

FEATURES

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‘Postcolonialism and business history: Edward Said and Frederick Cooper’

The work of Alfred Chandler famously defined business history as a subject (esp. Chandler 1962, 1990). In recent years, however, there has been much internal discussion within the subject about “Business History After Chandler” (including an annual meeting of the Association of Business Historians in 2008 of the same title).¹ Yet business history also faces pressures beyond the problematic nature of being a small subject dominated by the intellectual legacy of its ‘founding father’. Anglophone business historians especially are ‘spliced’ by an institutional divide: they are either based at history departments (mostly true for the US, and was the case in the past in the UK), or business and management schools (UK nowadays, and a few major business historians in the US).

Although Chandler was based at Harvard Business School, the intellectual roots of business history are arguably more strongly connected to history. Nevertheless, business subjects that business historians naturally engage with are often strongly influenced by concepts emanating from economic and business history. This is especially true for strategy: Chandler (structure follows strategy), Penrose (resource-based view), and Douglas C North (institutional theory) all did influential historical work (Chandler, 1962; Chandler 1990; North, 1990; Penrose, 1959).

Yet business as well as economic history have been ‘cast out’ by history departments during the ‘cultural turn’ in the humanities. This may or may not have contributed to a certain level of dislike of any postmodern tendencies in these subjects. Economic historians migrated into economics, both subjects being predominantly positivist in nature. Business historians, on the other hand, moved into business and management schools (at least in the UK), where other ‘friendly’ sub-disciplines like international business, organisational behaviour or critical management studies are strongly influenced by postmodern discursive traditions. Clearly, as a small subject business history needs to make connections with other fields in order to be able to join the larger ‘conversations’. Hence business history as a field is looking for new intellectual avenues to make contributions in a new institutional setting (Fridenson, 2007; Jones & Khanna, 2006; Jones & Zeitlin, 2007). This is now discussed frequently in the major business history journals, see for example Eric Godelier’s challenge in *Enterprise & Society* and the responses from other business historians (Godelier, 2009a, 2009b; Kobrak, 2009; Popp, 2009; Tiffany, 2009), work on the impact and citation of business history papers (Eloranta, Ojala, & Valtonen, 2008; Eloranta, Valtonen, & Ojala, 2010), and by

¹ As well as the workshop at Queen Mary University, London, entitled “Beyond Chandler – Intellectual Impulses for Business and Management History Tomorrow” (26 June 2009) for which this piece was originally written. Thanks go to Stefan Schwarzkopf for inviting me to this event.

organisational studies scholars with an interest in business history or vice versa (Kipping & Behlul, 2007; Rowlinson & Delahaye, 2009).

In other historical disciplines, the cultural turn had a more significant impact, such as postcolonialism in African studies, posing similar questions for the work of economic and social historians. A good example here is Frederick Cooper, who reinterpreted the economic and social history of labour, decolonisation and development studies in two books: *Decolonization and African Society* (1996) and *International Development and the Social Sciences* (1997), the latter co-edited with Randall Packard. These two influential volumes show an adaptation of critical approaches by scholars thoroughly grounded in their discipline.

Thus in discussing the potential of postcolonial analysis for business history, I chose the Edward Said/Fred Cooper combination rather than just Said because I think that Cooper's work is firstly a good example of a fruitful use of Said's cultural discourse analysis to social and economic topics and secondly because it opened up a new interpretation of my own work on business in Africa. Cooper's use of concepts popularised by Said helped me frame the role of foreign business in Africa as simultaneously being co-producers of an imperial discourse in the 1950s and before, as well as falling victims to a radicalised discourse on development in the 1970s (Decker, 2006). As such it is useful in framing present-day dynamics of institutional shocks in emerging economies (Peng, 2003).

I. Postcolonialism

There is clearly a canon of early works that are usually portrayed as foundational to postcolonialism (Young 2003), among them Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Kwame Nkrumah's *Neocolonialism* (1965). Although Nkrumah's work was especially relevant to the work I did for my PhD thesis, I strongly disagreed with the organiser's suggestion to put him on as one of the 'great thinkers' – mostly because he did not in all likelihood write the book himself. Rather it was probably written by a number of close collaborators, among them Ghanaian party members and at least two Britons – hence in itself a very postmodern piece. The founding work in academic rather than political terms was clearly Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1991).

Said's literary analysis unearthed the systematic nature of creating an image of the 'other' (the orient) on the basis of the positive identification of the creator with certain values (the occident), and then inverting all positive connotations into negatives in order to create the other, who is necessarily darker in order to offset the superiority of the creator of the discourse. This clearly tied in with work on subalterns, on the silences that occur in a history that is written by winners (Spivak, 1988). While this became highly influential in literary studies, it did create the tendency to sometimes overlook the social and economic realities that underpinned the discourse. Interestingly however, some major pieces of work by authors who would not claim an intellectual legacy to postcolonialism, for example Ken Pomeranz's *Great Divergence* (Pomeranz, 2000), seem to address some of the core issues of postcolonial theory and Said's Orientalism with a different methodological mindset. It is hard to imagine that asking the very question of why it was the West that developed but not the East would have been possible before the rise of postcolonial theory.

Young's (2003, pp. 5, 7) interpretation of postcolonialism is helpful because he debates whether there is a "single entity called 'postcolonial theory'", and instead

argues that postcolonial analysis uncovers non-Westerns views that were previously marginalised. It is this new view that Cooper (1996) and Cooper & Packard (1997) brought to their respective analyses of decolonisation and development in Africa.

II. Postcolonial economic & social history: Cooper (1996) and Cooper & Packard (1997)

While African studies naturally embraced postcolonial approaches, the bias of its origin in literary and cultural studies remained and meant that it was mostly cultural and social issues that became central. In contrast to this, Fred Cooper began to apply it to labour history. It was the issue of modernity and modernism, which came under scrutiny in many disciplines, and criticised for its belief in a singular, unbending scientific truth (Cooper & Randall 1997, p. 5; Scott 1998; Deutsch et al.; McCloskey 1985). A postmodern or postcolonial interpretation, however, opens up perspectives on different views and arguments that interact, gain ascendancy or become taboo, conflict or merge. By analysing the modernisation and development drive in Africa, which originally had a singular and scientific mindset, in the context of decolonisation and shifting political agendas, Frederick Cooper and others opened up a range of new perspectives in African studies.

Frederick Cooper's *Decolonization and African Society* (1996) analyses how the global discourse on economic development in the 1940s and 1950s framed imperial labour questions and eventually facilitated the decolonisation of the French and British Empires in Africa. He argues that governments wanted to create a bounded working class with whom they could negotiate through an essentially metropolitan system of industrial relations. This was essential, especially after World War II, to ensure the steady output of tropical commodities and rising productivity that was needed for Britain's post-war reconstruction. Labour, however, turned these development theories into a basis for entitlements, and the increase of strikes, consumer protests, riots and nationalist agitation gave rise to fear of losing control. Subsequently, social issues were subsumed by the 'nationalist struggle', as colonial governments could now conveniently deflect demands for universal entitlements, while the nationalist politicians, who took over government step by step, showed greater ability to contain conflict, at least until independence (Cooper 1996, pp. 468-470).

In their introduction to the edited volume on *International Development and the Social Sciences*, Cooper & Randall (1997) emphasise how the notion of development reverberated in local contexts, giving peripheral groups a sense of entitlement and a place in the global economy from which they could make demands based on a moral and political right – that of development. Their conception of development as an ideological framework allows for the existence of social struggles, alliances of different groupings and the participation of several conflicting interests in the same discourse, none of whom were fully in control of the contents and the boundaries of the debate. This was important to my own research, which considered African policies towards foreign investment as informed by contemporary development thinking, of which business was aware. Hence, the corporate responses became similarly informed by 'development', especially measures of political and public representation, but commercial decisions were also deeply influenced by adapting to the dominant ideology.

III. Cooper, postcolonialism and business

In my thesis I used Cooper's and Cooper & Packard's work extensively in order to better understand the relationship between British business, political transition and economic development in West Africa. British business was strongly embedded in the British imperial order, and as financially and politically extremely influential actors, companies co-created part of the imperial discourse within the realm of commerce and industry (see also Johnson 2007). With decolonisation and institutional transitions the role of business and its actual influence on decision-making at the Colonial Office became the subject of controversy (Butler, 2000; Milburn, 1977; Stockwell, 2000; White, 2000). But the question that was more important was the actual influence wielded with the emerging African elites (White 2000, Decker 2006), which was a much more volatile set of stakeholders.

Yet in a volatile institutional environment that experienced economic and political shocks, foreign business began to lose influence and became a target of populist nationalist sentiment (Guillen, 2000; Lipson, 1985). From the 1950s to the 1970s, business experienced a fall from discursive power. This was tied to the dominant ideology of development economics. As the radical approaches lost out in favour of a neo-liberal consensus in the 1980s, the threat of expropriation receded. Where companies are threatened by expropriation today (mostly in Venezuela and Russia), similar discourses are evident, which highlights that these are indicative of the levels of risk that foreign investors face. In the 1970s, the radicalisation of development economics opened up policy options like expropriations to states that were less powerful than today's Venezuela or Russia.

IV. Conclusion

Cooper's work is an example of using a postcolonial analysis within a specific research context. In the long run, however, I think that Cooper and Cooper & Packard's work on development shows the introspection of a discipline as well as its interpretation of its research subject. With business history engaged in the search for new intellectual stimulus beyond Chandler's contribution, it may be time to analyse the trends and discourses within business history over time. From its inception it has straddled the fields of history and business studies. Its orientation and receptivity to various trends over the years certainly tell a story about the institutional location of the field as well as allowing a 'marginalised' perspective on the larger disciplines it forms a part of.

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