

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

**BUSINESS
HISTORY**

Edited by

GEOFFREY JONES

and

JONATHAN ZEITLIN

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Geoffrey Jones
Jonathan Zeitlin

CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	x
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Notes on the Contributors</i>	xii

1. Introduction	1
GEOFFREY JONES AND JONATHAN ZEITLIN	

PART I APPROACHES AND DEBATES

2. Business History and History	9
PATRICK FRIDENSON	
3. Economic Theory and Business History	37
NAOMI R. LAMOREAUX, DANIEL M. G. RAFF, AND PETER TEMIN	
4. Business History and Economic Development	67
WILLIAM LAZONICK	
5. Business History and Management Studies	96
MATTHIAS KIPPING AND BEHLÜL ÜSDIKEN	
6. The Historical Alternatives Approach	120
JONATHAN ZEITLIN	
7. Globalization	141
GEOFFREY JONES	

PART II FORMS OF BUSINESS ORGANIZATION

8. Big Business	171
YOUSSEF CASSIS	

9. Family Business	194
ANDREA COLLI AND MARY ROSE	
10. Industrial Districts and Regional Clusters	219
JONATHAN ZEITLIN	
11. Business Groups and Interfirm Networks	244
W. MARK FRUIN	
12. Cartels	268
JEFFREY FEAR	
13. Business Interest Associations	293
LUCA LANZALACO	

PART III FUNCTIONS OF ENTERPRISE

14. Banking and Finance	319
MICHEL LESCURE	
15. Technology and Innovation	347
MARGARET B. W. GRAHAM	
16. Design and Engineering	374
WOLFGANG KÖNIG	
17. Marketing and Distribution	396
ROBERT FITZGERALD	
18. The Management of Labor and Human Resources	420
HOWARD GOSPEL	
19. Accounting, Information, and Communication Systems	447
TREVOR BOYNS	
20. Corporate Governance	470
GARY HERRIGEL	

PART IV ENTERPRISE AND SOCIETY

21. Entrepreneurship	501
GEOFFREY JONES AND R. DANIEL WADHWANI	

22. Business and the State	529
ROBERT MILLWARD	
23. Skill Formation and Training	558
KATHLEEN THELEN	
24. Business Education	581
ROLV PETTER AMDAM	
25. Business Culture	603
KENNETH LIPARTITO	
<i>Index</i>	629

LIST OF FIGURES

4.1	Comparing the optimizing and innovating firm	72
4.2	US Old Economy and Japanese business models compared	80
7.1	Business enterprises and globalization waves	144
11.1	Complex organizational forms and levels of ownership, control, and intragroup/internal transactions	246
12.1	A spectrum of cooperation	272

LIST OF TABLES

3.1	Use of economic theory and methods in articles published in <i>Business History Review</i>	41
3.2	Use of economic theory and methods in articles published in <i>Business and Economic History</i>	42
3.3	Use of economic theory and methods in articles published in <i>Business History</i>	45
9.1	Family business distribution in 1995–2000	201
12.1	Number of domestic cartels	275
13.1	Forms of capitalist action	294
13.2	Historical processes of peak association formation: a typology	301
13.3	Formation, legitimation, and institutionalization of peak associations	302
13.4	Foundation date of the first peak associations in certain industrialized countries	305
13.5	Modes of interest intermediation during World War II	308
14.1	Financing patterns and financial systems around 1990	321
14.2	Banking systems and thrift institutions (% of total assets)	328
14.3	Banking ratios of commercial banks (1913–14)	333
17.1	Levels of GDP per capita, 1870–1973	404
17.2	Growth in consumer expenditure, 1914–1973	407

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

GEOFFREY JONES
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THIS Handbook provides a state-of-the-art survey of research in business history. Business historians study the historical evolution of business systems, entrepreneurs, and firms, as well as their interaction with their political, economic, and social environment. They address issues of central concern to researchers in management studies and business administration, as well as economics, sociology, and other social sciences, and to historians. They employ a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, but all share a belief in the importance of understanding change over time.

As the chapters in this Handbook show, this research domain is wide-ranging, dynamic, and has generated compelling empirical data, which sometimes confirms and sometimes contests widely held views in management and the social sciences. However, much of this research is presented in specialist journals and in books, a form of publication which business historians—like other historians—regard as essential for understanding complex issues, but which most management and social science researchers seldom read. As a result, business history research is often overlooked, even by scholars who assert that “history matters” or emphasize the importance of path dependencies. This Handbook seeks to liberate this research, by presenting it in a form that researchers in other disciplines can discover and access.

For many years by far the most recognized scholar in business history was Alfred D. Chandler Jr. Although business history had been written for several decades before Chandler began publishing in the late 1950s and 1960s, he is rightly

regarded as the founder of the modern subject. Chandler was so influential not only because he undertook first-rate historical research, but also because he advanced a number of general propositions which exercised enormous influence on a generation of management researchers. In three major studies, each dealing with the growth of big business in manufacturing since the nineteenth century and its role in the growth of the United States as the world's largest economy, Chandler identified the role of organization building and professional management in the performance of firms. Chandler (1962), in a study which considers the growth of the multidivisional organization during the first half of the twentieth century, argued that new organizational structures result from changes in the strategic direction of firms. Chandler (1977), which examined the rise of large-scale business in the United States before 1940, explored why professional managers replaced markets in co-coordinating goods and services. Chandler (1990), which made a comparison between the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, showed how firms that made a three-pronged investment in production, distribution, and management were able to become first-movers in many industries.

The influence of Chandler's insights and research is acknowledged in many essays in this volume. Some essays are focused on the central themes in Chandler's work, such as the growth of big business (Cassis) and innovation (Graham). However the chapters in the Handbook also demonstrate how far contemporary business history has moved beyond the Chandlerian paradigm, with its focus on large manufacturing firms, mass production, mass distribution, and corporate R&D; its presentation of the US case as a normative, even teleological model of business development; and its explanation of the rise of the modern managerial enterprise as a functional response to the imperatives of markets and technologies.

The chapters in this Handbook demonstrate how research agendas have changed and broadened. There is much more research on forms of business enterprise beyond the large, vertically integrated, horizontally diversified, professionally managed corporation. These include industrial districts and clusters (Zeitlin), family enterprises (Colli and Rose), business groups (Fruin), and entrepreneurial startups (Jones and Wadhvani). There is also much more emphasis on the porous and variable boundaries of the firm (many of whose "core" functions such as finance, research, or human resource management may be wholly or partially externalized) in different national, sectoral, and historical contexts, as well as on the reciprocal interactions between business enterprises and their cultural and political environment. There has also been a distinct shift in chronological focus. While the hundred years between 1850 and 1950 were central to Chandler's work, the Handbook essays report extensive research conducted on the business history of the second half of the twentieth century. This was an era during which, for example, large diversified and integrated firms were replaced in part by markets or networks, while the global pre-eminence of US-based firms was challenged in many sectors.

Even where the focus remains Chandlerian, addressing big business, mass distribution, or corporate R&D, the Handbook chapters demonstrate how recent scholarship has greatly qualified if not overturned altogether some of the key claims of the Chandlerian paradigm, concerning the national and sectoral incidence of large managerial enterprises, the origins and effectiveness of the multidivisional form, and the centrality of internal “paths of learning” to technological innovation. Business historians have not converged on a full-fledged alternative to the Chandlerian paradigm, but the field has nonetheless evolved over the past generation in a much more open and pluralistic direction.

The Handbook shows that the growth of comparative research has been an important driver of changing scholarly agendas. While the prevalence of quantitative methodologies and the consequent need for large datasets has contributed to an overwhelming focus on the United States in many areas of management research, the chapters in this Handbook demonstrate how far business history has developed into a truly international and comparative field, and how much it has to gain by embracing a more fully global perspective. Most business historians still work primarily within their own national frameworks. This provides one important obstacle to accessing the literature, which is often written in languages other than English. However, as the following chapters show, the leading scholars in the field are increasingly capable of drawing sophisticated, fine-grained comparisons across different countries and regions, at least among the advanced industrialized economies of North America, Western Europe, and East Asia. A number of the contributors to this Handbook examine the cross-border activities and strategies of firms, states, business associations, cartels, entrepreneurial diaspora, and other transnational actors. Their international and comparative perspective raises new questions about national trajectories of business development, and enables business historians to contribute actively to current debates in adjacent fields such as comparative political economy and global history.

The wide-ranging topics and approaches covered by this Handbook reflect the fact that business history, as both a body of literature and a community of academic researchers, has both a narrow and a broad definition. The narrower definition includes researchers who conduct primary archival research, although using a plurality of sources and methods, on the history of business enterprises, who belong to the professional business history societies now established in many countries, and publish in the “core” business history journals, including *Business History*, *Business History Review*, *Enterprises et Histoire*, *Enterprise & Society*, *Japan Business History Review*, and *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte*. The broader definition comprises scholars from a variety of social science disciplines (including management studies) who study the historical development of business (sometimes doing original archival research of their own, and sometimes bringing new theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks to bear on existing research).

These two circles interact and enrich the field, which remains open to multiple methodologies and new questions, without falling under the spell of crippling orthodoxies which constrain research agendas. This is evident in the four opening chapters of the Handbook on the relationship between business history and other adjacent disciplines (history, neo-classical economics, evolutionary/institutional economics, and management), as well as in many of the more thematic chapters that explore key issues in contemporary political economy and/or management debates, including corporate governance (Herrigel), entrepreneurship (Jones and Wadhvani), industrial districts (Zeitlin), finance (Lescure), business interest associations (Lanzalaco), and skill formation and training (Thelen).

The “open architecture” of business history as a discipline means that it is unusually well-placed to participate in vigorous two-way exchanges with scholars in adjacent fields. On the one hand, careful empirical research by business historians can effectively challenge or qualify many of the “stylized facts” on which influential theoretical analyses in the social sciences sometimes rest. Corporate governance and financial systems are particularly striking examples, as few if any of the typological frameworks influential in the comparative literature (insiders vs. outsiders, stakeholders vs. stockholders, banks vs. capital markets, common vs. civil law) can account persuasively for the range of variation observed by historians over long time periods within and across countries. On the other hand, comparative social-scientific analyses suggest new questions for business historians, concerning the morphology and explanation of cross-national differences in the organization of business interest associations, the development of vocational education and training systems, and other similar issues which have not hitherto figured prominently in national historiographies.

The organization of this volume reflects and embodies these broad trends in the field. Part I examines the central methodological approaches and theoretical debates within business history, while situating them in terms of its complex, overlapping relationship to other adjacent fields. Part II surveys a variety of forms of business organization and emphasizes the diversity of routes to economic efficiency and business success in different times and contexts. Part III focuses on a series of key functional activities of business enterprise (including some that are often neglected in the narrower business history literature such as design and engineering and accounting systems), analyzing the variety of institutional mechanisms through which these have been performed inside and outside the firm itself. Part IV considers the changing relationship between firms and their wider social, cultural, and political contexts, stressing the reciprocal interactions between enterprise and society.

No single volume can be fully comprehensive. There are topics to which the editors would have liked to devote greater coverage. These include the regulatory role of the state, for example through antitrust/competition, industrial, and

environmental policy, which is addressed in the chapters by Millward on business and the state and by Fear on cartels among others, but which merits more extensive comparative analysis.

There are two serious omissions caused by the inability of the commissioned authors to complete chapters due to other obligations. We had hoped to include a chapter on the role of gender in business by Mary Yeager. This is an important research area which is highlighted in a number of chapters, including Fridenson, Colli and Rose, Jones and Wadhvani, and Lipartito, but which deserves a full-scale chapter of its own in which the largely national studies to date could be placed in a systematic comparative context. Kwolek-Folland (1998) provides a pioneering historical overview of women in business in the United States, while Yeager (1999) provides an edited collection of studies from around the world.

The editors had also hoped to include essays on business history in developing countries, but this goal was abandoned after C. K. Lai was unable to complete his essay on the business history of the Chinese-speaking world. The literature on the history of business beyond the United States, Western Europe, and Japan is not extensive, but it is growing. Both Canada and Australia have quite extensive business history literatures which are rarely incorporated into wider narratives (Taylor and Baskerville 1994; Fleming *et al.* 2004). The literature on developing countries is scarcer, and also overlooked. Monolingual English speakers are often simply unaware of the increasingly rich literature in Spanish on Latin America and in Chinese on East Asia. Family firms and business groups feature extensively in much of this literature, as do relations with governments and the historical impact of imperialism. A number of chapters in this Handbook, however, do extend their thematic analyses beyond the industrialized world to cover the colonial, post-colonial, and emerging markets in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. For further information, there are valuable surveys of the business history literature on China by Faure (2006), on India by Tripathi (2004), and on Latin America by Barbero (2003). Tignor (2007) discusses the limited research undertaken as yet on the business history of Africa.

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