

**Taking Care of Business History:
Challenges and Opportunities for the 21st Century.**

Thomas Haigh, University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee
thaigh@computer.org. www.tomandmaria.com/tom

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I'd like to thank Mitch Larson and his colleagues here at the University of Central Lancashire and on the ABH Council for inviting me to open the conference and for making us all so welcome. I do promise to address the conference theme, but like most historians I'm scared of trying to predict the future. Thus I'm going to try to sneak up on it by way of the past.

Beginnings

When preparing for this talk, memory took me back to the keynote address given to the Business History Conference's 2004 meeting in Le Creusot by the renowned sociologist and science studies pioneer Bruno Latour. As the food and drink of Burgundy was showcased, Latour dealt quite quickly with the matter of business history before, as he tends to do when giving an invited talk, delivering the text of whatever paper on sociological theory he was currently working on. During this short preface he said that he did not know much about business history, but what he had come across was rather dull. He then asked whether any of us had read Richard Powers' novel *Gain* which he, justifiably, considered a masterpiece of American literature in its splicing together of fictional business history and personal tragedy. Only a few hands were raised, presumably reinforcing his doubts about us. Latour then talked about networks which, if I recall

correctly, he believed should be understood as “passionate” things. At my table, at least, we made good use of the wine. My wife was impressed with Latour’s performance, and perhaps shared more of his judgment that she was willing to admit. She proposed that we call our first child “Bruno.” Fortunately our marriage survived.

French intellectuals seem to get away with things that other people can’t. I’m hoping this talk will clear the bar set by Latour, at least on the dimensions of gratuitous offense (less) and relevance (more). This is important, as you have no alcohol to console yourselves with should things go badly. Still, there is no denying that business history is a field that is sometimes underappreciated by outsiders and that countering perceptions of the field as dull and insular is a key challenge for business history in the twenty first century.

Let’s start with the name. Business history is one of those odd terms consisting of two nouns jammed together in such a way that one of them is effectively modifying the other. The other such field that springs to my mind is “science fiction,” and in that case too the interaction of the two words is stimulating but ultimately does little to define a precise meaning.

“Business history.” We know it’s got something to do with business. We know it’s got something to do with history. It’s not the history consulting business, as that is considered, for reasons that must also remain mysterious, a variety of “public history.” Still, the two nouns make it clear that there are two directions in which our field might expand. We can try to convince people who already care about business that history is important and interesting. We can also try to convince people who already care about history that business is important and interesting.

The heritage of business history lies on the “business” side of that divide. When Harvard first injected the respectable scholarly activity of history into the new field of business education leant

credibility to the latter. Credit for standardizing the term “business history” itself may go to the journal *Business History Review*, which has been in business since 1926 although it was originally called *The Bulletin of the Business Historical Society*. “Business Historical” doesn’t sound quite right either, though at least one of the words is an adjective. The name changed only in 1954, four years before *Business History* was founded.

I should at this point admit that what is probably in any event obvious by now: that although I am English (as I hope you can still tell) my perspective on these matters is parochially American. In fact I look forward to repaying your kindness in inviting me by learning more about the practice and politics of business history in Britain.

In its early years business history developed as the aggregation of histories of particular businesses. Firms were understandably proud to have reached chronological milestones such as fifty or a hundred years in business, and would hire a scribe or encourage one of their retired employees to gather material for a suitable celebration. That was how many corporate archives got started, and that was how many histories got written. In the United States the decades immediately after the Second World War were kind to big businesses, which felt confident and prosperous enough to support this kind of work. Great companies needed to preserve the evidence of their rise to greatness. More academic versions of business history were closely tied to economic history, an alliance that has since weakened.

The Inevitable Discussion of Chandler

The entry of Alfred du Pont Chandler at this point will surprise nobody. His contribution to the field has been celebrated and probed by scholars far more qualified for the task. To summarize their wisdom: Chandler succeeded like nobody before or since in making history relevant to

management thinkers and business leaders. He took a field devoid of ideas and ambition and reshaped it to explain crucial transformations in American society such as the rise of big business and the development of a class of professional managers. His early work documented the engineering of businesses structure as a kind of machine, tinkered with by a succession of great men to build new institutional capabilities. Structure, he insisted, should be engineered to support business strategy. This insistence helped to establish “strategy” as a booming field of management research and consulting. His work launched a productive dialog with economic theory, as he tried to establish why bigness was essential in some industries and counterproductive in others. He also had a remarkable knack for using titles to encapsulate his ideas, which were as big as the firms he wrote about. Strategy versus Structure. Economies of Scale and Scope. The Visible Hand of managerial bureaucracy. As long as you could pick up horizontal and vertical integration from the introduction then you could grasp Chandler’s key contributions merely by figuring out the significance of his titles.

With the passage of time it has become natural for those of my generation, who knew Chandler as an author but never as a colleague, to begin to read him more as a primary source than a secondary source. He shared the crisp, confident, upbeat mindset of mid-century corporate America. Chandler’s strengths and weaknesses were not so different from those of the smart, ambitious managers he so admired. He never claimed to be a social historian, and to assail him for lack of attention to issue of class, race, and gender would be like applying the standards of theatre criticism to a game of football. Chandler saw businesses as machines designed from the top down to maximize economic efficiency. He saw gigantic, well managed companies as the engine of human progress and as a proud achievement of Western Civilization. The triumph of the American corporation was a fact in need of historical explanation. His big ideas abstracted

away beautifully from the messy detail of human existence to expose the gleaming structures of institutional innovation and economic rationality within.

The world of business has changed dramatically since the 1970s. Chandler's beloved diversified multidivisional corporations have faced one challenge after another: the oil shocks, waves of Asian competition, corporate raiders, disruptive technologies, new business models based around outsourcing, and the relentless demands to boost short-term returns. The profits and revenues of the biggest firms are larger than ever, but their share of the US workforce has been dropping for decades and the relevance of Chandler's ideas to new giants such as Google and Facebook is unclear. Chandler thought he saw the shape of the future in a magnificently diversified firm such as GE in the 1960s, and he shared its fundamental faith that a good manager could manage any kind of business. *Today that vision seems part of the past, and indeed a kind of hubris that is itself in need of historical and cultural explanation.*

Why No More Big Ideas?

A business historian recently complained to me that our field had produced no new big ideas to replace those of Chandler. I answered that this was not so much an intellectual failure as an aesthetic preference grounded in changes to the structural makeup of the field. Historians have for some decades distrusted big ideas and "master narratives" though a recent surge of enthusiasm for the challenges of "big history" may be reversing that trend.

Those of us who took graduate courses in history at leading American universities during the late twentieth century were trained in a particular way. Since the 1970s social and cultural history had been dominant, and other fields such as the history of technology followed their pattern with a lag of a decade or two to legitimate themselves as respectable subfields. The historical stories

that won their authors prizes, jobs in prestigious universities, or publication with top ranked presses tended to follow a particular pattern. The author dives deeply into the study of a particular community, painstakingly situated in time and space. Its members turn out to be less homogenous than suspected, more varied racially and with a variety of identities shaped by class and gender. Contrary to our received ideas about the era, population, or place in question their experiences turn out to be highly particular and members of the community enjoyed an unexpected degree of “agency” to shape aspects of their own lives. People whose experiences were formerly dismissed insignificant were recovered for the benefit of posterity. Historians tried to dive inside the consciousness of their subjects, reconstructing their view of the world and explaining their actions in their own terms rather than according to present-day assumptions or according to the beliefs of the elites whose perspective had once defined history. They were put at the center of their own stories rather than at the margins of stories centered on rich white men. Even the classic periods and eras used to structure history, from the Scientific Revolution to the Progressive Era, were dismantled as being oppressively one dimensional.

In other words, the stories we historians have been trained to write are about the triumph of particular lived experience over oppressive generalization. That is, in a way, a big idea but it is a big idea that *undermines the validity of all other big ideas*. People offering theories about history, proposing historical laws, hypothesizing waves or cycles of change, instantly position themselves as cranks. Trying to generalize away from specifics to make pronouncements about broad topics made one seem, if not actually a crank, then naive or fundamentally unserious. Within the histories of science and technology, for example, the efforts of earlier writers and non-historians to make pronouncements about the essential nature of science or the relationship

between “technology and society” as if the two were coherent entities came to seem somewhat embarrassing.

So a hunt for “big ideas” cuts against the grain of modern historical culture, within which business history is increasingly embedded. In contrast, this mindset strengthens “history of capitalism” or “comparative capitalisms” as scholarly brands, because they play to the impulses of historians to historicize and particularize anything presented as universal and timeless. For example the increasing frequency of glib references to ‘neoliberalism’ one encounters in cultural studies, functioning as a rhetorical box in which to place “everything me and my friends hate about the direction of our society,” cries out for more thoughtful and nuanced examination of the historically specific and culturally constructed varieties of capitalist practice.

What Is It to Be Post Chandlerian?

For the last few decades business history has been in its “Post-Chandlerian” phase. That is in itself an interesting choice of words, defining current approaches primarily in terms of what they are not. That, of course, mirrors the situation in many other fields. The humanities have been postmodern and poststructuralist for about as long as they were modernist and structuralist, there’s a thriving “post-rock” movement in music, and the idea of the “posthuman” has been browed from science fiction to describe.... something to do with cyborgs and consciousness.

Unsurprisingly, the quest to move beyond or away from Chandler has led us in many different directions. Many scholars have applied Chandler’s own concerns to different kinds of firms – to the small firms that were there all along, to the importance of clusters of innovative companies or to the new kinds of “network” organization growing around information technology. Others have insisted on the role of government policies and patronage in development of the corporate world,

or done comparative international work to argue that there have been many different models for successful capitalism. Scholars have integrated the focus of labor history on internal strife and the tools of social history with the study of the corporation. We have tied the history of business to the invention of the consumer and looked at the role of businesses as users of technology. Above all, the assumption that the story of business is a fundamentally American story has been widely and successfully challenged.

I am not even going to try to do justice to all those different intellectual projects in this short address. Instead I am going to suggest that the appearance of these various topics and approaches reflects a fundamental shift in the kinds of scholars writing business history in the US and the reasons it is being written. This presents a basically hopeful view of the field, while also highlighting some challenges we face.

By doing so I hope to provide a perspective that is complementary to a number of recent “state of the field” musings I came across while working on this talk. Those include a recent book *Reimagining Business History* by Philip Scranton and Patrick Friedenson, an editorial in *Business History Review*, and a forthcoming book *Organizations in Time* edited by Dan Wadhwanai and Marcelo Bucheli. The explicit topic of the first two is the intellectual content of business history. (Wadhwanai and Bucheli, however, make some very interesting observations about disciplines and methods that closely parallel my own). I have had enough contact with the social history of science that my instinct is instead to focus on the subtext of such discussion.

To understand the intellectual direction of a discipline we must look at its human and institutional underpinnings. The kinds of research that flourish will be the kinds that are reliably rewarded with actual and symbolic sustenance: jobs that pay living wage, publication in

prestigious outlets, prizes, the occasional grant, the opportunity to teach Ph.D. students and thus reproduce oneself intellectually, even initiations to give keynote addresses. A scholarly community achieves stability and autonomy when someone can prosper by working with its methods and addressing its questions rather than by having to accommodate the norms and expectations of longer established disciplinary communities. This involves conferences, journals, grant review panels (for areas that receive funding), Ph.D. programs, textbooks, and undergraduate courses controlled by members of the community. Computer science, for example, accomplished these things in the 1960s and 1970s. Business historians created most of the necessary institutional apparatus long ago. What does not exist, in the United States at least, is the hardest and most essential thing for a growing research community: a supply of faculty or research positions. One cannot plausibly hope to secure a job there by defining oneself as a promising business historian, by publishing in business history journals, and by securing glowing references from prominent business historians. In this most crucial aspect we lack intellectual autonomy. One can debate whether or not this is on balance a bad thing for our scholarship, but it is a fact that will shape the rest of my remarks.

Research Aesthetics and Changing Populations

In the United States has been a definite shift over the past twenty years or so in the kinds of scholars serving on the editorial boards of business history journals, running business history associations, presenting at business history meetings, and winning prizes in the field. Business history has been establishing itself more and more clearly as a subfield or topic of history, and less and less as an area of specialization for scholars of business. (Harvey and Wilson, in a 2007 *Business History* editorial suggested that the marginalization of economic history within history departments had led to an institutional shift in the opposite direction, concentrating business

historians within business schools. Things are clearly different in the UK, and exploring the structural reasons for this divergence would be a fascinating project).

Although historians learn never to suggest laws or inevitable directions for historical change, this does seem to fit a pattern. The history of medicine used to be written by elderly doctors or by medical school professors nearing the ends of their careers. Early work on the history of computing was carried out primarily by computer pioneers themselves. The history of science used to be the preserve of scientists. In all these areas the intellectual growth of the subfield has been accompanied by a shift in the employment and doctoral training of its leading scholars, towards a kind of professionalization.

The transition has been spurred by the remarkable transformation and expansion of business education since the Second World War. Historians tend to point to the Ford Foundation program launched in 1954 which sought to modernize business education by making it more scientific and less vocational, as a turning point in the development of the field. Business schools seek to hire star researchers, who can publish in the most competitive journals. This generally means addressing very specialized questions using quantitative methods borrowed from the social sciences, rather than targeting research at external audiences among practicing managers or elsewhere in academia.

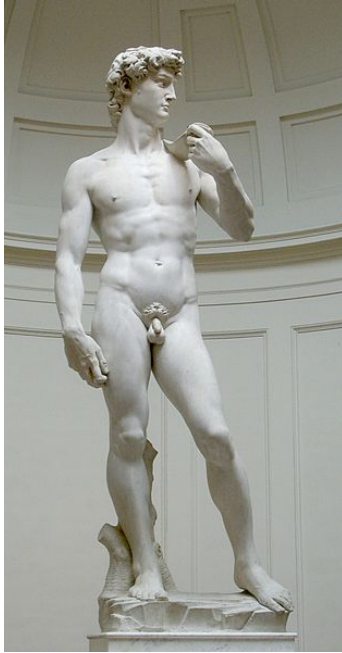
Historians have, despite a flirtation with punched card data coding and regression models in the 1970s, overwhelmingly thrown in with the humanities rather than the social sciences. We practice a craft, and that is evident with a glance at a typical history paper. There are no headings announcing research questions, hypotheses to be tested, or a careful review of the literature. No statistical tests are applied. When I first came America to study the History and Sociology of

Science for my Ph.D. having previously earned two degrees in computer science not far from here at the University of Manchester, my initial instinct was to learn statistics so that I could code data and run tests. This tendency was beaten out of me by the professors in my department, who would tolerate percentages but little more. Explicit justification of the representativeness of the sources chosen was also seen as inelegant.

The physical structure of a paper that could be published in a competitive history journal would ensure its rejection in a competitive management journal, and vice versa. As I am employed in a former library school turned “Information School,” where neither business, nor history, nor computer science has much prominence I have been exposed to yet another disciplinary culture and have come to be quite self-conscious about my own somewhat perverse commitment to writing history that is intended to appeal to Ph.D. historians while, simultaneously, attempting to explain to my colleagues in computing and in information science what history is and why they should care about it. We tend not to be fully aware of the norms, rituals, assumptions and ideologies that shape the research communities in which we work. They are acquired during our education, as much from fellow graduate students as from faculty, and by taking apart the assigned readings to figure out how they were constructed. Later in our careers they are reinforced by the reactions of colleagues to our presentations and the written and unwritten lessons imparted by reviewers. The commitment of historians, myself included, to the centrality of narrative and to the idea of research as a set of tacit craft skills is both a source of intellectual strength and a constraint on our ability to flourish in cross-disciplinary settings.

The way I explained it to myself is that a history paper strives to be something like this:

[CLICK]



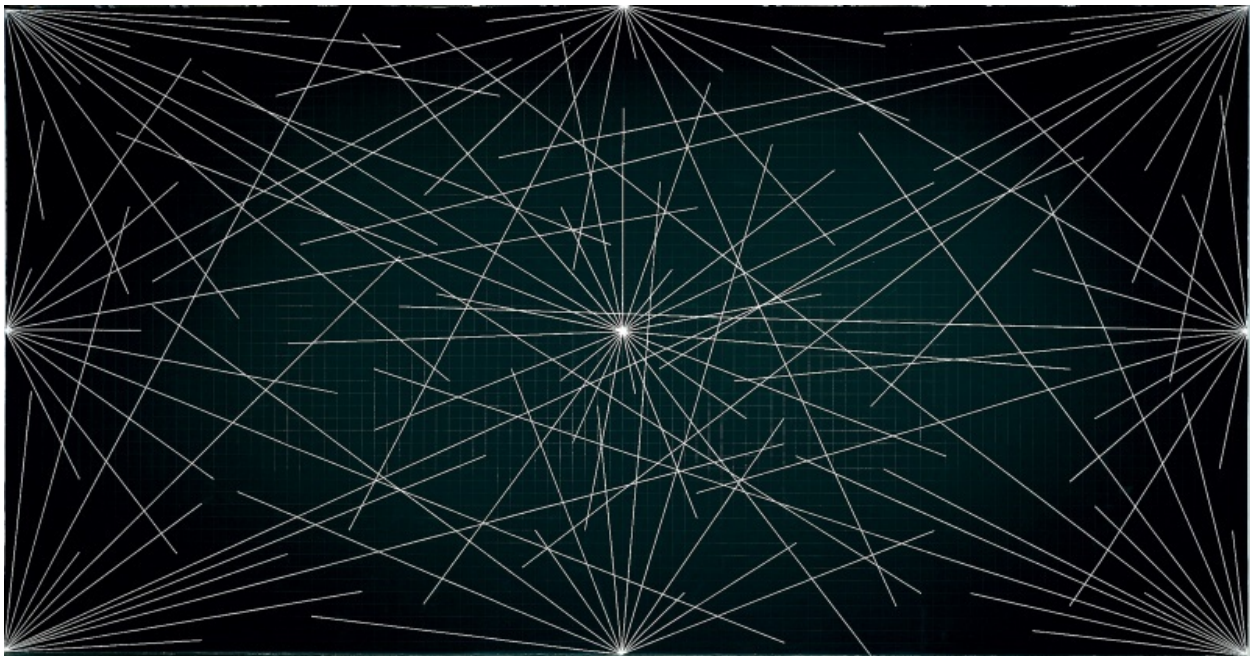
We are impressed by its immediate and obvious faithfulness to the thing being depicted, by the assurance of its flow. The enormous skill of its creator is used precisely to hide all evidence of his own artifice. He put a huge amount of research and preparatory work into the project, and deployed a range of ingenious techniques into creating the apparent naturalness of the representation. Another sculptor could read the clues in the statute to work out how it was made, and would admire its novel features. To most people, however, it appears a naturalistic mirror of its subject. Likewise when reading a book or paper on a topic close to my own work I often start with the footnotes – looking at the evidence and the works cited to work out what techniques the author used and how it relates to earlier histories. (Also, of course, to see if the author has the good taste to cite me).

Work in the social science mode is more like this. **[CLICK]**



It is a very different aesthetic. All the inner workings are pulled out and displayed in a heavily stylized manner. You can't really overlook its artificiality.

Or, perhaps, like this drawing. **[CLICK]** The work is intended to be self documenting and self describing, in that its title describes precisely how to create it. The aesthetic of the management paper pulls in a similar direction, describing and justifying each step of the research to vouch for the reliability of the findings being presented.



Sol LeWitt: Three-part drawing: A six-inch (15 cm) grid covering the walls. 1st wall: On a red wall, blue lines from each corner to points on the grid, yellow lines from the center to points on the grid; 2nd wall: On a yellow wall, blue lines from each corner to points on the grid, red lines from the midpoint of each side to points on the grid; 3rd wall: On a blue wall, red lines from the midpoint of each side to points on the grid, yellow lines from the center to points on the grid. (The number of lines and their length are determined by the draftsmen, but each wall has an equal number of lines.)

In contrast, historians are implicitly trained to find the ritual flaunting of literature reviews, research questions and null hypotheses ugly and primitive, and to dismiss it as an ostentatious attempt to appropriate the cultural authority of science. The social scientific paper is, in this view, just a form of highly ritualized and gratuitously boring narrative full of passive language and nasty jargon. We like to get to the story quickly and stick with it, introducing theory or broader generalizations in support of our particular analysis rather than making great sweeping claims on the basis of a tiny body of data. Thus when scholars in many fields, including most in business schools, look at historical work they do not necessarily recognize it as a valid or rigorous kind of research. Neither, to be fair, are historians very good at explaining what we do when asked by colleagues what “research framework” or “method” we use. A friend once told me the secret: just say that you use “grounded theory.” Good advice, but it gets one only so far. We practice our craft as we learned it from our masters. We read a lot of sources, we start to write something, and we repeat both activities until we are done. Something happens, but we usually can’t articulate it to the uninitiated.

Only a handful of historians have been hired by US business schools over the past fifteen years, and this has generally taken place despite rather than because of their historical credentials.

Harvard provides the only obvious exception. The better the business school the stronger the pressure to publish in a handful of elite journals, none of which are focused on business history or would be likely to publish a paper written in form and style usually expected of historians. A crucial question for historians in US business schools is thus whether they can find ways to present historical work in papers that follow the genre expectations of organizational research without betraying the substantive core of historical thinking.

Business is by far the most popular undergraduate major in the United States, but business students are, at least according to the *New York Times*, among the least hard working and academically weakest group of students to be found on a typical campus. They are increasingly unlikely to share the basic philosophy of a liberal arts education. It's also worth mentioning that business school faculty in the US earn more than twice as much as their colleagues in the humanities. In part, this reflects their contribution to the institutional bottom line, as the business of business education plays a vital role in keeping higher education afloat. Thousands of universities offer MBAs today, and this quintessentially American certification has gone global. It is an expensive degree, sought by students who hope to earn their money back with a better job or a more successful career.

In the United States business history is thus a hard sell either to business school faculty and administrators, who would not recognize historical work as research and still less as research of the kind that would boost their school's position in the ubiquitous league tables, or to business school students who are majoring in business to get away from pointless and impractical stuff like history. It's hard to be very hopeful about this conjunction, despite the many intellectually compelling arguments that can be made for the importance of history to professional education.

Business History within History Departments

As business history is vanishing from American business schools the aspiring business historian of the 21st century should probably focus on getting hired by a history department. (*Or on moving to Europe*). The problem is that business history, per se, is unfamiliar to most historians and off putting to many. Few aspiring historians have the opportunity to take classes in business history, and fewer still avail themselves of the opportunity. History, like most of the humanities, is not doing at all well in the modern university. Enrollments are dwindling, tenure track jobs are vanishing, and the supply of absurdly well qualified Ph.D. graduates far outstrips the demand for their services. Choosing a scholarly career, particularly one in such a gloriously impractical field, is often in itself a rejection of the values of broader society in general and of business in particular. Historians feel justifiably threatened by the encroachment of corporate values and jargon into university administration and the push from cash-strapped state and local governments to focus on subjects with obvious vocational benefits.

So it is a rather implausible to hope that the faculty of a research university's history department, on the increasingly rare occasions a beneficent Dean grants permission to hire a new faculty member, will emerge from their lively negotiations over which combination of time, geography, and disciplinary approach should be chosen for the position with a consensus that the number one need for their department is a business historian. The prospects for obtaining such a job, the platform on which a prominent academic career can be built, would hinge on the attempt to which the historian in question could make a case that she is really the thing described in the position description, say a cultural historian, expert on Latin American Studies, Atlanticist, or specialist in Jewish history who just happens to work on topics related to business. This is, in many ways, the mirror image of the plight faced by the business historian hoping to win a job in

a business school, and if successful the historian would be expected to publish and present according to the disciplinary expectations of history. The challenges to overcome are daunting, but a number of business historians have found employment in respectable departments of history around the US, in which they are able at least occasionally to teach the subject.

Recent enthusiasm for the “history of capitalism” as a framework for teaching issues related to the history of business and economics at elite universities such as Harvard, Princeton, and Cornell may change this. In particular Harvard seems to have put some money behind the idea, sponsoring meetings and fellowships. The movement was even featured in the New York Times in a recent article. The world has copied many ideas from Harvard, including the MBA and the case study method so perhaps there is hope here. (Alas, the importance of history to management education was one of the Harvard ideas that didn’t get broadly institutionalized by other leading US business schools).

Here there is reason to be hopeful. Within the discipline of history as a whole there is much less clear sense now than a generation ago of a particular core set of concerns and methods as central. That’s not to deny the marginality of business history, but it does create opportunities. The eminent environmental historian, Richard White, put this very nicely in a keynote address at the 2008 Business History Conference. White recalled that decades ago Western history (in the sense of the wilder part of the United States) was seen as a provincial backwater, geographically and methodologically remote from the core of the discipline. A move was punningly suggested to join forces with Pacific historians in the creation of a “Peripheral Studies Association.” Now, he observed, there was no single approach as dominant as social history had been in the 1980s. Without such a center, he concluded, the formerly peripheral was no longer stigmatized. White’s term as president of the American Historical Association seemed to support his point.

Strength Through Diversity

So someone hoping to earn a living as an academic business historian in the US will probably have to market themselves as, and to a large extent actually become, either a business scholar who applies the questions and methods of a subfield (for examples management) to historical data or a historian who applies the techniques and concerns of a particular subfield, for example cultural history, to a topic related to business. Successful as the Chandlerian paradigm was, one cannot expect it, or any single replacement, to provide a single support for the future growth of business history in such a diverse range of disciplinary niches.

Within the US we have seen a considerable broadening of the scope of business history, expressed in the range of material published in its leading journals and presented at meetings of the Business History Conference. I suspect that this reflects a deliberate strategy associated with many leaders of institutions such as BHC and the Hagley Museum and Library. At the conference, in particular, one meets graduate students earning their Ph.D.s in a variety of different kinds of history programs. The journal *Enterprise and Society*, now almost fifteen years old, has endeavored to publish work produced by a similarly broad range of scholars.

This implies a fundamental kind of shift in how “business history” is defined *from historical approach to historical setting*. That is to say, twenty years ago academic business history was, in as much as it was more than merely the application of economic history to the firm, a small and rather isolated historical discipline with its own questions, methods, and canon of great works. It was, in sociological terms, a sub discipline or scholarly tradition of its own. In future, and of necessity given the elimination of business history within US business schools, it will be defined

more as a loosely defined collection of historical work whose authors tell, from one perspective or another, stories in which business plays an important role.

That transition poses some perils and challenges. On the one hand, it promises a broader and more intellectual diverse intellectual community. Business history might become what historian of science Peter Galison called a “trading zone,” in which researchers from different intellectual traditions productively pool their talents around a specific project. On the other, it risks sacrificing the focus on distinctive concerns such as the structural evolution of the firm that allowed Chandlerian business history to develop its own research questions and ideas and around which intellectual partnerships were formed with scholars of business and economics.

How to address this challenge? In many ways it is the same issue faced by historians in other cross-cutting fields such as the history of the book. Historians, literary scholars, and other humanities researchers write about books and their authors all the time. Yet the book itself is often taken for granted. “History of the book” has emerged as an interdisciplinary field probing the materiality of culture. It cuts across established fields of studies and historical narratives to rediscover the evolution of book technology and its relationship to reading practices, publishing industries, and intellectual history. Relatively few scholars define themselves primarily as historians of the book, or of “print culture,” but the work of scholars like Richard Darnton has succeeded in persuading a much broader range of scholars to incorporate some of the perspectives raised by specialists in this field into their own work.

One would be hard pushed to think of a more important set of topics to the development of humankind over the past few centuries than those explored by business historians. The institutional development of firms, the invention of consumerism, and the evolution systems of

bureaucratic control. The rise of global business, the back and forth tug between sprawling and focused models of corporate integration. The proliferation of new and specialized kinds of technical and managerial work. Yet the work of business historians on these issues has not had much influence on the work of other kinds of historians. Business is either neglected entirely or treated as a moustache twirling villain. At best it is a passive backdrop before which historical actors move rather than an active participant in the story.

The shift to “history of capitalism” as an identity may help to address this. Still, that identity does not encompass the entire scope of business history. So our more general challenge is to package our unique insights in ways that make them assessable to non-specialist historians. What insights could business history offer to someone interested in, for example, the discourse on the “Americanization” of Europe or the development of film as an art form over the twentieth century? We are increasingly striving to situate our work within the concerns and literatures of what one might call “mainstream history” to provide social, political, and cultural context for the activities of business. This is necessary and admirable. But can we take the next step: to write business history of a kind that will feed ideas back into the historical mainstream, that can help a historian who today knows and cares nothing about the inner workings of business to broaden and deepen her understating of her own chosen topic?

In the personal journeys that led us to this room we have all made some unusual, and economically irrational, career decisions. As Marge Simpson once said, “Bart, don't make fun of grad students. They just made a terrible life choice.” Anyway, I assume your choices reflected a belief in the importance of what we do together as a way of making sense of the modern world. Fulfilling that promise means making the case for the centrality of business history to the broadest possible audience.

Seven Opportunities for 21st Century Business History, aka “How To Be More Like Me”

A colleague observed to me that there are two basic models for a keynote address. One surveys the state of the field and proposes a way forward, the other reports on the speaker's own research. Fundamentally, however, both have the same implicit message: you should become more like me. **[Click to expose subtitle]**

In this case that is true only to the extent that I believe business history's future is as a “big tent” in which a variety of approaches, including I admit my own, have space to interact and thrive. I've noticed, in any event, that historians do not take well to attempts to tell us what we should and shouldn't do. Perhaps this is connected to the disdain for explicit discussion of methodology I mentioned earlier. Instead, historians tend to respond to the power of an exemplary work which embodies a new kind of approach. Like Chinese engineering companies we take the impressive new thing it apart, probe its workings, and then try to build one of our own.

The traditional culture of business history, at least in the US, can seem particularly averse to manifestos and calls to action. Exposure to the endless manifestos, takeaway lessons, bullet points and models that infest the business school literature may, as a reaction, have pushed us rather too far in the other direction. The editors of *Business History Review* recently bemoaned the journal's low impact factor, meaning that its articles are rarely cited. They attributed this to the field's lack of success in persuading business scholars to take us seriously, but I think it also reflects a lack of explicit dialog between authors to situate our work within one or another tradition. Back in graduate school, when I was getting my first paper ready for publication in that journal, I recall receiving a suggestion that a passage discussing the particular approach I was

taking and its possible broader application should be cut from the draft and “saved for the presidential address.”

Well, this is the closest I am likely to come to delivering such an address to a gathering of business historians. So here are seven ideas about possible opportunities for business history that I’ve accumulated own idiosyncratic experience in the 21st century. These are not the only seven things for business history to do, or the seven most important, but the thrust of my argument so far is that business history is becoming ever broader and thus no single set of bullet points can or should provide its agenda.

1: There Really Should Be a “Social History of Work.”

I was trained as a historian in a particular tradition that tried to integrate the perspectives of business and labor history. I only realized how unusual this was when I presented my paper on middle class formation among tabulating machine supervisors at the North American Labor History Conference. There were more people on the platform than the audience, and one of the friendly people I mingled with asked me “What are you doing here” when I described my topic. Questions of identity are central to social and cultural history, but have not received much attention from historians of management or from historians of information technology. Phil Scranton once suggested that the differing perspectives of historians of labor and of technology could largely be explained by the fact that the former were lapsed Marxists whereas the latter were lapsed engineers. Business history has, to paint for a moment with a similarly broad brush, often been written by people who identify with senior managers. As a result the evolution of middle management identity has generally fallen into a netherworld between the domains of these groups. Labor historians care a great deal about occupational identity but only for workers

at the base of the corporate pyramid. Those above the rank of supervisor have been treated with much less nuance and sympathy. Business historians, in contrast, love managers but have traditionally focused on decisions made by top managers or just treated the corporation as a single rational actor. They have had little interest in questions of identity. Labor historians heeded the calls of the 1960s and 1970s to write “history from the bottom up” while business historians maintained the more traditional “top down” perspective. Neither gives a very good view of the middle areas of the organizational chart. One of the things I’ve tried to do in exploring the changing role of information system specialists within corporate America is to approach this history from the middle out, informed by scholarship from both communities. So it seems that the history of work should be a crosscutting historical field for the 21st century just as promising and liberating as the history of capitalism.

2: Corporations are Made of People, My Friend.

One of the things labor historians have done well is to consider how group identities are formed, sustained, and eroded. Would workers identify with their ethnic identity, their employer, their craft, or with a tenuously constructed sense of membership in a united working class? Could their collective will reshape the organization of work and the institutions of capitalism? Although labor historians have rarely acknowledged the complexity of managerial or middle class identities we could certainly benefit from acquiring their habits of looking for structural conflict and at the work done to build group identities and to seek collective mobility. Business historians have unrivalled expertise in telling the stories of institutions, but we have not always chosen to populate them. In my own research I became aware of the importance of new kinds of occupational identity such as “data processing manager” in shaping the organization of work around information technology. These identities became the centerpieces of social movements

within the corporate world, as technicians and specialized managers gathered in associations at conferences to lay the groundwork for collective action to win the status, organizational mandate, and elevated place on the organization chart they believed that they deserved. From this perspective the organization chart of a company in the late twentieth century represented a scorecard for a host of never-ending internecine battles, fought by different specialist and technical groups.

3: We're historians. So let's historicize things!

Everything has a history. Investigating the hidden histories of things that people believe to be timeless or universal, like progress, or truth, or freedom, can be particularly informative. They generally turn out to have changed in meaning over time, and to embed the assumptions and interests of particular groups of people. Economic sociologists in the vein of Vivian Zelizner have been doing this quite effectively in recent decades with respect to economic concepts, but there are still a lot of important ideas out there in need of social histories. The one I care about most is information. The concept of information, in its modern sense as a quantity that can be stored or processed by machines, appears to date from the 1940s and its spread, at least in the world of business, was closely tied to identifiable social movements within the world of business promoting particular ways of using computer technology. Yet historians have too often been content to backwardly project modern senses of information into the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. In general, business historians would benefit from more carefully examining the origin of, and ideology attached to, the concepts we borrow from the broader world.

4: Don't Forget Technology.

Ties between the history of technology and business history have been strong in recent decades, with many important scholars publishing and presenting in both areas. I hope we can maintain and build on that connection, even as institutional and disciplinary concerns draw business historians in diverse directions. Many crucial topics within the history of information technology have benefitted or can benefit from the insights of business historians – not just the firms producing hardware and software but the use of IT within organizations, its distribution, and the many experts, intermediaries, and trade groups structuring its use. Yet we see many more young scholars presenting work on IT at the Society for the History of Technology than at business history meetings. That’s had something to do with the success of the Special Interest Group on Computers, Information, and Society, SIGCIS, which I’ve led since 2005, to so perhaps I should apologize at this point! In recompense I would be happy to collaborate on opportunities to cross-promote business history to this audience.

5: Don’t Be Scared -- A Bit Of Organizational Theory Wouldn’t Hurt That Much

As a graduate student I had to create three “orals lists,” each consisting of perhaps eighty books encompassing the key works in a particular field. Passing a two hour inquisition on these was ritual that took one, after about three years in the Ph.D. program, from coursework on to dissertation. I decided on “The social study of business organizations” as a suitable field and made appointments with everyone I could identify in the Wharton school who had some kind of interest in sociological or anthropological approaches. Six scholars recommended their favorite readings. Like most educations this was eclectic, but much of what I read have stayed with me and guided my historical research. This convinced me that business historians can benefit from exposure to the organizational literature far beyond the traditional alliance around the economic theory of the firm.

For example in the “New Institutionalism” literature (not so new anymore but then none of us are getting any younger) I found a way to validate my sense that data processing managers, systems men, scientific office managers, and the other characters in my story were pushing to change a collective social consensus about the proper shape of the organizational chart, and that change was best approached on this level rather than by the traditional business history method of creating isolated case studies in which change is explained as a process internal to a particular firm. That’s an example of what I hope is a broader opportunity: that ideas from fields like organizational sociology can actually make historical work better rather than just as a way of trying to legitimate history within the business school world. The increasing involvement of business historians in the European Group for Organizational Studies is certainly a step in this direction.

6: The United States Has a National Story Too

As you all know, much of the best business history of the past few decades has been motivated by a desire to push back, in one way or another, against Chandler. This includes his initial focus on American big business, and his later attempts to explain divergence from the US model as a result of one or another set of local factors inhibiting events from following its path. Today Chandler is being shaken off even as an obligatory point of departure, as business history matures in regions such as Asia and scholars discover different frameworks and sets of questions. Within the history of information technology we have been particularly likely to think of the particular story of computing in the US as THE story of IT. Thus scholars working in other countries have produced work that is explicitly national in its frame, but Americans usually have not. Shaking off the twentieth century assumptions of American hegemony opens many opportunities for business history which had been obscured when modernization, globalization,

and Americanization were blurred together. As an Americanist I'm interested some of the less obvious ones: what really was American about the computer industry, the software business, or IT consulting? What does the American story look like as one of many equals, rather than as the norm from which divergence must be explained?

7: Let's Look at the Histories Our Actors Think They're Acting In

Historians tend to speak dismissively of the efforts of communities to construct for themselves a "useful past" – that is a historical narrative, probably of a presentist or whigish nature, that validates their current concerns. Our own version of the past is deeper and more truthful, though presumably in contrast "useless." Perhaps we should consider the myths and legends created within businesses, associations, or occupational fields as topics of study in their own right rather than just as fallacies to ignore or debunk. They are, after all, by far the most common historical narratives and play an essential role in human life. We all position ourselves as stars in the story of our own lives, and we understand our own actions as responses to broader historical stories in which these personal narratives are intertwined. Even the denial of historical precedent, as during the .com bubble of the 1990s, is itself a form of historical storytelling. Studying the use made of historical narrative within organizations and occupational groups can illustrate the power of history.

This is actually another idea that I came to via an organizational scholar, Karl Weick, with his idea of "sensemaking" – that people make sense of their own actions only in retrospect, by telling themselves stories. Admittedly I might have come to it more directly via the booming field of memory studies if I had been trained more as a cultural historian and less as a social historian. Recently I've also been exploring the extension of this imagined history to the

imagined future, as business information technology to be purchased and deployed following the acceptance of a collective vision of a future world in which the technology (say the management information system, the electronic patient record, or in my current work with Bernardo Batiz-Lazo and Dave Stearns, the cashless society) has already prevailed.

Conclusion

This idea of the centrality of historical narrative to human experience is the thought I'd like to end on. Preparing for this honor has made me think hard about what history is, and about why, after essentially wandering into the discipline of history by accident, I have continued to identify so strongly with it despite having, from an institutional viewpoint, wandered out again. My best answer is that we understand ourselves, and our businesses, through storytelling. In this context I think of the haunting film *Wings of Desire* and of the poem read early in the film, as angels flit around the city of Berlin listening to the thoughts of its inhabitants and bearing silent witness to their stories. The city, still divided, is shaped more obviously than most by momentous events within living memory. **[Click to expose picture]**

Why am I me, and why not you?

Why am I here, and why not there?

.....

How can it be that I, who I am,
didn't exist before I came to be,
and that, someday, I, who I am,
will no longer be who I am?

These are questions to ask not just about individual humans but about ideas, occupations, institutions, and technologies. Why do they follow one course or another? How can something come where once there was nothing? What endures over time? One could seek answers in many academic or spiritual traditions, but to me these are questions best addressed with the craft of the historian. We are made of stories, and by stories. Sometimes we may feel like the angels in the film, observing what humanity has forgotten or does not care to see as we pass invisibly through the world. **[Click to fade picture]** Still like those angels we can at least see and hear each other. And like theirs, our obscure work has its purpose. Historical research is the tool by which humanity learns how things come to be as they are and not otherwise.

Now that's business worth taking care of.