

# Cochran's Legacy: A Cultural Path Not Taken

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Thomas Childs Cochran, today nearly as long-lived as our century (he was born in 1902), is one of its preeminent historians. This is especially true in the field of business history, which owes to him much of its existence as a legitimate scholarly discipline. With a steady outpouring of books (twenty-five authored or co-authored, another five jointly-edited) and academic articles and essays (fifty-seven) that reflect a remarkable range of topical and methodological diversity, Cochran emerged as the first well-published and widely-recognized academic business historian of the postwar era.<sup>2</sup> Along with an impressive roster of specialized monographs, Cochran wrote several broadly-gauged overviews of American business history, ranging from textbook treatments to sweeping works of synthesis.<sup>3</sup> And he rose to the highest ranks of the profession as president of the Economic History Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the American Historical Association.

Yet Cochran's legacy to date has been perplexingly modest. For the most part, academic business history followed a path different from the one trod by Cochran. Whereas Cochran devoted his professional life to the study of business as a social and cultural phenomena, most specialists in our field have followed the lead of Alfred Chandler, with his focus on institutional structure and change, especially the evolution of large industrial corporations.<sup>4</sup> In spite of the volume, scope, and quality of Cochran's work, his approach to business history was not widely emulated.

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<sup>2</sup>For a complete bibliography of Cochran's works up to 1983 see Sharlin [48, pp. 215-219].

<sup>3</sup>The 1974 edition of the *Harvard Guide to American History* lists twenty-six works under the category "Business - General." None of authors listed had more than one work except Cochran, who had four [27, pp. 397-398].

<sup>4</sup>One crude measure -- the number of times the publications by the two men have been cited in social science journals when both were active between 1966 and 1985 -- shows Cochran with a stable average of about fifteen to twenty per year, while the number of times Chandler's work is cited roughly doubles every five years, reaching 841 in 1981-1985, or ten times the rate for Cochran [46].

In that sense, Cochran's legacy brings to mind Sherlock Holmes' observation that one can deduce as much from the dog that doesn't bark as from the one that does. But whereas Holmes used such non-events to solve crimes and, ultimately, affixing blame, my purpose here is to examine the course of Professor Cochran's career for what it reveals about the cultural study of business history in the United State since the Second World War: its context, its inner dynamics, its leading scholars and dominant methodologies.

### **Cochran the Synthesizer**

Thomas Cochran's formative years were marked by mobility, insecurity, individualism, and eclectic interests -- many of the same qualities he would portray decades later, in *Frontiers of Change*, as prevalent among the opportunistic Americans of early nineteenth century. He was born and raised in the Brooklyn Heights section of New York City. His father failed in business and became a public school teacher. The Cochrans' socio-economic position eroded, forcing them at times to board with relatives. Cochran missed several grades of school, but read widely and put in a stint at a local private academy.

Heeding his father's wishes, Cochran entered New York University in 1919, but performed sporadically, spurning classes to carouse with friends and enjoy sports, music, bridge (the subject of his first two books), and reading. In college his academic focus shifted from naval architecture to chemical engineering to theoretical physics, but these science-based endeavors left him uninspired. He graduated with a double major in chemistry and history. In 1923, he married and accepted a graduate teaching assistantship at NYU, declining a similar offer from Princeton out of his loyalty to New York. Two years later, he earned an M.A. and entered the Ph.D. program at the University of Pennsylvania [29, pp. 110-111].

Cochran's 1930 dissertation was a study of "economic relations" between New York state and the Confederation -- mainly patterns of finance, debt, and land ownership. Its circumscribed conclusions would have pleased Charles Beard. "The movement for the Federal Constitution was primarily a financial one," he wrote, due to security holders seeking the repayment of public debt and shaky state governments. Neither the Revolution nor the Constitution wrought much social or economic change; large landholders and merchants retained control, and "there was no great gain in democracy." Here, in rudimentary form, could be seen an emphasis on continuity over change as well as a muted critique of vested interests, both to figure prominently in Cochran's later work [15, pp. 181-182].

Cochran spent the Depression decade teaching, partying, remarrying (twice), writing, and ruminating about the limits of traditional approaches to American history. Little of his written work was published, for Cochran helped support himself by writing company histories used internally for tax litigation [29, p. 111; 47, p. 75]. But intellectually he focused in ways that would shape his long and prolific career. By the late 1930s he exhibited strong loyalties to three critical historical approaches: synthesis, business history, and "social science" history.

Cochran was frustrated by the national political orientation that dominated the study of U.S. history. Even the progressive historians periodized history around wars, presidential administrations, sectional struggle, and other grand national events. But Cochran had begun to read within other social sciences, particularly sociology, where he found an emphasis on mass group behavior and social norms

[29, p. 111; 18]. This methodological reorientation, in turn, drew Cochran to the study of America's prevailing activity: business.

Cochran was not alone in his interest in a social science approach to history. During the interwar years, a small cadre of historians turned to the social sciences in reaction to the materialism and relativism of Beard, Turner, and other progressive historians. Merle Curti became a central figure in the rise of this "New History," and influenced Cochran directly by encouraging the younger scholar to present his first AHA paper (in 1939) and to co-edit a volume with the revealing title *War as a Social Institution* [29, pp. 111-112; 31, pp. 104-131; 40, p. 180; 5, p. 134].

Cochran's prewar interest in business history, social science history, and synthesis yielded after the war two works of enormous importance -- probably the most influential in his career. For years Cochran struggled to fashion a new synthesis of nineteenth and early twentieth century American history with business as its core. After he married Rosamond Beebe in 1937, "Ro" prevailed upon him to elicit the editorial help of William Miller, a Penn graduate student who had worked with Cochran at NYU. The result was *The Age of Enterprise: A Social History of Industrial America*, which covered the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. "We have not been a people essentially political, literary, metaphysical, or religious," wrote Cochran and Miller. "Our habits and folkways have not been formed only by voting, reading, logic-chopping, or prayer. Our manners are not simply those of conventions, lyceums, schools, and churches. We have been primarily a business people, and business has been most important in our lives" [29, p. 111; 25, p. 2].

Cochran and Miller hoped to provide a synthesis at once fuller, more engaging, and more valid than suggested by simple economic explanations. Institutions played a role in the story, but as shapers of America, the business society. To be sure, the evolution of the firm -- including the critical "separation of ownership from control" that accompanied the rise of big business, emphasized earlier by Berle and Means and later by Chandler -- were duly noted. But Cochran and Miller devoted considerable attention to industrial laborers, urban dwellers, social philosophers (especially Herbert Spencer), politicians, and commercial farmers [25].

Compared with the non-academic, hagiographic business biographies of the day or the "robber baron" classics by Josephson, Allen, and their ilk, *The Age of Enterprise* was comprehensive, balanced, and synthetic [35, 1]. Even so, and in spite of its mission to demonstrate the centrality of business in the American experience, the book was infused with populism. It portrayed company owners "stripped of control" by financiers and managers in a process that "gradually dulled the initiative of erstwhile American entrepreneurs" and "profoundly threatened" American democracy. Cochran admitted privately to friends that he harbored socialist sympathies [25, p. 202; 40, p. 325]. But he kept his left-leaning empathies concealed in public and restrained in print -- although less so in this book than in later works.

The fruitfulness of the book's cultural perspective can be seen clearly in his treatment of industrial labor. While the rise of organized labor (like the rise of big business) is treated adequately, the focus is on the nature of work and workers. In the Gilded Age, workers were motivated to organize not merely by "simple questions of wages and hours" but also by their "eroding feeling of self importance" in the face of sporadic, monotonous, and dangerous factory work. Cochran and

Miller also considered the social conditions that hindered unionization such as "geographical dispersion of the working force, racial and linguistic antagonisms," and even viewed the work experience within the context of worker's leisure activities [25, pp. 231-235]. In these ways, the authors' dedication to understanding the workers' plight led them to raise questions that later would inspire a generation of leading New Labor historians such as David Brody, Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, and Roy Rosenswieg [4, 30, 39, 45].

The rise of big business staffed with professional middle managers that would form the centerpiece of Alfred Chandler's work was viewed in *The Age of Enterprise* in both economic and cultural terms. (In the burgeoning new bureaucracies "skilled jobs and minor administrative positions were reserved for native white Americans.") Cochran and Miller discussed the significant "economies" captured through the giant mergers, but also highlighted the leverage that businessmen gained in politics and against labor as well as "the growing appeal to businessmen of sheer 'bigness' itself." Unfortunately, they stopped short of closing the loop by considering the ways in which prevailing social attitudes both nourished and impinged this "fetish for monopoly" and thus, in turned, shaped firm and industry structure [25, pp. 230, 189, 192].

Publication of *The Age of Enterprise* earned Cochran tenure and promotion and wide recognition, and brought him into regular contact with other scholars in the budding field. During the war he began to work closely with Arthur Cole, who directed research in entrepreneurial history at Harvard supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. Cochran secured a grant from NYU's Graduate School of Business to launch a business history series by writing a history of the Pabst Brewing Company. He and Cole saw the project as an opportunity to apply social science methods to the company history approach exemplified by N. S. B. Gras of the Harvard Business School. The Pabst history (1948) became a model for the scholarly corporate history, insightful about the inner workings of the firm, and well-situated in historical context. But because Cochran felt constrained by censorship; because it was difficult to write synthesis through the vehicle of the corporate history; and because of his abiding interest in culture more than institutions, he turned away from the corporate history genre [29, pp. 111-112; 16; 40, p. 197].

Instead, Cochran formulated ambitious plans to write an intellectual history of the American businessman throughout U.S. history that encompassed ideas on business as well as non-business matters. He secured financial support for the project from Cole's project in 1946, but only by limiting its scope significantly: to railroad executives between 1840 and 1880. Cole had invited Cochran to join his informal group of East Coast entrepreneurial historians (institutionalized in 1948 as the Research Center for Entrepreneurial History). According to the Center's historian Stephen Sass, Cochran was "the most promising historian" among Cole's recruits [47, pp. 75, 78-79; 29, pp. 112-113].

Cochran's second early seminal work, "The 'Presidential Synthesis' in American History," appeared in 1948. By criticizing the dominant paradigms "based on the writings of a small group of cultural leaders," and by calling for greater concern with "the normal ideas of the average citizen," Cochran foreshadowed the emergence of the New Social History that would sweep the profession more than a generation later.

Cochran hoped to "build a social science synthesis" to replace the defunct presidential synthesis. His time at Harvard would reinforce and deepen his

professional commitment to the application of social science methodologies, especially those borrowed from sociology. But Cochran revealingly had deemed the "presidential synthesis" a failure when "judged either by the complex of values and standards that may loosely be referred to as humanistic or by those of the social sciences" [18]. As his public reputation as a social science historian came into sharper relief, Cochran also found himself struggling with the kind of "humanistic" sensibilities that so animated *The Age of Enterprise*.

### **Cochran the Sociologist**

Looking back on the efforts of sociologically-minded U.S. historians during the interwar years, Richard Hofstadter noted in 1965 that "historians were trying to write a kind of sociological history without having any sociological ideas" [32, p. 8]. Cochran was among the first historians to embrace newly-emerging sociological theory in an attempt to solve that dilemma. His frequent visits to Harvard helped Cochran sharpen and crystallize his sociological approach to the study of business history. Harvard was a wellspring of sociological thought in the 1930s and 1940s, thanks largely to the towering presence of Talcott Parsons; and sociology left a deep and enduring mark on the study economic and business history, in particular [28]. By drawing on aspects of Parsonian sociology to inform and shape his study of railroad leaders, Cochran emerged as one of the historical profession's most visible practitioners of sociological history [32, p. 9; 31, p. 120]. But to understand Cochran's legacy, we must consider the specific intellectual vein that he tapped in the rich and variegated mine of Parsonian thought.

Talcott Parsons -- trained in economics, sociology, and philosophy and influenced heavily by Weberian thought -- joined Harvard's economics department in 1926, and helped found the university's sociology department five years later. In his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Parsons relied on social scientific models to explain cultural formation, persistence, and change. He argued that economic and political processes were inextricably linked with social institutions, and presented the rudiments of what would evolve into his highly influential "action theory."

At the time Cochran joined Cole's Center, Parsons was in the midst of a critical theoretical shift. Parsons had begun to articulate his theories of functionalism, shifting his emphasis toward a more relational definition of human action within social and cultural contexts (including politics and economics). The essential building block of his analysis evolved from the discrete action to, as Parsons put it, the "actor-orientating-to-a-situation." Social roles were created and defined by culture, and sanctioned by social groups or institutions and laws [36, pp. 609-630]. Parsons, building on the works of prominent European and American philosophers, sociologists, anthropologist, and behavioral scientists (including Durkheim, Royce, Dewey, and James), joined a growing roster of academics who published on social role theory in the 1940s and 1950s [3, pp. 6-9].

In 1949, Parsons published his first work on structural functionalism (which he soon explicated fully in his magnum opus, *The Social System*) [41; 42; 36, pp. 621, 627]. The same year, Thomas Cochran published an essay called "Role and Sanction in American Entrepreneurial History" in a collection of works from Cole's Center [44]. The essay explored Parsonian social role theory as it might apply to the study of business culture and entrepreneurship. Businessmen and others act in

ways that "accord closely with the conceptions of the role held by people in general," explained Cochran. "The pattern of sanctions in any culture may be seen as the expression of certain implicit cultural themes, or basic attitudes, in interaction with social environment." Sanctions, both informal (internal) and formal (external or codified) were a society's "anchors of social stability."

How to account for change, especially entrepreneurial innovation? Cochran emphasized behavior ("innovating acts") and environment more than individuals, persistence more than change. For Cochran, the study of entrepreneurial history entailed a search for "powerful and tough ... basic cultural themes" and social sanctions that created conditions in which American entrepreneurship flourished. As he identified them, sanctions that encouraged innovation included a love of efficiency and technological progress, the desire for profit and personal wealth, honesty and perseverance, and the preference of practical experience over book learning; while the nation's basic cultural themes included individualism, self determination, egalitarianism, and what he called the "importance of the useable" and the "importance of the physically spectacular" [21].

This roster of themes and sanctions reveals another constant in Cochran's intellectual career. In spite of Cochran's claim that America's salient sanctions and themes had changed little since the Revolution, those he identified best described the preindustrial nation. Certainly "book learning," for example, had gained prominence in science and industry with the rise of professionalism, expertise, and institutional R&D at the turn of the century. Indeed, throughout his career Cochran was most at home in the history of early America, when the machine still stood in the garden. Taken as a whole, his work tells a story of declension and downfall, when a system of values and norms that fostered economic growth yet preserved freedom and egalitarianism clashed with the large-scale institutions that emerged out of wholesale industrialization.

Role theory was only one of several approaches explored by the theoretically hungry scholars at Cole's center. Some followed a different tact by drawing on the work of Joseph Schumpeter, Parsons' former colleague in Harvard Economics and by then the foremost theorist of entrepreneurship. Whereas Cochran focused on persistence and equilibrium, Schumpeter and his followers saw entrepreneurs as creative and visionary individuals who wrought economic growth through a breed of disequilibrium that the Moravian-born economist called "creative destruction" [47, pp. 119-123, 156-161; 38, pp. 371-392].

But Cochran was hardly alone in his approach. Harvard's newly-established department of social relations was attracting talented scholars in sociology and related disciplines; Robert Merton, one of Parsons' protégés, was beginning to make important contributions in reference groups; and others at the Center for Entrepreneurial History -- David Landes, John Sawyer, Sigmund Diamond, and the prominent economist Leland Jenks -- were applying variations of role theory to their work. Cochran moved to the forefront of that group when his study of railroad executive thought was published in 1953 [36, p. 619; 33, p. 356; 47, pp. 145-148, 174, 180-186]. In *Railroad Leaders* Cochran applied role theory rigorously -- more so than any work of business history ever would -- to formulate the book's questions and structure.

Based on the analysis of thousands of letters of sixty-one Eastern railroad executives, *Railroad Leaders* was a singular study in the vast railroad history literature. Cochran found remarkable continuity between 1845 and 1880, when

railroad executives remained preoccupied with growth, stability, and profits but showed relatively little interest in organizational matters. Although "railroad leaders were, in effect, shaping new roles in a new institution," concluded Cochran, those roles were "largely conditioned by existing American culture patterns." In contrast, Jenks a decade earlier and Chandler a decade hence emphasized the revolutionary character of the American railroads, economically and managerially. Cochran's railroad leaders were conformists, conservatively carrying early nineteenth century values into the late century; Chandler's were the pioneers of a new organizational age [20; 47, pp. 174-175; 34; 6; 7, pp. 79-205].

*Railroad Leaders* also betrayed some methodological weaknesses. Except when it came to raising and allocating capital, Cochran found little evidence of societal sanctioning (by the public, government, labor, competitors, and the like). Railroad leaders seemed to define their roles and sanctions almost solely with reference to themselves. In addition, the study was somewhat formulaic in structure and tone. Cochran somehow had imbibed the quintessentially dynamic American railroad business with a static quality.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Parsonian sociology evolved in ways that were increasingly useful to historians of business. Parsons developed functional models in which institutions and managerial organizations were integral components. By the middle of the 1960s, he had recast his four-function model in evolutionary terms, making it more germane to the study of historical processes. Chandler and others discovered in this work general ways to think about the evolution of organizations, but saw no need to rigorously or explicitly apply Parsonian models in their work. Parsons also extended structural-functionalism further into the realms of personality and culture [36, pp. 616-617, 621-624; 28, p. 33].

Meanwhile, social role theory was suffering an identity crisis. To be sure, Merton and others elaborated reference group theory with key concepts such as comparative, normative, positive, and negative reference groups. But the pace of scholarly publication on role theory waned in the 1960s as the field struggled to define itself. As a leading authority (one of the few remaining) admitted in 1979, "to date there has been little formalization in role theory. Several critics have noted that role theory lacks an integrative, propositional structure" [2, pp. 1, 13-17; 3, pp. 334-336].

Cochran never fully abandoned role theory, but nor did he employ it as fully again. In 1955 he acknowledged his profession's recalcitrance toward social science methodologies. "The inclusion of history as a full-fledged cooperating member of the social science group has not appealed to most historians in the United States" [quoted in 32, p. 9].

His shift toward other approaches was not driven simply by professional disillusionment. It also reflected his ambiguous intellectual and visceral relationship with scientific-style history. For left-leaning scholars like Cochran, the rise of conformist times and "consensus" historiography after the war meant -- in the words of his close friend Merle Curti -- the arrival of "dark and wintry times." Like Curti and many others, Cochran was "disinclined to swim against the overwhelming current." In a letter to Curti in 1951, he admitted having retreated into a social science shell. "I guess what I've done is build an ivory tower called the Social Science Approach to History where I can live wrapped up in social roles, protected from reality by sanctions, basic personalities and cultural themes" [quoted in 40, p. 325].

Perhaps in an effort to resolve this ambivalence toward his subject -- but certainly out of his ceaseless experimentalism and opportunism -- Cochran moved along. Another social science awaited.

### **Cochran the Anthropologist**

The year after *Railroad Leaders* appeared, Cochran was offered the Pitt Professorship at Cambridge University. But he asked to postpone the appointment in order to undertake a study of Puerto Rican business sponsored by the Social Science Research Center at the University of Puerto Rico. Cochran was intensely interested in using comparative study to help understand culture. Out of this research came *The Puerto Rican Businessman: A Study in Cultural Change* in 1959.

Once again, Cochran spurned hard, easily measurable evidence in favor of "less tangible elements." He found that Puerto Rico's unique set of conditions and constraints often stifled entrepreneurship and produced a form of "family-centered" capitalism that persisted even with the transition from agriculture to industry. But Cochran tried his best to remain neutral about the course of Puerto Rican business practices, refusing to judge whether "they have been good or bad for Puerto Rican life." To that end, he again employed social science research methods such as formal surveys and interviews protocols. And although he explored intriguing questions about personality in social context and about the transfer of business practices from the mainland, Cochran garbed many of his conclusions in stultifying jargon. Compared with their mainland counterparts, he wrote, Puerto Rican business elites were "more interested in inner worth and justification by standards of personal feeling than they are in the opinion of peer groups" [19, pp. 16, 117-118, 131, 167-181].

On the heels of this Puerto Rican study, Cochran accepted another opportunity to conduct cross-cultural research in business history, when Italian-born heavy industry magnate Guido Di Tello invited Cochran to chronicle the history of his family's Argentinean manufacturing firm, S.I.A.M. Di Tella. Working with Argentine-born University of Pennsylvania anthropologist Ruben Reina, Cochran co-authored *Entrepreneurship in Argentine Culture* (1962), one of the first studies by American scholars of Latin American business. The authors took pains to steer their readers away from ethnocentrism with illuminating contextual passages and gentle admonitions. ("The nature of this bond may be baffling to North Americans" [26, pp. 111, 170, 266].) Beyond that, however, the study was a straightforward business biography, with little to suggest the application of anthropological methodologies. Still, these two studies deepened Cochran's understanding of historical causality, convincing him that apparently identical phenomena might have distinct origins, depending on their cultural contexts.

### **Apex: Cochran in the 1970s**

Cochran returned to synthesis. Business history, and its chief practitioner, had advanced considerably since the days of *The Age of Enterprise*, and Cochran aspired to write another broadly-conceived treatment of business and American culture. He agreed to contribute to a multi-volume series on U.S. business history launched by McGraw-Hill in the early 1960s. While this ambitious project took



shape, he published several shorter surveys of U.S. business and economic history, produced some edited volumes, served as president of the EHA and OAH, and turned out numerous articles, some of which become widely-read classics. He also enjoyed two stints as a visiting scholar in England: the long-delayed Pitt visiting professorship at Cambridge (1965-1966) and a distinguished lectureship at St. Anthony's College, Oxford (1970). In 1968, Penn honored him with an endowed chair, the Benjamin Franklin Professorship [29, p. 114; 43, pp. 123-124; 8 and 24, among others].

This enormously productive period in Cochran's life reached a climax in 1972, the year he published his new synthesis, retired from Penn, and was elected president of the American Historical Association. *Business in American Life* was an impressive work, based mainly on a huge number of secondary works on a broad range of subjects. The mix of topics was quintessential Cochran: thorough coverage of management and firms, but even more on government and law, education, and -- the subject treated the most thoroughly -- business and religion in American life. Cochran divided American history into four periods: Heritage, 1607-1775; Transition, 1775-1850; Industrialism, 1850-1915; and Affluence, 1915-1970. He charted the evolution of American values, norms, and practices as they were slowly transformed over these long eras, first by early nineteenth century industrialization, then by the rise of big business. Many of the passages on subjects such as child-rearing practices, the impact of Freudian psychology, and religious doctrine as it related to business are innovative and insightful. And for the uninitiated reader, *Business and American Life* includes thorough coverage of business practice, regulation, organized labor, and similar topics [9].

But its tentative quality makes *Business in American Life* ultimately unsatisfying as a scholarly work. To be sure, part of the problem rests with the nature of the subject; when dealing with attitudes, values, beliefs, and even practices, Cochran rightly emphasized the "slow process of cultural change." But consider Cochran's discussion of the rise of rational, economically-instrumental behavior in antebellum America. He begins with a quotation from Max Lerner, then hints that we might agree with Lerner's characterization "without necessarily accepting Lerner's precise dates," adding that new behaviors after 1840 "appeared to many observers to be undermining the old agrarian order ... even though no great change appeared to be taking place in the underlying value system." Similarly, it is not clear why Cochran chose 1915 as a turning point for the rise of "big management" [9, p. 170]. This prevalent quality prompts the reader of *Business and American Life* to ask two fundamental questions: When did change occur? And what is the book's thesis? (The contrast with Chandler's forcefully-argued *Visible Hand* is stark. That work evokes other questions, but never these.)

Cochran was not similarly restrained in his 1972 presidential address before the American Historical Association, "History and Cultural Crisis." Returning to his early-career critique of modern American industrial capitalism, he sought to understand the current cultural crisis as a tension between modern, hierarchically-ordered institutions and deeply embedded democratic values. These "large and highly impersonal ... bureaucratic autocracies," he said, recently had become problematic in the face of new social concerns (such as pollution) and enduring individual ones (such as the desire for "noneconomic" fulfillment on the job) [14]. Here, at the peak of his career, the seventy-year-old erstwhile socialist and historian

of business was in effect a spokesman for the countercultural movement in its critique of big business.

For another decade, Cochran continue to publish. During this denouement he gravitated toward the subjects he understood best and cared for most: early industrialization, entrepreneurs, American values. His long association with Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation intensified in the 1970s, aiding a new round of research on the early industrialization that led to the publication of *Frontiers of Change* in 1981. In this book, Cochran largely overcame two problems that had weakened some of his earlier work: lack of forceful argument, and isolation from historiographic debate. In *Frontiers of Change*, Cochran put forth a "geo-cultural" interpretation to argue that American industrialization was more independent from Great Britain, came earlier (by 1840), and was more centered in the Middle Atlantic than most scholars believed. The key actors in the process were "artisan-entrepreneurs" who, because of their culture, responded to "the possibilities opened to them" in ways that brought about this early and rapid industrialization. There is an intense optimism, almost whiggishness, about Cochran's portrayal of these go-getters; Cochran even interpreted high rates of business failure as a search for opportunity, for instance. But most scholars welcomed the book as a useful, concise treatment of an important subject. Finally, Cochran had written a book about his heroes [13, esp. pp. 13 and 65].

Cochran's final book was an extended essay of reflections, *Challenges to American Values*. In this evocative volume -- inspired by America's declining fortunes in the 1970s and 1980s -- Cochran's perennial optimism is interspersed with cautionary tones. The book's central theme is that America's enduring values had outlived their usefulness in the face of late twentieth century science and bureaucracy. No longer were economic individualism and business-government antagonism appropriate [11]. Was Cochran joining the ranks of those who called for industrial policy and looked toward a new form of cooperative American capitalism? Or was he acknowledging that the value system he revered so highly finally had succumbed? One cannot be sure; in the end, the intriguing tensions and contradictions between Thomas Cochran and his social context remained alive.

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Thomas C. Cochran and Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., the dual founders of academic business history in the United States, led somewhat parallel careers. (Chandler is younger by sixteen years.) Both men were influenced heavily by Parsonian sociology, and participated actively in the Arthur Cole's Research Center for Entrepreneurial History between 1948 and 1958. Both wrote books about aspects of railroad history and corporate histories early in their careers, and published what were arguably their greatest works of synthesis in the 1970s. Both sought to dispel the "robber baron" tradition in business history. Both held an abiding interest in history as a tool for policy making. And, most importantly, both dedicated their long careers to the notion that business has been the central, transforming fact in American history.

Beyond these commonalities, however, the differences in the lives and academic work of the two men have been striking and in large measure antithetical. Cochran's eroding middle-class status during his formative years contrasted sharply with Chandler's patrician upbringing. Cochran's socialist leanings have no apparent

analog in Chandler; indeed, the aspect of industrialization that Cochran found most unsavory -- the rise of managerial big business -- is precisely what Chandler considers to be economic history's shining moment. Cochran's work emphasized persistence and the evolutionary nature of social change, Chandler's the revolutionary character of institutional change. Cochran aspired to scientism in the practice of history, yet focused consistently on humanistic questions, even when employing scientific methodologies; Chandler has been scientific in his concerns (with institutional economics rather than values, equity, culture, and the like) and uses historical narrative and quantitative data to build theoretical models. Finally, Cochran's career-long approach has been experimental and eclectic, topically (within business history) as well as methodologically (within the social sciences). As Harold Sharlin noted in Cochran's festschrift, Cochran is best known for his "separate landmark ideas" rather than a central thesis [48; e.g. 10, 12, 17, 18]. In contrast, Thomas McCraw observed of Chandler: "the salient aspect of Chandler's board career has been his maintenance of a sharp focus in his work" [37, pp. 1-21]. Cochran has the proverbial fox who "knows many things," Chandler the hedgehog who "knows one big thing."

This kind of focus can be useful in a profession in which reputations are built slowly over decades. But Cochran's comparative lack of influence on business history rests partly with the nature of his subject. Ideas, values, aesthetics, and other aspects of culture on the humanistic side of the discipline have proven to be far more contentious than the "hard" facts and quantifiable phenomena on its scientific side. Too, cultural continuity -- Cochran's bailiwick -- is intrinsically less engaging than dramatic change.

The larger historiographic trends that framed Cochran's career -- especially when it came to the place of scientific method in the profession -- were an inhospitable environment for his ideas. Neoclassical economists emerged to dominate economic history at a time when Cochran emphasized the salience of culture over the rationalism of the marketplace. At the same time, sociological methodologies never became popular among American historians. Role theory, although failing to coalesce as a distinct discipline, contributed enduring concepts and methods to the social sciences and proved to be useful in the study of deviancy, family, therapy, sex, learning and socialization, and occupation. Accordingly, it is still used regularly by social and cultural historians such as those who study the construction of gender. But Cochran's reliance on social science apparatus (in part to cope with his ambivalence toward his subject), sapped vitality from some of his work, and intruded between the author and his readers. He fallaciously believed that in historical writing narrative and drama were necessarily antithetical to analysis and science [22, p. 2; 23, pp. 348-359].

Instead, Cochran might have fruitfully engaged the New Left that dominated the historical profession during the peak of his career. By the early 1970s, "New Labor" historians who shared Cochran's concern with culture, workers, and the nature and control of work; "ethno-cultural" historians who rose to the fore in U.S. political history during the 1970s; and early Americanists working within the "republicanism" paradigm -- all had much to learn from and teach the distinguished business historian. But only the contextist historians of technology at Hagley seem to have made much connection with the distinguished scholar.

To be sure, there is a generational dimension to this story. As the first academic business historian, Cochran was closer than his followers to the

muckrakers and progressive historians who first commanded the subject, closer to the heart of socialism in American history. His romance with sociology blossomed during Parson's early career, before the great sociologist developed the evolutionary and cultural models that might have better suited Cochran's work.

In the introduction to *Business in American Life*, Cochran observed that political history lent itself more readily to "the writing of a coherent internal narrative" than business history. Five years later, Chandler proved him wrong with *The Visible Hand*. (And political historians have yet to produce an equally coherent narrative.) But in the same passage, Cochran also noted that "the institutions of business are inextricably intertwined with their social environment and can be satisfactorily interpreted only in relations to other institutions" [9, p. 2].

Therein lies our challenge. The work of Cochran and Chandler speak to halves of the giant historical puzzle: institutions and culture, firms and context. Chandler has shown how little we understood about the internal dynamics of the firm when Cochran began his career. Chandler's contribution probably was the proper starting point for our nascent discipline. Just as political historians began with parties and elections and moved outward toward culture, and labor historians began with unions and strikes before turning to "work, culture, and society" (to borrow Herbert Gutman's phrase), business history needed to begin with the firm and the industry. But now we need to turn outward, toward culture and context, and to look for ways to fit together the pieces honed by Chandler and Cochran. The fullest understanding will come only through combining both perspectives. I suspect that more and more business historians will follow Cochran's path in the future, and that his greatest legacy will be the questions he asked. If not, it is likely our field will become increasingly marginalized, and never fulfill Cochran's hope that business serve as the key to understanding the American past.

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