

Special issue: chronologies, periods and events in management and business history

I take pleasure in presenting this Special Issue (SI) of *JMH* focussing on chronologies, periods and events in Management and Business History. The nature of history means that all the events and periods we study are typically ordered into chronologies, often divided down into periods and events; these six papers highlight management and organizational phenomena that have in some way been defined by the periods in which they manifested themselves. All of them illustrate organizations or industries passing through particular “change points” or critical evolutions, which would in some way alter the character of the industry while also presenting important continuities. It is worth briefly reflecting on the concepts of chronology and periodization, and how they characterize the topic, before we embark on the papers of the SI. Three of the papers also showcase research done by colleagues at the Management and Organization History Research Cluster at the University of York since [Miskell \(2015, p. 210\)](#) noted its establishment.

The study of history is defined by the Western perception of time, which necessitates chronology, and an implicit understanding that the state of the world is constantly changing and evolving, irrevocably. [Rowlinson et al. \(2014\)](#) highlight the peculiar role that chronology plays in history – for historians it is not just that events follow each other, but that they have a distinct social and economic context without which they cannot be easily understood. Further, in practical terms, one research agenda is unlikely to be able to deal concisely with the totality of history. This encourages the convenient bookending of history into manageable chunks, known as periods ([Jordanova, 2006](#)). These periods may simply relate to a convenient chunk of time, such as a century or particular decade, but for analytical purposes, they are likely to be characterised by incremental change, yet at the same time, a particular structural or institutional continuity, such as “the long nineteenth century” ([Hobsbawm, 1962, 1975, 1987](#)) running from 1789-1914 (or 1918), the French Revolution being seen as the point at which the Ancient Regime was decisively challenged and bookended by the First World War. Management and business histories, which do not always relate directly to political history often appropriate these chunks of time in which institutional stability may be observed. Further, histories are often presented as periods running between two particular crises or change points which act as bookends. But yet this approach surely discourages us from actually focusing upon the change points themselves, which could be a revealing use of history for scholars interested in fields where adversity is important, such as change management, strategic management and entrepreneurship?

Such change points are often defined by exogenous political, social, economic, technological, cultural, legal or even environmental changes. They are often further defined by their particular temporal and spatial dimensions – they may be as short as 1-2 years or even a few months yet may also run to as many as 5-6 years or more, and they might be confined to one particular geographical area, city, country, continent, sphere of influence or even encompass the whole world. They may include all-encompassing events such as military conflicts – particularly the First and Second World Wars, but perhaps also periods of diplomatic conflict, such as the start and end of the Cold War. They may alternatively be major economic shocks, such as the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the Oil Crisis of 1973-1974 or the Sub-Prime crisis of 2007-2008. Periods of rapid socio-economic change may also be turning points – the British 1960s, for instance saw the abolition of Resale Price



Maintenance in 1964 (Tennent, 2013), before the introduction of Corporation Tax in 1965 (Mollan and Tennent, 2015), the Sterling crisis of 1966-67 (Schenk, 2010) and a programme of government sponsored economic modernisation designed to encourage industrial development (Owen, 1999); all of these things together wrought major changes to the business environment. This is even before considering the impact of social-cultural change, such as the creation of the teenager as a distinct category and falling birth rates (Marwick, 1998). Arguably, these changes hastened the end of gentlemanly capitalism and ushered in a new, more consumerist yet managerially aware era in which the post-war consensus between management and labour started to break down. Such exogenous change points, which may be characterised as “revolutions”, often see several events take place together which undermine established cultures or routines within business and management encouraging or perhaps even forcing a managed response.

The papers

I will briefly introduce the papers individually before considering them in a thematic sense.

Perhaps the most ambitious paper presented in terms of scope is James Wilson's application of deconstructionist theory to the historical development of operations management theory, an area of study which has cosmetically reinvented itself several times, most notably after its professionalization in response to demands for “scientific” rigour inspired by the work of Buffa (1961), Skinner (1969) and Orlicky (1975) in the 1960s which seemed to redefine operations management as an activity for the executive suite not the factory floor. Yet, Wilson points to striking continuities stretching back to the era of Taylor and before, or at least rediscoveries of old knowledge, for instance, occurrences of “lean production” known as “hand-to-mouth” buying in the 1910s and 1920s. Inevitably, similar concerns continue to influence the field even as it refocuses itself on supply chain management in service dominated economies, and splits off project management, one of its earliest concerns, as a separate discipline. A sense emerges that Wilson sees much new theory as a rebranding exercise, designed to “see off” exogenous threats to the discipline's survival, while in reality preserving its core essence.

Simon Mollan's paper on free-standing company theory also focuses on theoretical matters, though he calls for greater empirical engagement. The free-standing company concept was a post hoc attempt by Mira Wilkins and Schröter (1998) and Wilkins (1988) to categorise a tranche of British overseas extractive companies that appeared not to fit the template of the conventional multinational enterprise. Given that these companies mostly emerged in the late nineteenth century and mostly seemed to ebb away after the end of the first great era of globalisation around the First World War, this theory also seems to constitute a sort of post hoc periodisation. Mollan suggests however that the imposition of this template onto many thousands of separate business enterprises has resulted in an “ahistorical theoretical object”, which lacks ability to explain change over time. Thus, free-standing companies are rendered a “zombie category”, which has acted to stall historical research, with negative consequences for the international management discipline.

Focusing more directly on British management history around the First World War, Chris Corker draws on research from his Coleman Prize winning thesis to examine the experience of Sheffield armaments companies in the 1920s, as they struggled to adapt to the new reality of peacetime and disarmament. This perhaps inevitably led to retrenchment and rationalisation, but Corker demonstrates that the companies were extremely slow to adjust their strategies to the slowdown in government orders, with no real attempt to diversify their activities; indeed, it took some years of losses before the companies responded. This case study reminds us that the boundaries of historical periods are imperceptible to those

who live through them – even where it was rational to adjust strategy to a radical paradigm change, the end of the Great War, actors often appear to be slow to respond or even perhaps aloof from change.

Nicholas Burton's paper looks at a reverse situation to Corkers' in that it studies an industry which was actively benefitting from new government policy, as the Thatcher government sought to de-regulate saving for retirement in 1980s Britain. Oral history is used to interview people active in the industry at the time, to discover the impacts that de-regulation had on actual product design. Modularity (Schilling, 2000), an idea from systems theory, is used as a lens to understand both changes through time but also through hierarchy, including how changes from the demand and regulatory level influenced product design. Burton's paper is thus methodologically interesting as it maps changes in the industry across two dimensions. Its conclusion that this interplay drove the industry became more "modular" over time as value chains vertically disintegrated demonstrates that we should not assume periods to be homogenous blocks of time, but rather they can be characterised by complex evolution over time, often characterised by twists and turns that make conventional narrative employment challenging.

Laura Singleton's paper, which focuses on the US urban crisis of the 1960s, demonstrates the extent to which social circumstances could also impact business. Singleton demonstrates that racial tensions in dozens of US cities led to an eruption of violence in the summer of 1967; this caused concern significant enough for Corporate America to cooperate with the mayors of cities including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago and Detroit to form the National Urban Coalition, supported by companies as high profile as Chase Manhattan Bank, Time Inc., General Electric and Ford Motor, to form a National Urban Coalition. This was followed by another body, the National Alliance of Businessmen, which attempted to work with industry to create new long-term jobs for people from deprived areas. Both bodies ran into difficulty by the early 1970s however, partly because they relied to a large extent on the voluntary part-time participation of executives, and partly because of a shortage of local goodwill coupled with intuitional weakness. Both bodies survived until the 2000s, but lacking support from the highest profile companies, degenerated into localised coalitions. The events of 1967 appeared to have ushered in a new period of Corporate Social Responsibility, driven by the urgency of the crisis but this proved to be a false dawn for companies and communities alike. Periods of crisis can undoubtedly open up new historical periods, but they may not ultimately have the entirely hopeful outcomes that actors hoped for.

Alex G. Gillett and Kevin D. Tennent build on previous work (Gillett *et al.*, 2016; Tennent and Gillett, 2016) to consider the interplay between business and society in perhaps one of the most social of industries – association football, or soccer. Focusing on the 1980s struggles of an English football club in a declining industrial area, Middlesbrough AFC, they use the theory of institutional logics to develop a new "institutional logic of professional sport". To do this they explore the attempts of the local authority to save the club, important to Middlesbrough, as it represented the town's chemical and steel industries. But formal cooperation between the two bodies was "blocked" by the different institutional logics of local government and professional sport, despite the utility maximising character of both. This case study reminds us that what is often retrospectively cast as a "dark age" before a defining event that in some way opens up a new "sunny upland" can be misleading; in a classic illustration of the pitfalls of retrospective periodisation, it is claimed by authors such as Walters and Hamil (2013, p. 743) that English soccer was declining in prestige and importance in the 1970s and 1980s, before the founding of the Premier League in 1992, with its increased TV money and sponsorship, somehow made the game "relevant" again and aided its globalisation process. But for contemporary actors and policymakers, both in terms

of the local authority and the industrialists who ultimately saved the club, Middlesbrough AFC was desperately relevant and a cause urgently worth believing in despite the poor financial state of the club and the alleged poor reputation of the sport. Indeed, this rescue happened in time for Middlesbrough to benefit from participation in the Premier League in the 1990s, but football's increased commercialisation was in reality an attempt to increase its already existing popularity, not to introduce it for the first time.

The contribution of the special issue

The papers presented in this Special Issue provide us with an opportunity to grapple with one of the under addressed questions in management history, as it attempts to place itself at the centre of the management studies discipline. While much discussion centres on how history might be integrated with the broader concerns of social science, and how history might become more theoretical, periodisation, and how it shapes our perception of historical continuity and change remains a theoretical concern which emerges from within the history discipline itself. Continuity and change are surely critical factors to periodisation; I hope that in this SI, we have helped historians to think about the extent to which change is an ontological phenomenon which exists in an empirical sense, or the extent to which it is actually a construct projected and narrated by historians in a theoretical sense, without the real consideration that we are writing with hindsight.

Of the papers here Gillett and Tennent, Burton, Corker and Singleton all consider change in an empirical sense, though also see within their historical episodes opportunities for the development of broader theoretical concerns. Gillett and Tennent's paper seeks to challenge existing periodisation to some extent, though, and this strand also runs through the papers by Mollan and Wilson. Both Mollan and Wilson attempt to deal with periodisation essentially imposed by theorists acting in a particularly ahistoricist fashion. Mollan, for instance, deals with a question that arises from the scholarship of Mira Wilkins, a close ally of Alfred D. Chandler, which leads us into the very heart of our discipline, perhaps challenging Wilkins in the same way that [Lamoreaux *et al.* \(2004\)](#) pleaded for a less Whiggish approach to history. Also, looking at the other side of the Whiggism coin is Singleton, whose paper considers the attempts of America's largest corporations to include those apparently left behind by their prosperity and dominance. Yet Singleton's paper, which traces the decline of these efforts over a 35-year period, ably shows the dangers of finalism – what often matters in history is where the case under examination is considered to end; we as historians can choose to take our leave before the negative consequences of a course of action or an intervention are revealed.

Wilson points to further dangers of finalism and presentism inherent perhaps in theory abstraction from history itself, perhaps even a danger of assumption of historical fact before empirical study has been conducted. In one of the fields examined by Wilson, Project Management, there has recently been an upsurge of interest in the potential of history to reveal the specifics of “forgotten knowledge” in past engineering and construction schemes ([Söderlund and Lenfle, 2013](#)), a call also answered by [Gillett and Tennent \(2017\)](#) elsewhere. Wilson, Corker, Gillett and Tennent and Burton draw our attention further to the liminal periods around the beginning and ends of different periods and highlight that it is difficult for historians to neatly pinpoint where they begin and end.

Periodisation is, therefore, a form of post hoc historical theorisation – it may be useful because we have to start somewhere, but it can also distract from the building of

chronology, as it may lead to the ahistorical assumption that just because there appeared to be some form of institutional continuity for a period (as, for instance, Wilkins imposes with her thousands of free-standing companies, apparently appearing consistent between 1870 and 1914, in many industries and countries), it can distract us from the empirical reality presented by the flow of events. Therefore, we need to build a more nuanced form of periodisation, or else, to allude to McCloskey (1985), we perhaps risk creating continuums of “gnomic past” where little change of interest to management historians is assumed to take place, closing down investigation. Perhaps a useful route forward would be greater pluralism among historians, of the sort called for by the Canadian historian Ged Martin (2004), who called for historians to study longer periods to avoid the misunderstanding of historical context and ahistoricism caused by overspecialisation. Just as management historians need to be aware of the need for greater theoretical impact, or indeed “integrity” of their work (Maclean, Harvey and Clegg, 2016), they need to consider carefully the historical integrity of their work including the underpinning assumptions that periodisation and chronology bring.

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