Business History in France

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In spite of some progress over the past few years, business history still remains relatively little developed in France.

This is the sentence with which Claude Fohlen began an article on the present state of French business history for the Business History Review in Spring 1967 [4]. Since Fohlen wrote these words, we have seen appear some significant contributions to the history of modern French business, most notably major works on the largest French automobile manufacturer -- Renault [5], on one of the principal railroads -- the Northern Company [2], and on French investments abroad [6 and 1]. But the record for a more than 10-year span is not a remarkable one, and indeed one is sorely tempted a decade later, to begin a discussion on the present state of French business history with precisely the same words as Fohlen chose in 1967; which, in effect, is exactly what I have done.

Inevitably, any discussion of the doing of business history in France, its problems, its weaknesses, the infrequency with which serious projects are undertaken falls back on the matter of sources. French businessmen, we are told, are obsessed with privacy. Business records are business secrets, still worse, frequently family secrets, guarded as zealously as any technological breakthrough or unwashed family linen. The records are simply not available. They are sewn into mattresses. The doors will never open. It is better to explore some other subject. You are wasting your time. These, essentially, are the words that any prospective researcher hears when he announces that he is contemplating a study in French business history, as indeed was my own experience when a number of years ago I became interested in the history of the department stores of Paris.

Perhaps it was simply the perversity of my own character that led me to proceed with this idea against the advice of nearly everyone with whom I discussed it. Perhaps I felt confident that I had amassed sufficient introductions to break down those reputedly formidable doors. Through family connections I had managed to establish contacts with the International Association of Department Stores, conveniently located in Paris, and to acquire letters of

introduction from one of the French consulates in this country. had even had the brilliant inspiration to seek the intervention of Bernard Gimble, whose interest in the community of scholars at the University of Pennsylvania -- where I did my graduate work -- had led him to contribute a lavish new gymnasium shortly before my arrival at Penn. Unfortunately, when I went to see the director of alumni relations to place me in contact with Mr. Gimble, I was told that I would need the services of a medium, since Bernard Gimble had been dead for five years. But I did come away from this interview with an introduction to the head of the Wharton alumni club in Paris, a man who was, initially, to act as my intermediary with the Bon Marché and to provide me the very substantial service of agreeing to sponsor my work -- that is, guaranteeing my responsibility and professional intentions -- during my forays into the store and its archives. Finally, I was careful to have the University of Pennsylvania provide me with one of their documentstyle letters of introduction certifying my credentials, and bearing a large ribbon seal, whose effect upon Frenchmen is practically indescribable.

Whether, in the end, any of these preparations was indispensable is questionable. The fact of the matter is that although somewhat suspicious at first, the Bon Marché management was nevertheless interested in and even pleased with my research proposal. Like most French businessmen they shared in their firm's history and its sense of tradition. Nor were they oblivious to the public relations benefits that might ultimately result from the publication of a book on their firm and its past. Entry into the Bon Marché and its records, as it turned out, was only slightly more difficult than entry into the great public archives of Paris. Altogether I was to spend nine to ten months within the Bon Marché, with nearly free run of the store.

It would be convenient if I could simply lay the matter of secrecy to rest at this point, but the experience I have just recounted cannot, unfortunately, be the final word. Not all the documents that I was eventually to look at were made available to Perhaps if I had asked during my first weeks me at the beginning. at the Bon Marché to see the records of shareholder meetings, or those of the administrative council for daily affairs, or the employee dossiers that were to prove so valuable in my work, I would have encountered no difficulty gaining access to these. I suspect the contrary was the case -- that I was fortunate neither to ask for these nor to stumble upon their existence until after I had spent some time at the house, becoming a familiar figure, earning management's confidence, and equally important, learning the bureaucratic ins and outs of power and prerogatives within the I seriously doubt that another investigator, with only a tangential interest in the store, and wishing to spend simply several days or weeks perusing these sorts of documents, would

succeed in his request. As it was, I noticed some hesitation when I asked to see council meetings of a more recent date, and I did not press this further since they were not essential to my purposes. Nor did I ever see the financial books of the house. When I asked to review these I was told they had been burned in the not-too-distant past. Subsequent conversations with a director of the firm several years later suggested that what books exist might be made available to me; but I still cannot be certain that this would be the case.

I must also admit that my queries at other department stores were far less fruitful. I was informed over and over again that few records, if any, remain from before World War I. In some instances my instincts told me that this was probably true — a problem I shall examine more closely momentarily. In other instances, however, I suspected it was not. Not all business firms are as willing as the Bon Marché to open their archives to outsiders. Undoubtedly my experience with some of these department stores is one that has been repeated in the past sufficiently frequently to give some credence to the warnings I had heard before coming to France. Indeed it was perhaps only because I was an American who would publish across the Atlantic that the Bon Marché proved to be as welcoming as it did.

But if my experience at the Bon Marché was not necessarily a typical one, neither was it necessarily unique. If a number of French businessmen remain highly secretive and if there are certain major firms whose records are simply not available in any circumstances at the moment, there are an equal number of firms, I suspect, that are prepared to open their files in the proper conditions. Secrecy and privacy are obstacles to the French business historian, but they are not always insurmountable ones, and we can no longer accept them as a sufficient deterrent to the doing of business history in France or, conversely, as a sufficient explanation for why the field remains such an underdeveloped one.

The destruction of sources poses, of course, a far more serious problem. Whether the loss of business records in France is greater than in other industrialized countries is a question I cannot answer, although French historians tend to assume that the usual neglect, accidents, and disinterest over time have been given freer rein in France than elsewhere. Certainly French business history has suffered from the devastation wrought by three wars fought on French soil over the past 100 years and, still worse, from the fact that so much of French industry has been geographically concentrated precisely in those areas where the fighting, and the bombardments, have been most intense.

Since the Second World War an effort has been made to gather what records remain available, and that companies are willing to release, within state archives, especially the AQ series at the National Archives begun under the aegis of Bertrand Gille in 1949.

The collection itself, however, is testimony to the enormous lacunae that exist. For some companies the list of materials is disappointingly small. The dossiers of others cover only portions of their history. In the case of the PLM railroad, for example, a number of useful documents remain, but many do not, and it is unlikely that a complete history of this company can ever be written.

Yet it would be a mistake to paint the situation in too bleak a tone. Many of the files deposited with the National Archives are bountiful and promising, some extremely rich in their documentation. These include not only the archives of Renault and the Northern railway which, as I referred to earlier, have already been mined and processed into major studies, but also the archives of major insurance, banking, construction, and mining and siderurgical companies that have only partly been tapped, or not at all.

Moreover, the AQ series is complemented by deposits of company records in departmental files throughout the provinces, or by other series within the National Archives on the economic and business affairs of the nation. Valuable materials can be found in the chamber of commerce archives of various major cities. The archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be -- and have been -- used for information on overseas investments. The archives of the Department of the Seine contain the dossiers of firms that went bankrupt -- especially useful for the study of small- or medium-sized establishments.

Sources alone, then, cannot account for the paucity of quality work in French business history. Their loss or unavailability do pose constraints, but only to a point. The real problem, it seems to me, lies elsewhere: in attitudes, in traditions, and in a failing of the imagination. If so little is known, even today, about French business history, it is, I would suggest, because so few historians have found that history to be an especially compelling one. Lack of interest and lack of concern, not lack of sources, have been at the root of the matter.

How does one explain this? For Fohlen the problem on this level was primarily institutional. First, divisions within France between faculties of law and faculties of liberal arts, the one the preserve of economics, the other the preserve of history, delayed the emergence of economic history as a field in its own right. Then once economic history had established itself in France as a bona fide discipline, it tended to concentrate on broad, inclusive subjects such as price trends and economic expansion — what the French call global history — subjects which might take into account general business developments, but only as a part of the story and only in a way that left little room for penetrating into the particulars of business history as historians have done in this country and elsewhere. Furthermore, Fohlen pointed out, there have been no great names in French business

history, no Blochs nor Lefebvres nor Braudels to attract younger historians into the field. Nor has there been the steady publication of a business history journal. The institutional climate in France, as Fohlen saw it, has simply not been conducive to encouraging the study of business history.

The institutional climate in America and Britain has been conducive, and yet the number of American and British historians who have been drawn to French business history is no greater than the number of Frenchmen and Frenchwomen. If one leafs through the Business History Review since the beginning of the decade one will fail to discover a single article on modern French business history. The record for Business History, the British equivalent, is little better. Obviously institutional constraints like those of sources, tell us only part of the story.

Ultimately we must go deeper, to the place not of business history, but of business and businessmen themselves, in French historiography. French historians have not been oblivious to questions of economic growth and business development, but they have tended to see these in a particular light which differentiates the business history of France from that of other industrialized countries in the West. At bottom, the history of modern business for all Western historians, has been the history of big business, of concentration, of integration, of mass production and mass distribution, of entrepreneurs who pieced together mighty empires of markets and productive units -- a history, that to French historians, has seemed sorely out of joint in a country where the pace of industrialization was gradual rather that cataclysmic, where the number of small firms remained great, and where the number of great firms (and rarely very great at that) remained small, where businessmen were far more shadowy figures than the Carnegies or the Fords or the Levers or the Rathenaus, and where competition and innovation seemed less pronounced than elsewhere. In France, therefore, the stress has been less on change than on continuity, less on dynamism than on stagnation, less on a story of power and scope and, in the end, success than on a story of weakness and archaism and, in the end, failure.

In turn this has meant that the fascination that has drawn historians to the business history of other countries has been lacking in France. To French historians, the history of French businessmen has been relatively unimportant and certainly unalluring. Compared with their counterparts in America, Britain, or Germany, French businessmen have appeared to have had less explicit power over the affairs of their society, less of an explicit role in giving shape to the evolution of that society. Big business, historians have taught us, has not lain at the center of modern French life in the way it has elsewhere. In France it does not fit our preconceptions of the course of modern history. In France it is not a gripping story; and therefore... why study it?

This failure to attach much importance to the place of French businessmen in the history of modern France has been reinforced, moreover, by the tendency of social historians to focus their attention almost exclusively on the history of the lower classes, especially the history of labor. For the most part businessmen and their businesses have been left to the business historian, as though the latter represented a field apart from the history of society.

There has, of course, been one major effort — the work of David Landes [8] — to bring together social and economic history through the medium of the French businessman. Theoretically, Landes's seminal articles on the French family firm as a reflection of French social values should have encouraged historians, at least on this side of the Atlantic, to see in the French businessman a vital historical problem lying at the very center of modern French history. Ironically, because of the perspective that Landes took, that French businessmen and their firms were inherently conservative, Landes's writings seem to have had precisely the opposite effect: to reinforce the point of view that French business history has been an uninspiring story, and hence not worthy of serious examination.

What then is the future of business history in France? The answer to that question will be determined not by whether enough sources ever become available, but by whether the importance of investigating the history of French business in its broadest implications ever becomes recognized as a significant historical task.

If we are willing to revise our attitudes toward the role of business in modern French history, if we are willing to accept the fact that as in all Western countries business and industry have stood at the core of economic life in France over the past 150 years, if we are willing to become more subtle in our comparisions between French business enterprises and those of other countries, if we are willing to recognize that many French businessmen were dynamic and that their experience must be taken into account before we can discuss the failures in French business history, if we are willing, therefore, to recognize that we can, in general, ask the same sorts of questions of French business history as Americans, for example, have been asking of their business history, if we are willing to do these things, to make these attitudinal changes, then we can proceed to a far more vital French business history than has hitherto been the case and, in the process, we can proceed to discover just how rich the source materials really can be.

We can turn, for example, to the papers of Henri Fayol, of Ernest Mercier, of the leaders of other major firms whose archives are available for a history of managerial thought in France. Or we can turn to the managerial structures themselves, to the organization of major firms in France and consider in what ways these resembled or differed from their counterparts elsewhere and what conclusions we might consequently draw. Or, again working with those archives that are available, we can begin to make major, comparative, cross-industry studies on why and how business firms grew in France, and on the structural incentives or constraints that promoted and directed this growth.

To this end recent developments within French historiography have, in fact, been encouraging. Maurice Lévy-Leboyer [9 and 10], Francois Crouzet [3], and others have sought to reverse the notion that French economic performance in the 19th century was a story of failure. Lévy-Leboyer has gone still further, suggesting that French businessmen were aggressive, skillful, and far more open to change than has generally been allowed. If these perspectives take hold, then we might expect an awakening of interest in French business history.

Revising our attitudes on business performance is, however, only a first step. We must also redesign the lines we draw that define our disciplines. As long as we continue to see business history and social history as relatively separate schools of research, we will continue to place business history on the perimeter of much of the historical work that is being done today, and we will also assure that business historians themselves will fail to come to grips with the full import of their subjects.

If business history in France is to be encouraged, then both social and business historians must acknowledge that the history of a modern capitalist society only becomes intelligible once we comprehend the role of businessmen in reflecting and giving shape to that society. Documentation on the place of businessmen, business enterprise, and business values in French life is not unavailable to those historians willing to take such questions seriously.

We can, for instance, learn about business as a disseminator of values and as a force in promoting an emerging consumer society by studying the public relations of individual firms or industries. Sources here can be found not only within the archives of various companies, but in the Wz and Li series at the Bibliotheque Nationale, in certain holdings of the Archives of the Department of the Seine, and, I presume, in the equivalent to these archives in the provinces. We can also learn how the labor experience in France was shaped by business ideologies, practices, and market contingencies, and how in turn business ideologies and roles were shaped by labor pressures through a more imaginative use of those documents within company archives that pertain to labor relations. Indeed, it is likely that for archives still in private hands it is the business historian more than the purely labor historian who is likely to gain access to such materials, especially documents like employee dossiers; and it is time that business historians, with the particular perspective they can bring to their analyses,

go to the archives that thus far have been primarily the preserve of labor historians: police archives, for example.

Or we can learn about businessmen as a social group, their values, their roles, their life style, and their standing within their community by looking at the speeches they made or letters they wrote within and without their firms; by interviewing the businessmen themselves, or their families and descendants; by going to notarial records, or the Legion of Honor records that normally provide background information on nominees, or the records of the police and those of the F series in the National Archives that at times can serve this function as well; or by simply going to the printed sources -- journals and magazines -- that have been too little exploited in this respect.

Finally, if business history is to prosper in France, we need to look more closely at the relationship between French businessmen and their political environment. Here too there are encouraging signs -- for example, in the work of the Americans, Charles Maier and Richard Kuisel. But much remains to be done, and again this requires a change of attitudes towards the study of businessmen themselves. Once again the sources are promising -- prefectoral and police reports, ministerial documents in the National Archives, the records of chamber of commerce and business pressure groups (if the latter are available), and papers of prominent or even not so prominent political figures. Most promising of all, surprisingly, is simply the passage of time. As the reach of the 50-year seal on government documents recedes further and further into the 20th century, the opportunity to research the dynamics between business and governmental strategies in a period when the two were becoming more and more intertwined grows increasingly larger with each successive year.

In conclusion, then, the prospect for business history in France is one of choice. We can, if we so wish, continue to think in traditional ways about sources and subjects and, in the process, provide the opportunity for still another historian, 10 years from now, to begin a discussion on French business history with the words; "In spite of some progress..." Or we can rethink our notions about French business and businessmen, rethink our notions about business history itself, and consequently rethink our notions about materials and their uses. The choice does not seem to be a difficult one to make. It only requires some imagination and creativity. Then again, Claude Fohlen might have said the same thing, over 10 years ago.

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