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Histories of Business and the Everyday

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Introduction

What has been the relationship between business, as a set of institutions and practices, and the ways in which people have lived and experienced their everyday lives? The history of the everyday is a well-established sub-field of social and cultural history, but it is one with which business history has had very little dialogue. This article is an attempt to establish the potential for a fruitful conversation between business history and the history of the everyday. It positions this neglect as a puzzle and sets out why business history should engage with the everyday, before asking what is the everyday, what are histories of the everyday, and what is their potential. Thereafter I explore why business history has neglected the everyday and how we might go about bringing the everyday into business history. I conclude with an exploration of the potential gains and implications for business history (and related fields) from a turn to the everyday.

Business History and the Everyday

Business historians study a set of extremely powerful institutions and practices, at the center of which sits the business enterprise itself. As a field, as with economics, business history has a strong interest in change and dynamics and tends to focus on exemplars of change; those novel or innovative institutions and practices that set in motion the most far-reaching processes of change. The multidivisional corporations of the second industrial revolution would be prime examples of such exemplars. We see them as bringing about change in terms of methods of organizing, the material conditions of life, and, most obviously, economic growth. The changes they have wrought have been of the greatest magnitude. We study both what happens inside these organizations and how they relate to the external environment; for example, how they relate to government, to the market, and to the citizen as consumer or employee – but the business enterprise remains the basic analytical building block. The business corporation is positioned as one of the most important institutions under modernity, a powerful agent of change that rivals the state in terms of influence and reach. As business historians we of course think that business *matters*. As such, business must

have done much to shape how people have experienced everyday life. And yet business history has very largely neglected this question. This is a puzzle. The relationship between business and the everyday seems to have a taken for granted (and timeless) quality to it, but that is an assumption that is, I think, misplaced. We know that business has played a very important role in processes of economic growth and development and improving standards of living (whilst also sometimes causing immiseration and growing inequality) and seem to think that a largely sufficient measure of the impact of business on societies and cultures. There is a related tendency to essentialize the corporation or to concentrate on relatively small and exclusive cadres of individual actors, such as top management. But, I contend, business impacts on the experience of everyday life in ways that are profound and extend far beyond the economic or the organizational. Interactions with business are fully and deeply woven into the fabric of our everyday lives; our interactions with business are constant and frequent. If, as Pat Hudson contends, “mankind is more than waist deep in daily routine,” then business forms a very significant element of the waters in which we now wade.¹ Or, as William Cronon says in the preface to *Nature’s Metropolis* since the nineteenth-century “market institutions” have even come to “define our relationships to each other.”² And experience of the everyday matters to people. It is how we are in life and it is where our lives unfold. Pleasures and sorrows are largely located and experienced in the everyday. It is where our most important relationships are formed and are sustained. It is in the everyday that people find value and make meaning. We do not live abstractly, timelessly, placelessly. We live concretely, in this place, at this time – and very rarely is business absent from this place, this time. Enquiring into the relationship between business and histories of the everyday is then, in the first instance, an attempt to address an important empirical lacuna. However, as I will try to show, asking this question has important conceptual implications for business history, as well as for cognate fields, such as the history of capitalism.

The everyday and its history

¹ Hudson, “Closeness and Distance,” 378

² Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis*, xiv.

The everyday seems to stand outside time. Simultaneously everywhere and yet invisible, it slips by largely unnoticed and seemingly impervious to change. We think we know what it is but it resists being captured succinctly in language. Nonetheless it is in fact a rather concrete phenomenon. Contra to easy assumptions, it is not simply the mundane over the rare or extraordinary, though it is very often focused on the routine and the quotidian. Scale is important, and as we shall see histories of the everyday are often related to micro-historical methods, even if it is not only concerned with micro-level processes and experiences. Indeed, as we shall also see, it is not possible to comprehend the everyday, even at the most granular level, without attention to meso and macro-levels. It is often associated with “history from below,” but it is not only concerned with the ordinary and the masses; after all, everyone lives an everyday life. It is not, then, the plebian over the elite. Nor is it located solely or even overwhelmingly in the realm of private or domestic life. A great deal of everyday life is played out in public and is often distinctly collective, both as a process and an experience, even if scholars such as Ágnes Heller have located the everyday very largely in the realm of the private, the domestic, and the familial.³ Drawing on phenomenological philosophy, we can relate it to the notion of the life-world, leading us to characterize it as the daily experience of being in the world.

Seeking to ground this in the concrete, in approaching a definition, Hudson emphasizes the:

habitual, repetitive, unreflective ... habits of waking and sleeping, the routines and rhythms of the day, the year, the life cycle; responding to light and dark, the weather, the state of the soil; preparing food and eating, cleaning, washing and provisioning, nurturing, work routines, familial and social reciprocities, day to day sociability ... in this dispensation is derived from conditions in the external world but is neither reducible to them, nor determined entirely by them.⁴

Histories of the Everyday

The genesis of the historiography of the everyday over the last half-century provides important clues as to its content and character. It can trace its roots back to a series of historiographical developments or movements across a range of primarily European

³ Heller, *Theory of Feelings*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 377-8.

countries; to the *Annales* school in France, to *Alltagsgeschichte* in Germany, to microhistory in Italy (and France), and to “history from below” in Britain. It was (and is) marked by a radical shift in the scale or distance (small and up close) at which historical study is conducted. These shifts in scale and distance have important implications; for the relationship between macro and micro processes, for directions of causality, and for the relationship between structure and agency (and, critically, for the location of sites of agency). In turn, it has implications for the kinds of narratives that historians might and could write. Though this was not necessarily distinctly articulated at the time, the history of the everyday stands in marked contrast, on probably every dimension, to the new economic history that was emerging near concurrently. It also faced in a very different direction to Northian new institutional economics as they took shape, a development that was to have a profound and lasting effect on the interests and practices of business history, seen most clearly in the Chandlerian tradition (itself influenced by the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons). This section sets out to briefly state the core tenets or features of the history of the everyday, and to identify the question it raises for business history

As Brad Gregory has stressed, the history of the everyday (and related historiographical movements) emerged from and was colored by a process of political disillusionment on the left. There were, Gregory argues, strong “political ... reasons for the reduction of historical scale in both the history of everyday life and microhistory.” He observed how:

Beginning in the 1970s, faith in the possibility of the liberation of the mass of marginalized humanity through the transformation (or decline) of industrial capitalism became increasingly untenable. The protean interplay of political institutions, corporate power, technological innovation, and mass advertising in the industrialized world seemed rather to militate against any deliverance of the downtrodden.⁵

It is notable that in this passage, as in many other statements on the history of the everyday, a considerable stress falls on the significant influence of those self same institutions of modernity – corporate power, technological innovation, mass advertising – with which business historians have been so fascinated (and in which they have,

⁵ Gregory, “Is Small Beautiful?” 100.

perhaps, placed considerable faith). In contrast, a focus on the everyday offers an escape from the iron cage of an ever-tightening modern industrial capitalism. The question becomes a very simple one: what are “the implications for social history if long-term, large-scale processes imprison rather than liberate?”⁶

As we have seen, the principal response of historians working in these new veins was to rethink the scale and distance at which they worked, driven by a conviction that “by dramatically shrinking the arena of investigation” they would be able to open up to questioning the “purported teleology of modernizing historical processes.”⁷ The principal outcome, as Brewer outlines, was “a commitment to a humanist agenda which places human agency and historical meaning in the realm of day-to-day transactions and which sees social reality as grounded in the quotidian.”⁸ It is here that the politics of the history of the everyday are located.

They are politics because they raise important questions about agency and its location and thus also about power. But before we can begin to tackle this central issue, we need to examine several others. First, the shift in the scale and distance at which historical study is carried out, necessarily implies a concomitant shift in the balance of attention paid to different levels of structure. In particular, there follows an inevitable de-privileging of macro-level structures, which are simply no longer the principal focus, in relation to causality. For as Gregory argues, “microanalytical attention paid to precise contexts [as implied by the reductions in scale and distance] entails the effective abandonment of causal concepts associated with macrostructural developments.”⁹

However, these adjustments do not imply merely that the macro is moved away from the center of our preoccupations, rather it actually suggests a process through which macro structures and processes begin to be decomposed (with obvious implications for their ontology, as explored elsewhere in this issue by Lipartito). Thus, “Sharply reducing historical scale disrupts ... the corporate character and ... continuity of institutions and structures.”¹⁰ The notion of the corporeality of institutions, their unitary, bounded, and cohesive nature, distinct and separable from other institutions and actors, has obvious relevance in the context of the business enterprise, itself often literally a corporation. Gregory, quoting Gribaudi, gives the example of “the market,” a

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 101

⁸ Brewer, “Microhistory and the Histories of the Everyday,” 91.

⁹ Gregory, “Is Small Beautiful?” 104.

¹⁰ Ibid., 105.

macro-level institution core to modernity and industrial capitalism. Rather than a singular abstract, the market is in fact “‘given in the interaction and in the negotiation of the concrete social actors who, in each instance, embody them.’”¹¹ Thus, attention to the everyday reveals what the foregrounding of larger institutions occludes.

This reordering or decomposition extends from the institutional to the temporal. We have already seen how attention to the everyday disrupts the “purported teleology of modernizing historical processes.” Massey expands on the nature of this disruption, arguing that “The value of the everyday, though, is that it shows how the apparently universal processes of modernity—the expansion of multinationals, the redevelopment of cities, the increasing mobility of populations and the growth of high-tech media—are shot through with historical survivals and local differences.”¹² Privileging apparently unitary macro institutions inevitably privileges a particular temporality; one that is smooth, continuous, and unidirectional. Attention to the everyday brings into play a multiplicity of differing temporalities. The everyday brings with it both timelessness, in its unchangingness, as well as timefulness, in its relentlessness and immediacy. It brings memories and echoes of the far past into the present and obliterates yesterday. Its temporalities are simultaneously particular and individual, shared and collective, vague and precise. Naturally, if we no longer privilege (or even trust) the temporalities associated with modernity and the march of its institutions then we can no longer employ the grand narratives through which it has been represented.

Most fundamentally, these interlocking moves demand that we rethink agency and, in particular, its location within social structures and processes. The core argument is that “meticulous attention to human interaction on the micro-scale preserves the agency of ordinary people.”¹³ We recall how agency “becomes dispersed across webs of social affiliations engaged in the “realm of day-to-day transactions.”¹⁴ In contrast, business history, with its institutional and structural focus, has tended to locate agency elsewhere, either as the property of a small elite cadre occupying positions of power within key institutions, such as top management in large corporations, as the property of real institutions, such as business enterprises, as the collective property of a larger institutional formation (“principals” or “agents,” for example), or, at the highest and most abstract level, it might argued that it is ultimately always capital and markets

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104..

¹² Moran (quoting Massey, “History, Memory and the Everyday,” 55.

¹³ Gregory, “Is Small Beautiful?” 101.

¹⁴ Brewer, “Microhistory and the Histories of the Everyday,” 91.

that do things.. The history of the everyday throws that certainty about the location of agency and the exclusivity of those to whom it belongs into doubt. We will return to the location of agency from a history of the everyday perspective in a later section.

Why No History of Business and the Everyday?

To not enquire into the relationship between business and the everyday is to deny to business a whole realm of significance. Either business must not impact the everyday or the everyday is unimportant. I do not believe either of these possibilities to be true. I believe business history has ignored the relationship between business and changing experiences of the everyday because it lacks a politics. Or, rather, it lacks an explicit, acknowledged politics. As discussed above, the history of the everyday emerged from a series of historiographical movements motivated by a political reaction of disillusionment on the left. In contrast, business history (unlike the new history of capitalism) has rarely explicitly positioned business and the business enterprise as instruments of capitalist power (or, indeed, forms of power in non-capitalist political economies also). This follows on from the structural/institutional preoccupations of business history. The privileging of institutions in business history, combined with analytical strategies relying on a belief in corporations' coherent and unitary character, is posited as purely epistemological (this is what we study) when it also contains a submerged politics – a politics that reifies and essentializes those self same institutions of modern capitalism. Thus, it has had little to become disillusioned about. Corporations are in and of themselves neither emancipators nor prisons. When corporations fail in business history it is by the narrow definitions of profit and loss, survival and extinction. The same applies at the sectoral and industrial levels. Negative effects are the outcome of mistakes and errors of strategy. More rarely, an individual corporation will be aberrantly malign, but this does not bring into question the wider institution. Conversely, turning away from the corporation, the “creative destruction” of disruptive entrepreneurship preaches a kind of secular and egalitarian liberation theology. So long as new technologies emerge and wealth increases, how people actually experience living their lives remains in the shadows. So long as life continues to improve materially (as it undoubtedly has done, at least for many) then we need not ask too closely about how business enterprises have impacted the experience of being in life for the many.

Is this adequate, or can we do more? Hudson has argued that many historians

of the everyday, having “vacated the arena of Grand Theory,” have also “forfeited their contributions to debates about state formation, nation building, economic change, globalization, world crises, wars and the environment.” Business history might be vulnerable to similar charges. Thus, the “task for historians of the quotidian is to re-engage with these issues and to use their marvellous revelations to expose the inadequacies of deterministic world views.” This is a task in which business historians should be willing participants.¹⁵

Bringing the Everyday into Business History

My starting premise is that business and the everyday, at least in the age of modernity and industrialization, are deeply, inseparably entangled. That our everyday lives are saturated with the handiwork of business. But at what points do business and the everyday intersect? Where do we look? Not, for the most part, in existing business histories. True, William Cronon argued in *Nature's Metropolis* that the “geography of capital expressed itself not just as ... physical structures but as the ways people lived, worked, and traded,” noting that beyond “the maps of rank-ordered central places, after all, beyond the abstractions of capital and credit, were ordinary markets of daily life, in which people went to town to buy the many things that merchants unpacked from many boxes piled up on many sidewalks.”¹⁶ Here he brings a gritty granularity and specificity to the effects of capital, markets, and enterprise. And yet, in turning to look inside one of those enterprises, Montgomery Ward and Co. in this example, he once more erases the particular, arguing that:

Surely there were few more powerful symbols of modern urban life than this vast buzzing tower of human enterprise, like nothing so much as a swarm of anonymous insects performing their intricate labors according to the dictates of a mysterious collective intelligence.¹⁷

Turning to histories of the everyday, we do encounter business, for example in Joe Moran's fascinating history of that most mundane of phenomenon; the queue.¹⁸ However, business institutions and practices are not the principal focus, as is often true

¹⁵ Hudson, “Closeness and Distance,” 382.

¹⁶ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 309.

¹⁷ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 337.

¹⁸ Moran, “History, Memory and the Everyday.”

of other histories of the everyday that identify the corporation as a key institution of modernity and may even identify a business as their research site.

A systematic cataloging of the intrusions of business into the everyday is probably not possible, but we can sketch an outline. There is, most obviously, how, where, and for whom people have worked: for increasing numbers the answer to those questions has been for a business enterprise. What does that mean for the time people have risen, the time they have rested, when they have slept. Increasingly, the workplace was no longer the home, so how have people got to their workplace, and what have they passed, seen, experienced, and engaged with on the way? Have they become habituated to picking up a coffee during their journey, or a pack of gum or cigarettes from the corner store? What has that been like? Did such experience feel anonymous or familiar, rare or a regularity? Have these commuters had to queue? Quite possibly. With whom did they queue, were they known to each other, did they talk? Did they entertain themselves along the way and if so how? Who provided the entertainment and how was it accessed? What has been the level, nature, and intensity of advertising to which people have been exposed along the way? What have these advertisements tried to sell to people, and how did they go about doing that? How have people we felt about these processes? Did they feel oppressed by these advertisements or filled with expectation and desire? What has been the pattern of these activities across the day, the week, the year, a life? Have people become accustomed to looking ahead and, if so, how have they felt about that? If they learnt to imagine a future what did those futures contain and have those contents been even partially dependent on a business enterprise for a fulfillment? What meaning have weekends, other breaks, and vacations assumed in relation to patterns of working? What do the time horizons people have operated in life tell us about the salience of work in a business enterprise as it relates to self-conceptions, motivations, and satisfactions? How are and what have people been paid? Has it satisfied them? Has their self-esteem come to depend on it?

What has been the nature of relationships with others in the workplace? Did those relationships reward and please, or depress or anger? Have there been jokes, conversation, and camaraderie? If so did they occur because of - or despite - the way work was organized, monitored, and managed? Have people practiced disruption, deception, or distraction? Have people often or ever felt humiliated or powerless? Or, conversely, perhaps work left some feeling empowered and fulfilled? What have the spaces in which work occurred been like and how have the people occupying those

spaces felt about them? Did they come to hate them? Or even notice them? How have people felt at the end of the working day or week – or career? Were they often or always tired? Did work when come to occupy the minds of people even as they were absent from it?

Where was home and with what was it filled? Did homes become spaces of consumption or of retreat? How did people map home, mentally, in relation to the spaces around it? How did they learn to map and negotiate the wider landscape within which home was situated? What signposts and landmarks came to populate the landscape, and how many of those landmarks were commercial, established by business? Did people learn orient themselves via the grocery store, gas station, bodega, Laundromat, fast food restaurant, or the family-owned bakery that generations of families have been buying bread from for close to one hundred years? How did it feel to navigate these landscapes with their billboards, hoardings, and commercial and office spaces? How has the experience been different in the suburbs versus downtown? Did people develop a preference for living life in one over the other and if so why? Did those different spaces come to represent different opportunities for or modes of consuming and of being entertained? Do people come to feel comfort in navigating these commercialized public spaces or did they seek to escape them, either literally or metaphorically? Have they sought refuge or redemption, for example in nature or in religion? Have those spaces always been free of business and its reach or have they too been colonized?

What are the implications of our answers to all of those questions for the nature of peoples' intimate relationships, especially with family and friends? How long did work separate them from each other? With what moods and emotions have people come return from work? Did increasing numbers first meet their loved ones in a space of business? Did the consuming the products and services of business enterprises become a part of how familial, social, and other emotional bonds were built, cemented, and maintained? Did people consume together or apart? Did business become incorporated into both individual and collective memories? Did business come to figure in the stories people told about themselves, their families, and their communities? Were the valuations, practices, and techniques of business imported into intimate and familial relationships? Did people come to depend upon business to help them take care of, nurture, and provide for their loved ones? Did people come to believe or to feel that they were living in what some have called a business civilization?

Did there grow up a dependency on business for personal or collective senses of opportunity and potential? Ultimately, to what extent did people become dependent on business for any sense of meaning and value that might be found in life? Where and how has business entered the ongoing creation of life-worlds?

At the same time, we must consider both patterns and change. How different and variegated have been experiences of the interaction between business and the everyday? Have people experienced and answered each of these questions differently according to whether they were a man or a woman, young or old, depending on race or ethnicity, sexual orientation or identity? How much difference did geography introduce? And, most importantly, what changed over time? Much, clearly. Business may have become a dominant institution under modernity, matching the centrality, power, and influence of rival macro institutions, such as the state and religion, but that has not always been the case. Histories of business and the everyday should not confine themselves to the last two centuries, even if that is where they begin (for not only did the centrality of the business enterprise grow dramatically during that period but also because the sources for studying histories of the business and the everyday are so much richer and more robust for these more recent periods).

Implications for Business History

I want to briefly discuss three interlinked implications for business history that I believe follow from a dialogue with the history of the everyday. The first concerns the status of our central object of study: the business enterprise, both in and of itself and in relation to its environment. The second concerns agency, its location, and its direction. The third concerns the relationship between business history and the new history of capitalism and emerges from positioning the business enterprise as a meso-level institution.

As noted earlier, a turn to the everyday has the effect of beginning to decompose, or disassemble, previously robust and solid seeming institutions. The apparent persistence in time and space of an institution such as a business enterprise is at least semi-illusory. To put it in terms derived from histories of the everyday and microhistory, the appearance of boundaries is to some extent an effect of distance. Each of us apprehends or comprehends only a particular fragment of the corporation as we engage with it, the particular fragment we perceive being dependent on the role we play as we engage with it: are we CEO; middle manager, shop floor or maintenance

worker; warehouse fulfillment staff; a security guard at the door; client, customer, supplier; or simply a passerby in the street walking past billboards and gleaming headquarters. The whole does not exist for us in our experiences with corporations. Even in our engagements with much smaller and simpler businesses, where apprehending the whole might be almost possible, there is a particularity and idiosyncrasy that means that the whole we see never quite fully matches the whole that others see. There is no distinct and hard-edged, universally perceived unitary object. Moreover, that implies a necessary rethinking of broader concepts, the economic in particular.

But these processes of disassembly have other dimensions too. Though physical assets may persist, as organizations business enterprises need to be reassembled every day through the coming together of a myriad of people performing their roles. Organizations, just as individuals do, have their own everyday. Organizations have histories that they seek to remember and they also seek to project themselves into the future through plans and strategies, but it is in the everyday that they live. The persistence of the business enterprise is not possible without the ongoing replication of its micro-foundations in the everyday, a process of ongoing replication in the everyday that is necessarily deeply enmeshed or entangled in other everydays located “outside” the enterprise itself. It is through histories of the everyday of business that we can reveal and study these micro-foundations. Business history has rarely questioned the corporeality of the business enterprise or thrown into doubt its cohesiveness and unitary quality. But as we turn to considering the everyday, the sharp outline of the business enterprise starts to blur as it is overlaid with a dense and ever thickening web of social affiliations and day-to-day transactions. The boundaries of the firm become porous. And thus also called into question, is the enterprise’s relation to that which is conventionally thought of as being outside it. An enterprise/environment distinction or dichotomy starts to become less tenable. This blurring of the boundaries of the firm extends further because, as I have tried to stress throughout this piece, business, as a set of institutions and practices, has a very wide and powerful set of often unintended effects that shape the experience of the everyday for all of us, whether or not we are at any given moment directly engaged in some kind of activity or relationship with a business enterprise. Moreover, those effects are very often not a consequence of or explicable by a reductive turn to a motivation such as “profit seeking.” A turn to histories of the everyday raises questions about what a business enterprise is, what it

does, and how and why does those things. This turn thus drives us outside of the firm, even as we remain business historians.

The effects that come from shifting the scale and distance of our studies also have implications for agency and its location. That agency should reside in the everyday is not immediately obvious. Hudson, for example, repeatedly stresses the “habitual, the routine and the seemingly unreflective aspects of the quotidian.”¹⁹ In particular, she argues that in the European tradition the history of the everyday “stresses the role of habit and routine as much as choices and decisions. The everyday is taken for granted as a sort of second nature in which people orientate themselves with little deliberate reflection” and, critically, that “habits ... make decisions for us.”²⁰ This does not sound much like agency.

Nonetheless, we remember Gregory’s argument that “meticulous attention to human interaction on the micro-scale preserves the agency of ordinary people” is a central tenet in histories of the everyday.²¹ Critically, this is not an attempt to transfer agency from one group to another, nor it is an attempt to erase power and structure. Rather it is to argue for a wider distribution of agency and for rethinking what we mean by agency. In business history, agency has typically been thought of as the ability to exert will or to bring about change. In the context of a business enterprise, this formulation very largely reserves agency for a limited range of people, most obviously senior managers, who are tasked with determining and enacting strategy. From this perspective, it makes little sense to inquire into the agency of, say, a shop floor worker or a retail customer. They may or may not be a constraint on the agency of others but that hardly amounts to personal agency. But histories of the everyday ask us to see agency as possession of the space for self-determination, for the creation of personal meaning and value in life, for the ability to create life-worlds. Hudson describes the everyday as being about “Neither structure nor agency, but the point at which the two coalesce.”²² People exercise this form of agency as situated individuals, as members of families, neighborhoods, communities, interest and friendship groups, each with shared and collective histories, memories, and value systems. This situatedness might be seen as a constraint on agency, suggesting we are not free to build whatever life-world we wish to, but it is probably also deepens and enriches agency by virtue of the fact that it is

¹⁹ Hudson, “Closeness and Distance,” 376 and 377.

²⁰ Hudson, “Closeness and Distance,” 377.

²¹ Gregory, “Is Small Beautiful?” 101.

²² Hudson, “Closeness and Distance,” 377.

relational. The implications for business history is not that we remove agency from those to whom we have typically assigned it – the principals and agents in the language of economics – but that we acknowledge a much broader form of agency possessed by all as they encounter and engage with business institutions and practices. People are able to make choices about how they incorporate business into the life-worlds they build. Those choices have consequences for them and for the business enterprises they interact with or engage in. In the end, “Proximity succeeds over distance in offering a glimpse of how identity and human agency emerge, how they are circumscribed by larger forces and affected by contingency and by intersubjective experience.”²³

At the same time, in promoting a shift from the macro to the micro, the history of the everyday (and related historiographical movements) has tended to neglect meso-level structures, institutions, and processes. In an important sense, the business enterprise is in fact one form of those “precise contexts” that might form the focus of a “microanalytical attention,” even if it is itself a meso-level institution.²⁴ Thus, having stressed the dissolving of the business enterprise through a focus on the everyday, in a curious double movement, the business enterprise begins to come back into focus, now not as a cohesive and unitary body but instead as a locus for the initiation and organization of that thickening web of social affiliations and day-to-day transactions. The field on which the everyday occurs is not flat and featureless. Instead it has places where the individual skeins gather and knot. The business enterprise is thus re-concretized, not as a unitary whole but as a locus for a myriad of minute interactions, many of them repeated rather than unique, largely barely noticed (if at all). It is through these interactions that the enterprise accomplishes whatever it manages to achieve. At the same time, it is through these interactions that people live and shape their lives. But, critically, it also through these interactions that abstract, macro-level forces and institutions – capital, commodification, the market – actually do their work. The business enterprise, as a meso-level institution, has become over time the primary institutional mediator between capitalism, people, and their experience of being in life. Opening up this perspective suggests rich potential for greater integration between business history and the new history of capitalism. The latter has done much fascinating work linking macro-level institutions such as capital and the market to lived experience but without always paying close attention to meso-level institutions, such as the business

²³ Hudson, “Closeness and Distance,” 381.

²⁴ Gregory, “Is Small Beautiful?” 104

enterprise. Adding this layer of articulation between high-level and relatively abstract forces, such as capital, helps us better reveal and understand those processes in which the new history of capitalism is most interested. Likewise, business historians rarely contextualize their studies and the processes they observe in relation to concepts such as modernity or capital. The benefits should flow in both directions. Together, business history and the history of capitalism can, by paying renewed attention to the everyday, better articulate the linkages between macro, meso, and micro.

More broadly, for both business history and the history of capitalism, bringing the everyday into our studies will greatly expand the scale and scope of the canvas on which we work. It would allow us to fully acknowledge, perhaps for the first time, the depth and subtlety with which business has come to shape human experience, in ways that extend far beyond the material. It reveals business' entanglements with cultures and societies as far more multifarious and complex than we currently allow for. Moreover, this expanded canvas is now populated with a much richer and wider array of human characters. We have to confront seriously questions of culture, values, meaning, and ethics in ways that go far beyond corporate strategy and policy. And business history might be prompted to confront those questions of power and politics that is so far largely sidestepped. These changes will enhance opportunities for fruitful conversations with social and cultural history, the history of emotions, and other non-historical disciplines, most obviously anthropology.

Conclusion

The essay has argued for a dialogue between business history and the history of the everyday. It is based in the premise that the neglect of the historical relationship between business and the everyday is a serious empirical lacuna. It denies to business a whole realm of significance. It has sketched out a very rough introduction to the history of the everyday and has suggested a limited number of questions that might be asked by a business history of the everyday. Perhaps most importantly, it has indicated three implications for business history that might follow from a turn to the everyday: how does it change our understanding of what the business enterprise is; what does this mean for how we understand agency; and, finally, how might this strengthen and deepen the integration between business history and the new history of capitalism. This essay is speculative but if it provokes others to ask new questions of the history of business, opening up new lines of inquiry, then it will have achieved its aims.

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