

# “The Future of Business History”: An Introduction

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Early in 1995, Roger Horowitz, the Associate Director of Hagley’s Center for the History of Business, Technology, and Society, returned from a conference at the Newberry Library in Chicago bearing a tempting idea. Our colleagues at the midwest’s premier independent research library had for some years been creating sets of related scholarly events in order to focus attention on significant developments in fields closely linked to their collections and mission. Could we not do something analogous at Hagley?

The obvious focus for Hagley was business history, which, from our perspective, seemed to be exhibiting the characteristics of a “mature industry”: a dominant format for production (the organizational synthesis, Chandlerian internalism), fairly settled problem sets (i.e., key concepts and approaches), and roughly stable market shares among co-respective enterprises (corporate histories, business-government relations, multinationals, R&D, etc.). Moreover, business historians themselves seemed interested in reevaluating the development of their field, and exploring new approaches and avenues of research.

We also noticed that at the points of intersection between business history and studies of culture, gender, ideology, race, work, the environment, and of course, technology, scholars (few of whom described themselves as business historians) were accomplishing intriguing and innovative research on the activities of businesses. Could we interest these innovative scholars in business history as a worthy field with which to engage? Adapting the Newberry’s tactic, we began planning three linked conferences which would draw together these distinct constituencies so as to map, however tentatively, new strategies for locating business in history. Given the limits of our resources and capabilities, we narrowed the focus to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The first gathering, held at Hagley late in spring 1996, aimed to create a “conversation” among thirty individuals, chiefly advanced graduate students or junior faculty, whose work suggested fresh directions for the discipline. To provoke discussion, the Center commissioned and pre-circulated “plenary”

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<sup>1</sup> We expect that a future Hagley conference, now in the earliest planning stages, will have an explicitly international emphasis, for as one commentator noted, the meeting whose papers this volume reproduces might better have been headlined as “The Future of *American* Business History.”

papers on business and gender (Angel Kwollek-Folland) and culture and business (Ken Lipartito).<sup>2</sup> Participants debated the implications of these two texts in the meeting's opening sessions, then clustered in a set of six groups to share perspectives on traditional themes (the state and business) and more novel ones (theory). Evaluations subsequently provided by those attending identified key issues for "The Future," and a subset of that initial group proposed several of the papers published in this volume.

As the implications of gender analysis for business history seemed an especially important theme in any reconceptualization of the field, the second of the Center's coordinated provocations was a November 1996 symposium which identified research and conceptual challenges stemming from that concept. We invited Wendy Gamber (Indiana University) and Kathy Peiss (University of Massachusetts-Amherst) to outline scholarly possibilities and problems using this line of analysis for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively. Joan W. Scott (Institute for Advanced Studies) consented to comment on the presentations. The symposium drew a multidisciplinary regional audience and generated vigorous discussions, both during and after the "question period." Along the way, it became evident that businesswomen occupied a difficult space within women's studies, for, whether as "petty" proprietors of millinery firms or boardinghouses or, later, as owners in cosmetics companies, or managers in advertising, they figured as agents within market capitalism, rather than its victims or antagonists. We anticipate that the *Business History Review* will publish the papers and comment (likely in 1998), thus extending and broadening a discussion opened so vitally last autumn. Feedback from the symposium led the Center to devote the Fall 1997 Hagley conference, "Boys and Their Toys?: Masculinity, Work, and Technology," to the social construction of the "other side" of gender research.

To develop "The Future," the Center broadcast a call for papers and gathered a program committee which included Hagley staff along with former Business History Conference president William Becker (George Washington University) and historian Sally Griffiths (Villanova). Fewer than one-third of the proposals we received penetrated the committee's screens to become the conference's six panels. From these papers we can extract four broad themes which seem to offer intriguing possibilities for both extending the scope of business history and rethinking its methodologies: entrepreneurial dynamics, culture and business, firms' boundaries, and theoretical alternatives. Perhaps a few comments on each of these will serve both as summary and stimulus for further work.

First, entrepreneurial dynamics. Some papers sought to extricate historical analyses of American business from a conventional attention to center firms and corporate research, envisioning a broader canvas for sketching other elements of the business experience. An application of this approach was to

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<sup>2</sup> Lipartito's paper was later published in *Business and Economic History* 24, (Winter 1995), and received the Newcomen Prize for 1995.

posit alternate categories for viewing which firms “mattered” and thus were suitable subjects for historical analysis. In such frameworks, enterprises previously classified as “marginal” took on new significance as active interventions into society by women and African-Americans, as well as by worker entrepreneurs and members of immigrant groups. These agents, both diverse and plainly different from predominately native-born male owners and managers, inscribed distinctive pathways to success and failure in the nation’s complex market economy. Exploring their efforts and achievements will constitute a social history of business anchored by concepts originating from research on the family, gender, ethnicity, labor, and community. The post-1945 panel suggested another vector of reconsidering entrepreneurial dynamics. Whereas studies treating the century after 1840 have emphasized the making of great corporations through production and managerial innovations, the period since World War II may come to be regarded as a decisive departure point for an eventual “unmaking” and reconstruction of center firms and the emergence of other patterns of business development that contradict the Chandlerian model. Assessing the impact of the military-industrial complex on post-war business structures, the rising vulnerability of leading firms exposed by the crises of the 1970s, and the fragmentation of markets which a diversifying consumer base reflected are among the fascinating challenges now being engaged by researchers. Together with an economy increasingly oriented toward service sector activity, they suggest dramatic contrasts between the last half century’s business trajectory and that of the preceding century’s dynamics.

Second, cultural matters. In important ways, this conference demonstrated the potential for cultural analysis to reshape our perspectives on business in American history. The tendency, already eroding, to wall off enterprises’ strategies and structures from their cultural surroundings received a resounding critique. The very definitions of markets, and the deployment of advertising to sell products, are nestled in the polyvalent cultural terrain of American society. The historical infusion of business practices by cultural attitudes and values is evident once race and gender are taken seriously as means to privilege and exclude whole classes of people or to relegate them to “objects” of research, advertising, or training. Conversely, business practices and principles have had pervasive influences on broader cultural dynamics, insofar as they have provided gauges for evaluating everything from aesthetic performances to environmental “impacts” and the meaning of failure. Explicating this complex interpenetration demands sustained research, which clearly is already in process.

Third, the problem of boundaries. As a veteran business historian noted at the BHC’s 1996 conference, the essence of the discipline has long been the study of the firm as the essential unit of analysis. Several conference presentations suggested that this devotion to the enterprise has blinkered researchers’ capacity to envision more complex forms of business activity, and blinded them to the way that businesses have routinely played with their own boundaries. The construction of business enterprises and their approaches to management, investment, labor, and marketing of necessity demanded interactions between company leaders and “others” beyond those in their

employ. Moreover, there is room for exploring the ideas and practices which percolated among firms, the notions originating or refined in academic circles, among lawyers and regulators, and in contests with labor or over patents. Firms also have found great convenience leaving critical elements of their activities outside of the formal boundaries of corporate structure and under only attenuated control by managerial hierarchies. As yet, we know precious little about contracting arrangements for product sales and distribution, durable interfirm alliances, trade associations' regulation of competition, research consortia, industrial districts, and other institutional forms which did not respect firms' boundaries. No simple "make or buy" decision tree or transaction cost framework will afford researchers adequate insight into these permeable borders.

Last, theory. Business history has long relied upon versions of the "organizational synthesis" in sociology and critical perspectives on neo-classical economics for a general theoretical base, building on Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, R.H. Coase and Oliver Williamson, among others. However, the salience of these approaches to the range of concerns highlighted at the "Future" conference is less than obvious. In order to widen scholars' avenues for grounding research in other realms, we selected papers that emphasized opportunities to consider business history in relation to ecological, cultural, and post-structuralist theory, along with presentations that assessed the utility of Charles Perrow's work on complex organizations, Anthony Giddens's structuration approach, and a revisionist economics that engages history, uncertainty, and imperfect information. The spirited discussions which these sessions provoked indicated that those attending were both familiar with and intrigued by the potential of these alternatives. Though it is unlikely that a rush toward a new consensus perspective will occur any time soon, we expect that continuing exchanges about theoretical questions will animate business history in the coming years and will bring its practitioners into closer contact with scholars in related fields. Reaching beyond the firm toward culture and society will demand new tools and new conceptual arrays, some of which were carefully sketched at Hagley in April.

One means to extend and refine these initiatives now rests in your hands: the publication of the conference proceedings by *Business and Economic History*. In closing, we wish to express our deep appreciation to the Business History Conference and especially to *Business and Economic History's* indefatigable editor, Will Hausman, for creating a venue through which to share these papers with a larger audience. Any role the Hagley meetings may have in helping to chart directions for the next generation of scholarship will derive chiefly from this dissemination. Our thanks also go to the authors, session commentators, and Hagley staff members whose collective labor made possible this effort to imagine "The Future of Business History."

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