

Business historians: (wo)men with or without a plan? Nine suggestions to solve the identity crisis

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As the only historian in the debate who has no direct affiliation with business history as a subdiscipline, I would like to reflect both on the short position papers that have been provided by my colleagues Jones, De Jong and Kipping and on where I believe opportunities can be seized by business historians (BHs hereafter) to deal with those problems my colleagues raise, whilst taking the liberty of throwing in some stones to cause some ripples.

On the basis of the three contributions, and also the article “ ‘New Business History? An invitation to Discuss’ ” by De Jong, Higgins and van Driel (2013) one can easily conclude that Business History as a subdiscipline is in some sort of “identity crisis” or at least some prominent business historians seem to think so. But reading the suggestions made by my colleagues -and before joining this collective flagellation- I believe that it is necessary to see that 1. Many of the problems are not restricted to BH as such, but are problems of historians in general, and in some cases even of all scientists and 2. The competitive advantages of BH are not used at their fullest. The suggestions done by De Jong, Higgins and van Driel come down to the following four main issues:

- develop theories, make your theoretical assumptions and conclusions concrete
- make your methodologies explicit, be transparent about the data you use, share those data with others
- invest in comparative research
- engage in debate, including the big issues that are currently on the societal agenda

I dare to say that although self-knowledge might be the beginning of all wisdom and thus this may be a useful exercise for BHs as such, the four elements above are points of weakness among virtually all subdisciplines of history. As such BH doesn't differ all that much from other disciplines, but still it considers itself as being at the margins of historical research. Instead of stressing the problems here -which as I just mentioned are really not that particular- I would rather suggest some strategies that use the competitive advantages of BH as a field in order to overcome the “identity crisis”:

1. Stop being modest and make the societal relevance of Business History (more) explicit

The only student who ever dared to claim explicitly to me that he was not at all interested in identifying the relevance of his historical research for present-day developments was a business historian and I remember that exactly because of this, I was quite shocked. This reluctance to identify the usefulness of their own research for present-day developments seems to be a common problem among all historians and even humanities scholars at large, but even so: BH here has a competitive advantage in dealing with so many relevant societal issues.

Claiming that “History matters” as a way to make BH matter is indeed not enough, but that goes for any subfield of history. It is the essence of what we study -the passing of time, and the change and evolution that this entails- that matters, not the factual issues. Long-term change - and I'm not even talking centuries here, but decennia- is hardly ever included in policy advice, let alone political translations of those, nor do most other sciences do serious research -that goes beyond some simplistic generalisations that would give any historian an instant migraine- on periods of time longer than let's say 50 years. At the other side of the spectrum are disciplines such as climate researchers or evolutionary biologists who usually do not care much for the past 1000 years as the change within these periods is not big enough to be important. But even

within these sciences, attitudes are changing and if we help to feed the perspective that long-term change matters, other disciplines might start paying attention to us as well.

2. Don't get too distracted by too much quantification

Abe de Jong and his co-authors, in their article, jealously point to economic history as an example where some developments have been picked up. Whilst I never really considered economic history as a field distinct from business history, it is true that economic history in general has –probably most prominently among all fields of history- dealt with the need to make methods and techniques –and I explicitly mention these separately- explicit in their own research. This in itself has indeed greatly improved the methodological clarity within economic history, also among those not using quantitative techniques. However, methodology is about more than statistics, which in itself is a collection of techniques to analyse data, and given that this is not always realized among economic historians either we risk to lose attention for the mechanisms behind historical processes, to see the bigger picture(s), which is a skill historians over the past few decennia have increasingly developed.

3. Keep primary sources in the picture

One of the typical –and positive- aspects of BH in my view is the attention that goes to primary sources, to digging deep in the historical archives, an aspect of historical research that is –or once was- central to history as *métier*. Investing in methodology and theorizing does not have to be at the disadvantage of such valuable research, but in practice it sometimes does.

4. Dare to share

In line with what Matthias Kipping refers to, I would like to call upon BHs to share their findings more with others, including their data, although –I would like to stress- that this reluctance to share data with others is not something typical for BHs, but for all historians and to some extent even all scientists. The fear that revisions of your data may lead to questioning the outcomes, is unnecessary. I entirely agree with Matthias Kipping that this is part of what science is about.

5. Embrace the economic crisis

Although the crisis may affect budgets within companies available for research of businesses histories, it might prove to be, in the near future, an event that gives more opportunities to Business historians. As much as the economic crisis has cast a spell on the future of classical economics, raises questions about the validity of economics' prognoses that might be less optimistic or valid than formerly presumed, it offers room for BHs to broaden their perspectives, and to critically assess classical economics' predictions of the past few decennia on economic growth and development, preferably with tools and methodologies also from other social sciences.

6. Put current developments in a historical perspective

Are new forms of economic exchange really new? How new is new? New forms of economic exchange, such as for example the collaborative consumption and production, as expressed in developments such as crowdsourcing, group buying, formation of new cooperatives etc. might be less new and revolutionary than is often thought. We do not need to go back all that much in time to find valuable examples of collective buying (see the guilds), or crowdsourcing, or cooperatives, to understand that it is rather an anomaly that we have used these instruments so little over the past 50-100 years whereas they seem to be a sort of “natural” component of

economic systems in the past. What are the important and necessary features of such instruments? What made them go right or wrong in the past? To what extent are we now facing similar circumstances as those in which they functioned or did not function in the past?

7. Enlarge your time-frame

In order to deal with such issues as mentioned in the previous part BHs should also start paying more attention to business in earlier times and to covering larger time-spans. The history of early modern business is virtually absent in the program of this conference: I found 6 papers that deal with periods before 1800, and even less that cover more than a century of history. As a historian trained in interwar agricultural history, who then went on to write a PhD about 18-19th century commons and then started writing papers on all sorts of issues going on from the late middle ages onwards, I dare say (although this did take me a long time to realize): in comparison with what came before it, the 20th century is pretty boring!

Doing science is a matter of finding systematics in phenomena, such as people doing business, but with a time frame that is limited to not more than two centuries, the number of interesting varieties of the same phenomena that –if compared systematically- could deliver interesting insights becomes rather limited. Opening up time frames –backwards in time- and dealing with larger time frames could increase variety, and as such enrich conclusions, models, theories based on such research.

8. Go beyond the exception

There is a strange contradiction between the singularity of the methodological approach in BH (mainly casestudies) and the generality of the theories claimed by our friends the economists, that one would expect to surface in BH-studies, or that could at least be tested within BH-studies. And it might be that this contradiction is also what is keeping BHs from theorizing. Moreover, a company's history is bound to stress the exceptionality of the firms' performance as this is what explains its success and its capacity to have its own business history being written. This is a counter-scientific starting point and endangers the comparability of cases in a later stage. Search for failure, not just success.

9. Become the moralists of science

The previous suggestion also brings along some ethical issues. Some domains of science, in particular psychology and medical research, are currently going through what one could call an ethical crisis, with several well-known scientists who have messed with their data, sometimes even jeopardizing the lives of patients. This is an issue that has received plenty of attention within the Netherlands but there can be no doubts that scientists in other countries may also have been unable to resist the lure of the citation indices. At the same time a European-wide discussion is going on –and has definitely not ended, considering the growing number subsidy instruments that demand financial input of industrial partners- about the position of the scientist when paid by a company that has a stake in a certain outcome. Whereas historians who are 1. Experts in the critique of sources, 2. Hardly ever get money from industry and 3. Don't bother about citation indices, historians in general seem to be in an excellent position to play an important role in the debate on the ethics of science. But among all those historians, business historians are the best placed to do so as they are, indeed, often paid by companies who may want to see another result on paper than what the author of the commissioned book had on mind. How does one deal with that?

My suggestion therefor is: make an opportunity out of your (potential) weakness –i.e. being influenced by the company that commissioned the research-, explain how BHs deal with these

issues (which contracts and protocols are used? What is done in case of conflicts etc?, and become the moralists of science!