

Harm G. Schröter

Business History in Europe: The Vitality of the Discipline

Abstract

This contribution is NOT about the substantial achievements or the possible omissions of business historians in Europe in the last decades, but rather about the conditions of their work, its appreciation by persons outside the discipline, and its importance in a (mainly) scholarly context: in short, how important is business history to us business historians as well as to others? It is based on information provided by more than 80 colleagues from 19 European countries. Differences and similarities in the structure of the discipline and its demand and desirability are mentioned. The argument is that, though business history is not immediately threatened, it has not been able to keep pace with the general expansion of institutional teaching and research. There are no simple remedies for this relative institutional stagnation, but it is hoped that the initiatives proposed will stimulate discussion and that they might even lead to a revitalization of working-conditions of the discipline.

Introduction¹

This study is motivated by my personal impression that business history in Europe (henceforth: BH) today is in a paradoxical situation: it is blossoming on the one hand and stagnating on the other. The quality of published work has improved greatly, but demand for it and outside recognition of it have stagnated over the past two decades. During my period as President of the European Business History Association I found this contradiction not only in the countries I already knew well, but also in many others. And there is no apparent rule of differentiation: The discipline's situation in rich countries like Germany did not differ greatly from that in countries experiencing economic difficulties, such as Greece. Why does BH not

¹ I want to thank all who helped constructing this contribution. To the 80plus colleagues who returned the questionnaire many others have to be added who helped with more detailed information, exchange of e-mail and so on; that number makes the list too long to mention everybody. Still I want thanking a few who specially helped: P. Battilani, K. Bertrams, P. Boje, H. Bonin, Y. Cassis, J. Dankers, P. Fridenson, A. Godley, G. Harlaftis, C. Kleinschmidt, H. Lindgren, M. Mata, M. Müller, C. Natmeßnig, A. Pogány, N. Puig, A. Reckendrees, K. Sogner, D. Ziegler, and W. Hubbard, who turned this contribution into readable English.

keep pace with the institutional growth in departments of economics and history or of business schools in general? In an attempt to find some tangible answers, I twice sent questionnaires to members of the European Business History Association (EBHA) soliciting personal assessments on a variety of issues. Here is what I have learned.

The purpose of this contribution is to stimulate debate on the future of business history in Europe. Its overview of the condition of BH in today's Europe differs from the many excellent general contributions on the output and achievements of the discipline² in that it is entirely focused on the institutional framework or setting of our endeavors. My main point is that there is a gap between the improvement of our scholarly performance and the weakening of our general working conditions. The empirical evidence for this assertion comes mostly from the polling mentioned, although I concede that there was inevitably a subjectivity in the formulation of individual questions and in their evaluation (see the paragraph on methods). Although surely not everybody will agree with my thesis, I think it is of strategic importance for the discipline to raise the issue. Consequently, I invoke the observation of Hubert Bonin in his overview on business history in France: «[...] and sure we'll disappoint colleagues as we'll not dedicate broad investigation of every pole or theme of research, and we don't look after full comprehensiveness».³

This contribution is organized in the following way: it looks first at the relationship between BH and economic history and then discusses the methods of the two polls mentioned. The results of the polls are summarized in two tables, followed by more detailed evaluations of the personal situation of business historians, their teaching and scholarly production. Here the biggest part is devoted to a discussion of the institutional and qualitative aspects of the discipline's framework, which suggests a relatively stagnated development. After proposing possible ways to rejuvenate BH, the essay concludes with an appeal to action.

Business history and economic history

The fields of business history and economic history can overlap substantially, but in principle they have different points of departure. BH is generally defined by a focus on the microeconomic aspects of business and economic activity, whereas economic history

² Here we mention only as pars pro toto: Franco Amatori /Geoffrey Jones (eds.), *Business History around the World*, Cambridge 2003.

³ Hubert Bonin, *Business history in France: the start of the 21st century*, ms., 1.

concentrates on the macroeconomic dimensions of national economies and policies. In practice individual historians often undertake both types of research topics. Indeed, BH is carried out predominantly by historians who perceive themselves primarily as economic historians not business historians. Like many other disciplines economic history grew rapidly during the expansionist period of European universities in the 1960s and 70s. Moreover, economic history enjoyed special support for political reasons. It embodied the ideological competition between the capitalist West and the socialist East, for the touchstone of Marxist socialism was the explanation of economic and historical development. For the socialist East it was not only a question of how to understand the world but also of what sort of socioeconomic policy should be followed. East and West competed not only in ideology but also in politics and policies. Here a key arena was the developing world and its path of economic growth: How was long-term economic development to be achieved? In this context politicians in both West and East were ready to fund large institutes for academic research in economic history, for example the Economic History Department at the London School of Economics or the Institute of Economic History at the Academy of Science in the German Democratic Republic. The collapse of the socialist regimes in the East from 1989 undermined this special political support for economic history. In the former socialist countries several prominent institutes in the field were abruptly closed, while in the West the discipline fell into a slow, lasting decline. A typical occurrence was the withdrawal of professorships or other appointments in economic history upon the retirement of the incumbent. Such attrition is still going on; in Italy for instance the number of professorships in economic history shrank from 185 in 2011 to 166 in 2014.⁴ Nowadays institutions typically have just one economic historian, although there are some research clusters in the Nordic countries, in the UK, the Netherlands, Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Switzerland and Spain. Probably the largest concentration of economic historians in Europe today is to be found at the University of Barcelona, which had 40 (!) colleagues in 2014.⁵

BH has typically played a minor role in such economic history institutes. Although the task of doing business history has usually been allocated to professorships in economic history, «among them the number of colleagues who are interested in BH is not particularly high».⁶ In the case of Spain we have an idea what this «not particularly high» means. In 2014 of the 348 Spanish economic historians only 25 to 50, or between seven and 14 percent,

⁴ Patrizia Battilani to H.G.S., e-mail dated 28 May 2017.

⁵ Nuria Puig to H.G.S., e-mail dated 01 May 2014.

⁶ Dieter Ziegler to H.G.S., e-mail dated 30 April 2014.

expressed a direct interest in BH.⁷ And few of the economic historians who are interested in BH concentrate on the field; most of them undertake other research topics as well. The predominance of part-time involvement means that there usually is little continuity in research, a condition necessary for developing any discipline. Therefore, for BH to develop as a vibrant discipline it needs its own, explicitly defined professorships as well as economic historians who take a lasting interest in BH. Other approaches which use trendy issues to contribute to the field have no lasting impact and promote its development only in exceptional cases. Consequently, it is necessary to look for ways to build a framework for business history that is autonomous from that for economic history.

In 2014 Andrew Godley of the Henley Business School at the University of Reading characterized a trend in the UK which may apply to other countries as well: «Since then [the 1980s – H.G.S.] the discipline of business history has matured into a coherent and self-confident subject area with a well-functioning learned society, several journals, and a much broader institutional base across many different universities in the UK. It has moved much further away from its parent-discipline of economic history, and much closer to management studies. Indeed, compared with the discipline in other European countries, the merging of business history and business historians into business schools over the past quarter of a century is a highly distinctive feature of the discipline’s evolution in the UK».⁸ This positive evaluation is in stark contrast to other countries’ experiences; in Spain, for example, «economic history has a better reputation than BH, which looks either narrow or dependent on the corporate world».⁹

A few autonomous centers for BH, such as the *Centrum voor Bedrijfs geschiedenis* in Antwerp or the Centre for Business History in Glasgow, were established in the expansive decades, but they were exceptional cases. Moreover, since the collapse of the socialist regimes general support for BH and economic history has faded, and both professorships and departments have been cut. A similar development also occurred in the field of social history. The student revolts in 1968/69 fostered a general leftward swing in the dominant political preferences in most western European societies. Questions of social development came to the fore, and the history of the working class and class relations in general received a prominent place along side more traditional topics. This new focus on social history also became part of the Cold War's ongoing ideological competition. In many cases the established institutions for

⁷ Nuria Puig to H.G.S., e-mail dated 01 May 2014.

⁸ Andrew Godley to H.G.S., e-mail dated April 2014.

⁹ Nuria Puig to H.G.S., e-mail dated 15 April 2016.

economic history were expanded to include social history. But often the two fields in fact remained separated; the respective personnel carried out research in either economic *or* social history, seldom both. Quite a number of chairs were founded for the history of the working class; at the Ruhr University in Bochum an entire institute for the subject, the Institute for Research on the History of European Workers' Movements, was established in 1980. Here too the end of the Cold War strangled this development. Today I know of no professorships devoted exclusively to researching and teaching workers' history. On the one hand, the remit of existing institutes has been broadened to encompass all kinds of social history, while on the other hand the number of academic personnel has been reduced. One of the most dramatic examples was the liquidation of the *Institut für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte* at the Free University of Berlin. Colloquially known as the Fischer Institute after its founding professor Wolfram Fischer, it was for many years one of the largest institutes of its kind. During the 80s it employed four full-time professors, twelve assistant professors and researchers (all with PhD), three secretaries, and two librarians, who administered the institute's substantial library. By the end of the 90s all was gone. Similarly, the afore-mentioned *Centrum voor Bedrijfsgeschiedenis* did not survive a reorganization in 2003. In many countries professorships for business and economic history have been converted into professorships for either general history or economics. In France and Germany especially, the number of such cases has been substantial. In Europe overall the number of professorships in economic history has not only stagnated but declined. This is in remarkable contrast to the general development in tertiary education. Between 2002 and 2015 the number of graduated students in Europe rose about 60 percent.¹⁰ That expansion has to a large extent bypassed business and economic history, a fact that corroborates the impression of a substantial relative decline of our institutional relevance. In 2014 Per Boje, a former president of EBHA, wrote on Denmark: «The trend has been growth in the number of business historians, and during the last 10-15 years Business History is probably one of the strongest success-stories within History but the success is to some extent diminished by a declining number of economic historians at the universities.»¹¹

The staffing of scholarly disciplines is governed at least in a general way by the prevailing political and pedagogical climate. This axiom applies also to BH, and we should keep this in mind when assessing BH's vitality. Since the 80s the scholarly activities of its

¹⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Tertiary_educational_attainment,_EU-28_2002-2015.JPG [last access 16 May 2017].

¹¹ Per Boje to H.G.S., e-mail dated 30 May 2014.

representatives have been considerable in number and high in quality, and yet its institutional presence has been threatened and undermined. The appearance and disappearance of workers' history at European universities is a reminder of instability of politically inspired intellectual fashions. Business historians (which I henceforth also call *our profession*) need to make sure that our profession does not become a passing fancy. By spreading information about common professional problems throughout Europe, I hope this contribution will stimulate structured debates about how to deal with the challenges involved.

Methods of this enquiry

The information used in this contribution derives from self-evaluations by persons actively engaged in BH in Europe. What is their perception of the profession in general as well as of their own position? What do they think about the future? In order to include all possible relevant information, the questionnaires contained no definition of BH. Nobody asked, and consequently the replies reflect a certain variety of disciplinary definition. But in the context of a general enquiry, I think this broad approach is a strength rather than a weakness.

Defining the group of potential respondents entailed a pragmatic choice. It would not have been possible to solicit the opinion of everyone involved in BH, for it is impossible to identify them all. Therefore the target group consisted of all members of the EBHA, since such persons publicly identify themselves with the discipline. In 2014 I sent a questionnaire to all members of the EBHA. It asked for an evaluation of the respective member's personal situation concerning research, teaching, support, possibilities of cooperation and so on. The questions are given in Appendix I. Unfortunately, of the ca. 220 EBHA members no more than five (5!) answered, perhaps because the questionnaires had been sent indirectly via departmental representatives. Therefore, a second questionnaire was addressed personally to known colleagues. This time the response was considerable: 82 persons, more than a third of EBHA's membership. Many of them answered both the original questionnaire from 2014 and the second one from 2016. On the other hand, for a couple of countries I received only one or two answers, meaning the poll's representativeness is limited. In the table given below the number of respondents in each country is indicated. However, this does not always represent the number of colleagues who answered a particular question. In quite a few cases, the evaluation was discussed by several colleagues, but only one of them answered. Such cases are indicated by a "+" behind the number.

The second polling is admittedly biased towards established and tenured business historians, for relatively more persons among the known colleagues belong to my own (older) generation. However, this overweighting is also an advantage; it meant that the information came from senior persons with substantial experience in BH in their home institution as well as in their home country generally. Hence it is plausible to assume that the information is fairly reliable. Given the composition of this second group polled, they were sent both the first questionnaire focusing on personal experience (see Appendix I) and a second questionnaire asking for an evaluation of the overall situation of BH in their country (see Appendix II). In most cases the forms were returned duly filled in, though not always with all questions answered. However, I also received additional information, explanations and sometimes a multiple-page evaluation of the respective country's situation. In a few cases I deepened or clarified certain questions by further correspondence.

The two tables on the state of the discipline by country presented below provide only general trends. I tried to figure out these trends by distilling the answers given by all colleagues in a country group.. Although individual answers were seldom identical, they usually were coherent enough to establish a composite trend. In some cases, such as France, the information provided was partly contradictory, which I indicate by inserting the sign “./.” in the pertinent table cell.

Standardized questionnaires have well-known weaknesses, and this polling is not excepted. Not all questions were answered; especially questions relating to a respondent's personal situation were often omitted; only 25 to 30 persons replied to them. In a few cases a respondent's answer clearly showed that the question had been misunderstood; one colleague replied with a clear «I do not understand». However, there were also a number of especially interesting and informative free-form replies. In general the answers were focused and clear enough to be of use. In other words, the polling experienced only the normal difficulties associated with such questionnaires.

Almost all business historians polled work in departments of history or economics, or in business schools. Of the answers received 55 percent came from persons employed in departments of history and 45 percent from persons employed in departments of economics and business schools. The tone of the answers that came from those in business schools was often a bit more positive. However, since this is a non-measurable impression, a thesis such as «BH fares better in business schools» cannot be verified.

Main results of the enquiry

Two polls were undertaken, in 2014 and in 2016, both using the same questionnaires. In 2014 respondents from ten of the 15 countries in the polling foresaw problems for BH in the future. The outlook was either negative or stagnant. In only five countries did business historians consider their discipline's future hopeful, positive or even «blossoming».

Table 1: 2014 – State of the discipline by country¹²

2014 Country	Own centers	Own profs.	Own courses	Emerging scholars	Own organiz.	Student demand	Demand in books	Perception	General outlook
Austria 2+	no	no	no	no	yes	down	sharp decl.	stagn.	stagn.
Belgium 3	no	no	no	some	dissolv.	down	decl.	hope	neg.
Denmark 1+	yes	ca. 10	few	few	no	down	some	stagn.	stagn.
Finland 2	no	no	no	some	no	down	some	stagn.	positive
France 4	no	ca. 2	no	decl.	yes	down	few	stagn.	stagn.
Germany 4	no	decl.	no	stagn.	yes	down	sharp decl.	neg.	neg.
Italy 4+	no	decl.	no	stagn.	inactive	down	stagn.	hope	hope
Netherl. 4+	no	ca. 2	no	some, pos.	yes	stag.	few	pos.	pos.
Norway 2	yes	1 or 2	no	few	no	down	some	stagn.	stagn.
Portugal 2	no	no	one	?	no	down	?	pos.	pos.
Russia 1	no	no	no	few	no	down	sharp decl.	neg.	neg.
Sweden 3	yes	>2	no	stagn.	no	down	stagn.	stagn.	stagn.
Switzerl. 1+	no	no	no	?	no	down	stagn.	neg.	neg.
Spain 1+	no	no	yes	decl.		down	decl.	decl.	decl.
UK 4+	>10	>20	yes	10 to 20	yes	up	decl.	pos.	"blossom"

./ = no answer; source: filled-in questionnaires and free text. Numbers behind the country: # of answers (more information: see § on methods)

¹² The entries in both tables are not entirely consistent. For instance, the answer, whether a certain country employs professors exclusively for business history (not economic and business history), was in most cases a clear «no» or «yes», sometimes combined with the amount of these special professorships. However, in other cases the answer was that they were «in decline». In such cases I used the expression provided.

Source: questionnaire 2014.

The coverage of the 2016 polling included four more countries (Czechia, Greece, Hungary, and Poland), but Russia fell away. This time respondents from nine of 18 countries assessed BH's future as negative or stagnating. The proportion of counties in which BH was not prospering fell from two-thirds to one-half. This would seem to indicate an upswing in the perception of the future of BH in Europe. However, I am not entirely convinced. When confronted with the 2014 result two years later, a few colleagues felt something like 'oh, it is not that bad in my country' and graded their evaluation up. Especially in 2016 responses from several countries (e.g. Czechia, Italy, or Portugal) were inconsistent: Whereas all specific indicators were assessed negatively, the general situation was described as not negative, even positive. Consequently, the implied improvement in BH's prospects between 2014 and 2016 rests on shaky ground.

Table 2: 2016 – State of the discipline by country

2016 Country	Own n cent ers	Own profs .	Own courses	Emerging scholars	Own organi zation	Student demand	Deman d in books	Percep - tion	Genera l outlook
Austria 5	no	no	no	no	no	sufficien t	./.	./.	stagn.
Belgium 4	no	no	1	some	dissol v.	down	decl.	hope	negativ e
Czechia 1	no	no	no	few	no	up	./.	hope	positive
Denmark 3+	yes	ca. 10	few	few	no	down	some	stagn.	not neg.
Finland 3	no	2	no	few	no	sufficien t	some	./.	positive
France 9	no	./.	yes	decl.	yes	down	growing	stagn.	not neg.
Germany 7	no	no	no	stagn.	yes	down	decl.	stagn.	not neg.
Greece 3	no	no	yes	few	no	no	some	decl.	negativ e
Hungary 2	no	no	no	very few	no	small	./.	negativ e	negativ e

Italy 6+	no	decl.	few	stagn./decl.	inactive	down	stagn.	hope	stagn.
Netherl. 4+	no	ca. 2	no	some	yes	stagn.	few	positive	positive
Norway 5	yes	1 or 2	no	growing	no	down	some	robust	not neg.
Poland 1	no	no	no	few	no	down	none	negative	decline
Portugal 3	no	no	one	./.	no	down	low	positive	not neg.
Spain 2+	no	no	yes	slow grow	./.	down	decline	decline	negative
Sweden 6	yes	2	no	stagn.	no	down	stagn.	stagn.	stagn.
Switz. 6	no	no	yes	up	no	stagn.	stagn.	stagn.	stagn.
UK 10	yes	>20	yes	ca. 10 to 20	yes	stagn.	decl.	positive	positive

./. = no or contradictory answers; source: filled-in questionnaires and free text Numbers behind the country: # of answers (more information: see § on methods)

Source: questionnaire 2016.

The state of business history in individual countries

General professional situation

Consistent with the origin of the samples, the respondents by and large clearly identified themselves with business history. To the statement «I do like working with BH» 29 chose «yes», two «neutral», and no one crossed off «No». Similarly, a large majority responded affirmatively to the statement «I would like to publish more [in BH] » (20 yes; five neutral; three no), and a majority thought they had sufficient time for BH. As regards teaching, most of the respondents taught other subjects than BH, especially common were courses on economic history or in some cases on social history and the like. A clear majority «would like to teach more BH» (15 yes; nine neutral; five no), and agreement was even stronger to the focused statement «I would like to teach more advanced students» (20 yes; four no; two neutral). This response probably reflects the situation at business schools to a larger extent than at departments of history, because business schools usually do not offer BH courses for advanced students.

The enquiry revealed a clear demand for academic collaboration. All respondents stated that they cooperated academically with colleagues outside their own institution.

Cooperation inside their home institution was widespread but not similarly universal (16 yes; six neutral; four no).¹³ In Germany, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and in the UK full professors may count on the support of a personal academic assistant, in some cases even of one or several assistant professors. In most of the same group of countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Sweden, UK) professors are assisted by a personal secretary. Both groups, but especially the latter one, may be larger than the questionnaire results indicate. For instance some professors in Switzerland have the support of at least a secretary, but this fact was not reported. Only nine respondents got academic assistance from their own students. In short, the professional situation of BH in Europe is bifurcated by the issue of support staff: a minority of fortunate colleagues who can rely on some sort of internal, institutional support and a majority who do not enjoy this advantage of the traditional continental university system. However, there are self-organized groups of collaboration and support, sometimes even within the member's own organization, such as the ten-year-old *Grupo de Investigación Complutense de Historia Empresarial / Complutense Research Group on Business History* (GICHE) in Madrid. More widespread is cooperation clustered around a defined topic, such as the *Humanities in the European Research Area* (HERA) on «fashion» [www.enterpriseofculture.leeds.ac.uk] or the *Network of Interdisciplinary Research in Family Firms* (N.I.R.F.F.) [www.ub.edu/histeco/p4/eng/index.php]. Others enjoy support of their country's BH organization; for instance the German *Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte* (GUG) supports research groups on history of banking and insurance [www.unternehmensgeschichte.de/?seite=bank_versicherungsgeschichte], family firms [www.unternehmensgeschichte.de/?seite=Familienunternehmen], and the history of marketing [www.unternehmensgeschichte.de/?seite=marketinggeschichte]. Still the most widespread form of cooperation in BH is based on personal networks that pursue a specific subject, such as cartelization.

Teaching

Reliable information on the role of teaching in our discipline is unavailable. We do not know the exact number of colleagues involved in teaching BH or economic history in Europe, nor

¹³ The high number of neutral answers is a bit puzzling. The reason might have been a not precise enough question («I cooperate with colleagues inside my own institution»). Though this question was asked in a context of question on research, it did not say so. Consequently cooperation in teaching and administration could have been considered as well. In that light a high number for «neutral» may have been a reaction of imprecise questioning.

do we know the number of students in such courses or the number of PhD candidates. But we know a couple of trends. There are many more bachelor-level than master-level students who come into contact with economic and business history because in many teaching institutions courses or single lectures in the fields are mandatory at the bachelor's level, which is rarely the case at the master's level. What demand for courses in BH might be if students were given a free choice is unknown. However, colleagues from several countries related that they have difficulty attracting enough students and that this can threaten the existence of such courses. One colleague told me that in order to fulfill teaching obligations in the face of the lack of demand, he changed from the length of lectures and seminars from two to three hours. These impressions are confirmed by the answers given in the questionnaires, which indicated that student demand in most countries was either declining or stagnating.¹⁴ According to Hubert Bonin, in France few junior students were interested for taking up the available grants in BH.¹⁵

If business history is taught at all, it usually is part of a course on economic history. BH is offered to students as an autonomous course in only six of the 19 countries covered in our enquiry. For the most part such courses in BH are available at business schools rather than universities. And they are offered almost exclusively at the bachelor's level. I do not know of any master-level courses dealing solely with BH. Master-level students, however, can write their thesis in BH. The incentive for doing so relies to a large extent on the inspiration of the student's supervisor, who may – or may not – suggest topics in BH. The polling disclosed that the number of master's theses in BH was declining or stagnating everywhere.¹⁶ Surprisingly, the situation at the PhD-level was evaluated more optimistically. The answers given here were sometimes contradictory, and the brighter prospects were still embedded in a general downward trend. Of the 26 answers referring to this question 13 were read as negative, five as stagnant and eight as positive. In short, there were more negative than positive evaluations, but this was notably more positive than the situation at the master's level.

We need to see the flagging student demand for BH in the context of overall student numbers. For many years now the total number of students in Europe has expanded more or

¹⁴ In case of the UK in 2014 student demand was deemed to be going «up»; in 2016 that was changed to “down”. The «up» for Czechia in 2016 may be related to a new (re-)establishment of BH.

¹⁵ «[...] and this at a background of an unemployment rate of 25 per cent for young Frenchmen!»: Bonin, *BH in France*, 2.

¹⁶ For Germany and Sweden I received contradicting answers. In both countries I received the same number of answers saying the number of master theses in BH is «going up» or «going down», which I counted in the table as “stagnating”.

less every year. So the stagnation of the number of students in BH necessarily means that the discipline is in a relative decline. How can this decline be reversed? Given stagnant student demand, we need to ask if our offerings are sufficiently attractive to today's students. If not, how can they be improved? To my mind these results on teaching and student demand clearly raise the question: would it help if we could establish more dedicated courses on BH?

Scholarly production

Scholarly output in BH seems to be in a sounder condition than teaching. All but two colleagues saw an improvement in the quality of BH scholarship during the last ten to 20 years. By contrast, there was no corresponding expansion in the quantity of publications. As to the number of book titles published in BH, opinion was equally split between growth and decline. Respondents were similarly split in the assessment of the number of copies sold, with a slight tendency toward a weakening of demand. There are of course great variations between individual countries. These differences are even greater when it comes to commissioned works of BH: company histories and the like.

Commissioning historical works has an especially strong tradition in Scandinavia. In Norway, for example, enterprises large and small, towns, organizations, such as trade unions, institutions, such as hospitals, and even small administrative units, such as the Meteorological Institute of the University of Bergen, often contract the writing of their history. In Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, and Germany the demand for bespoke histories seems strong, while in the rest of Europe it has contracted since the global credit crisis of 2008/10. Who are the persons paid to write these works? They come from four main groups: journalists, scientific staff (permanent and temporary) at educational or cultural institutions (including museums), freelance researchers, and archivists and (former) employees of the commissioning body. Until the 90s journalists seem to have been the most important group, but later academically trained historians (freelance or academic staff) came to dominant especially for large projects. In all countries this shift in the professional background of contract authors has led to a substantially improved quality of the historical research involved. Especially larger companies, organizations and institutions select their authors according to scholarly qualifications as well as pay for supplementary quality control. In exceptional cases a group of business historians are paid to give advice on overall construction of the work, chapter drafts and the final manuscript.

In countries with a tradition in commissioned historical works we also find freelance business historians who make a livelihood writing them. While responses from the UK, Portugal and Switzerland were vague as to the existence of such freelancers («some»), colleagues in Greece, Spain, Hungary or Czechia had not heard of such persons. Becoming an established freelance research historian is not easy; many aspirants, for example newly graduated MAs in BH, fall away after a short time. In a few countries, however, their work prospects have benefitted from the founding of companies that promote and organize such research services for BH. In the Netherlands there is *Stad & Bedrijf* in Rotterdam, and in Sweden there is at least one similar enterprise. In Germany several are to be found. Two of the best known are in Cologne: *Geschichtsbüro Köln* and *Agentur für historische Kommunikation*. The *Geschichtsbüro*, founded in 1999, published over 200 books and brochures up to 2014, and has today seven permanent employees. The *Agentur*, founded in 2004, does not produce works itself, rather it acts as an agent or broker between customer and researcher. Their activities indicate a steady demand for commissioned BH at least in Germany. The strong demand is also reflected in researchers' salaries. Top-level freelance business historians such as Johannes Bähr or Paul Erker command incomes comparable to those of full professors. Also in Scandinavia commissioned researchers usually have been quite well paid. In Norway, they typically have a contractual employment of one to three years at a salary often above the level of a full professor, especially if they are freelancers. The reason given is a social one: these authors do not have the same security of income as permanent employees and therefore deserve a higher fee to compensate their exposure to the open market. This is surely a situation that business historians in other countries could only dream of.

What triggers demand of commissioned works in business history? In some countries demand is steady, while in others it goes in waves. In Greece demand increased in line with the upswing of the economy and collapsed with the economic difficulties after 2010. In Sweden and Norway the start of a new millennium generated a noticeable surge in demand for bespoke histories. In Norway specifically the centenary of the country's full independence in 2005 also stimulated demand. In other countries important or controversial political events or periods – for example the second world war or the Nazi years – also have played a part in provoking interest in the past activities of companies and institutions. This was particularly true for Austria and Germany of course, where public interest in and demand for documented histories of enterprises, such as Volkswagen, or financial institutions, such as the Deutsche Bank, during the Nazi years quickened during the 90s. Since 2005 demand first had waned in

part because the major companies and institutions have now been covered. However, since a couple of years family-firms and small- and medium-sized enterprise have stepped into the gap and consequently there is an upswing again. Similar research, especially on wartime collaboration, has been carried out in Switzerland and France. Also in these cases the wave of commissioned business histories subsided between 2005 and 2010. In no country did the surge just mentioned result in a longer lasting demand for bespoke histories dealing with other time periods. After 2000 Czechia also experienced a politically based demand for the history of the country's major enterprises in the years after 1945, but this seems to have petered out.

Institutional and qualitative aspects

Fifty years ago BH had a poor reputation among academic historians. It was mainly carried out by journalists who in most cases published some kind of hagiography of the company or institution involved. Thus, in the late 60s when the German economic historian and pioneering business historian Wilhelm Treue published two volumes on the history of Thyssen steelworks,¹⁷ many colleagues at his university were dismissive. One contributor to this negative reaction might have been the enormous fee – rumored to have been 100,000 D-mark – which the company had paid Treue for his work. Be that as it may, it took several decades of excellent scholarship in BH before the discipline's bad repute in the German historians' guild was overturned. And there are still prejudices to overcome. For example, an informant from Spain wrote: «Economic history has a better reputation than business history, which looks either narrow or dependent on the corporate world.»¹⁸

By and large, however, in most European countries today BH is recognized as a legitimate variety of history writing. In the case of Germany the fact that highly reputed scholars such as Lothar Gall, long-time editor of flagship journal *Historische Zeitschrift* and one-time president of the German Historians' Association, periodically engaged in writing BH,¹⁹ undoubtedly helped to promote this increase in BH's esteem among historians in general. In our enquiry all respondents affirmed that the scholarly quality of publications in BH in Europe had improved steadily over time and nowadays meets the highest standard. I

¹⁷ Wilhelm Treue, *Die Feuer verlöschen nie – August Thyssen-Hütte*, vol. 1: 1890–1926, Düsseldorf 1969; idem/Helmut Übbing, *Die Feuer verlöschen nie – August Thyssen-Hütte*, vol. 2: 1926–1966, Düsseldorf 1969.

¹⁸ Nuria Puig to H.G.S., e-mail dated 15 April 2016.

¹⁹ Lothar Gall was professor of modern history at the University of Frankfurt from 1975 to retirement in 2005. In addition to an internationally respected biography of Otto von Bismarck, he published books on Deutsche Bank (1995), Krupp (2000) and other enterprises.

see at least three stimuli for this improvement, all of which can be considered expressions of the discipline's Americanization. The first was the influence of Alfred D. Chandler jun., professor of business history at Harvard Business School, whose magisterial works on the structure of management in modern corporations redefined and reinvigorated BH in the USA and elsewhere. A second was the research on multinational enterprises and foreign direct investment (FDI), which was pioneered by Mira Wilkins, professor of economics at Florida International University. A third stimulus was more general and related to analytical and presentational style: the adoption of the «American» approach of defining a question and answering it in the text, rather than simply telling a story.

BH is not entirely immune to new approaches to history such as the linguistic turn or the cultural turn, but in practice the discipline's discussion of methodology and interpretative approaches in recent decades has been concerned mainly with three conceptual issues: 1) cliometrics or quantitative history, which had a large impact in the 80s; 2) the Chandlerian school's focus on managerial strategy and structure, which was dominant perhaps in the 90s; and 3) the «varieties of capitalism» framework formulated by Peter A. Hall and David Soskice, which stimulated much research during the decade after 2000. What are the approaches applied and the topics researched in BH nowadays? Cliometrics, which is of course a method and not a conceptual framework, is little used now; the few exceptions are found especially in Sweden and the Netherlands. Also the Chandlerian tradition of BH research is in decline with only a few advocates in Germany, Greece, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland. Research interest in the varieties of capitalism has also faded. It would seem that there is no longer a prevailing approach in BH research. Concepts mentioned by questionnaire respondents included evolutionary economics, corporate social responsibility, cultural-lead questions, forms of enterprises, types of management, corporate governance, and very often narrative approaches. Perhaps the comment of Håkan Lindgren of the Stockholm School of Economics best captures today's situation: «Problem-orientated BH and with a great variation of scientific problems to solve, and as a great variation of methods to solve those problems».²⁰ Some of the topics taken up have a remarkable longevity, especially biographies of business leaders. The German journal for business history (*Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte*, ZUG) was founded by Wilhelm Treue originally as a journal for both company history and entrepreneurial biography (*Tradition, Zeitschrift für Firmengeschichte und Unternehmerbiographie*). The same year the Swiss biographical series on the country's

²⁰ Håkan Lindgren to H.G.S., e-mail dated 13 April 2014.

pioneers in business and technology (*Schweizer Pioniere der Wirtschaft und Technik*) began to appear; it is still thriving and comprises more than 100 volumes. Another traditional BH topic that continues to attract research is the relation between state and enterprise. New are network analysis and geographical approaches such as district analysis. Research on family firms and other organizational forms of enterprise such as business groups has become more and more important. This may be a reaction to the Chandlerian school's focus on big business, but it is also reflects the fact that these non-Chandlerian forms of enterprise have shown a substantial higher resilience than big business during the economic crises which emerged after 2000. Much less has been published on economic co-operatives, and contributions on workers, middle management, engineers and so on are almost entirely absent.²¹ Despite these gaps, the extent to which the number of both approaches and topics in BH has grown in recent years is remarkable. The expansion underscores the fruitfulness of BH, which is best understood as « [...] part of an attempt to see business within an even broader perspective than before».²²

In his evaluation of BH in France Hubert Bonin threw open the question of variations between the European countries: «France is still missing institutions as <big power> in business history because of the fragmentation of its universities and research centres, because, first, every university has to teach everything everywhere, which prevents our <system> from setting up strong specialised platforms; each business historian has to tackle a very small team, with colleagues in economics or management.»²³ Indeed, the strength of BH tradition varies greatly from one country to the next. The Scandinavian countries and the UK seem to have the strongest and longest-standing BH milieux. Strong traditions in BH are also found in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, but less so in Greece, Portugal, and Spain; while Ireland seems to lack BH entirely. France and Italy are in the middle. For obvious reasons the weakest BH tradition is to be found in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe. There BH faces several considerable difficulties: the totally different principles governing economic activities under the socialist regimes; the disarray or lack of archival materials; and the long-standing weakness of training in the discipline with a corresponding lack of repute. What Ágnes Pogány writes regarding Hungary holds true to a large extent for the other socialist countries as well: «Business historians in today's Hungary have an important theoretical and practical problem with the fact that the continuity of

²¹ See Bonin, *BH in France* (cf. n. 3), 14. Even Wikipedia's very selective entry on BH mentions labor relations.

²² Knut Sogner to H.G.S., e-mail dated 08 May 2014.

²³ Bonin, *BH in France* (cf. n. 3)1.

enterprises was terminated in 1945. Socialised enterprise used to be integrated into larger units or dissolved. Again at the end of the 1980s many firms with substantial tradition were terminated. Today there are hardly any enterprises which can follow their roots into the last century. It is also an open question whether the new owners of re-privatized firms, many of which are owned by transnational enterprise, are interested in the history of their firm to such an extent that they order research and publication of it. Future Hungarian business history has to work on several tasks. It must find a scholarly approach which allows a new relationship to international research and find its own place both in historical research as well as in teaching at universities. This task of theoretical definition and practical policy needs also to be met by the supporters of BH and those who order commissioned works.»²⁴

The strength of a country's BH tradition is reflected, albeit imperfectly, in its professorships, and here the present situation is not rosy. The only countries with a substantial number of professorships exclusively for BH are Denmark, the UK, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Professorships in economic history are rather widespread, and their incumbents may or may not also teach BH. Moreover, in many countries economic and *social* history are combined in a single professorship. In such cases the occupant usually specializes in one or the other rather than both; if the specialty is social history, then BH is rarely included the teaching and research. Moreover, in nearly all countries the number of relevant professorships has stagnated or declined.

In most countries economic and business historians are employed as single specialists without an attached discipline-related infrastructure. Consequently, their ability to organize collaborative research within their own institution is limited. Those who work in a department for economic (and social) history, such as the *Institute for economic and social history* at Charles University Prague, are presumably more fortunate in this regard, and such institutes are to be found in nearly all European countries. At a few universities these departments are large enough to establish a subdivision on BH, for example the *Business History Research Group at the Department of Economic and Social History* at the University of Utrecht. Subunits for BH are also found in many business schools, for example in the *Department of Policy Analysis and Public Management* at Bocconi University in Milan; the Stockholm School of Economics has an appropriately named *Institute for Economic and Business History Research*. In Denmark, Norway, Sweden and the UK there are one or several dedicated

²⁴ Translated by H.G.S.; Ágnes Pogány, *Business History in Ungarn*, in: Alice Teichova/ Herbert Matis/Andreas Resch (eds.), *Business History. Wissenschaftliche Entwicklungstrends und Studien aus Zentraleuropa*, Wien 1999, 77-87, here 87.

centers for BH, each with three or more permanent academic staff. Usually these centers are attached to a business school, for example the *Center for BH* at BI Norwegian School of Economics in Oslo, but there are also exceptions such as the *Centre for Business History in Scotland*, which is part of the School of Social and Political Science at the University of Glasgow. The *Uppsala Centre for Business History*, which houses 18 researchers at present, is a hybrid construction that is associated with Uppsala University while also collaborating with Stockholm School of Economics. Whereas in most countries departments for economic and social history emerged in the expansive 60s, dedicated BH research and teaching centers emerged first in the 80s. An important exception was the forerunning *Business History Unit* at the London School of Economics, which started in 1977. After 1990 the opening of new centers for BH seems to have stagnated. Denmark has been a notable exception. In 1999 the Copenhagen Business School established a *Centre for Business History*, which has developed a vibrant research environment. In 2006 the South Danish University in Odense established a BH unit which now is called *Centre for Maritime and Business History*. A third Danish BH center, founded at Aarhus University in 2003, did not last long. Similarly short-lived was the BH center started at Corvinus University of Budapest in 1995.²⁵

Organizational features

In a number of European countries business historians have founded their own professional organizations. Examples are, France (Association française d'histoire des entreprises), Italy (*Associazione Studi Storici sull'Impresa*, ASSI), the Netherlands (*Stichting Bedrijfsgeschiedenis*, ca. 110 members), and the UK (*Association of Business Historians*, ABH, with about 250 members in 2016 – ten years ago membership stood at around 300). There is also an *Association d'Histoire du Commerce* in France, but it does not seem to cooperate with non-French organizations. Belgium's business historians also had their own society once, but it was dissolved about decade ago. Germany has two BH societies: *Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte* (GUG) with a membership of ca. 400 (including 110 institutions and corporations) as well as *Arbeitskreis für Kritische Unternehmensgeschichte* (AKKU) with ca. 130 members. Emerging scholars in BH in Germany are especially concentrated in AKKU.

²⁵ In 1995 it was decided to found a center for enterprise history which in 1997 and 1998 cooperated with Reading University. Today this institution functions only on an informal basis. (I thank Ágnes Pogány for this information).

Societies for business history can be divided into three different types of organization. The most widespread type is an organization of more or less exclusively individual scholars who focus on BH. The second type is a mixed organization of scholars and enterprises like the Austrian ÖGU (Austria - *Österreichische Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte*, which since a few years seems to have fallen asleep), while the third type, a kind of composite research institution, is represented by the German GUG. At a formal level GUG is an organization of enterprises with scholars concentrated on its advisory board, however its workshops, publications and so on are dominated by scholars. GUG is also an institution for (re-) construction of company archives, commissioned writings and so on. It has supervised many more commissioned works in BH than all other, including Cologne's *Geschichtsbüro*. Consequently, GUG represents the first address for both companies and university historians who require advice and practical help with all historical issues. The advantage of the first type of professional organization is, of course, its high scholarly level. However, high-level scholarship is also a dominant characteristic of the activities of the German society GUG. Decisions regarding the content and execution of society conferences are taken first by the advisory board of scholars and normally approved without question by GUG's executive. There are usually two annual conferences, one focused on scholarly debate and the other, which is hosted by an enterprise, on topics of general public interest. Because of the substantial number of its member enterprises the GUG-type of organization is much better funded than the other organizational types. The society has an office in Frankfurt and about six permanent staff plus eight archivists on its payroll as well as an various number of researchers from university on an honorary basis; GUG's current managing director is Dr. Andrea Schneider-Braunberger, a former president of EBHA.

In addition to country associations there exist at present two BH organizations for Europe as a whole. The oldest, the *European Association for Banking and Financial History* (eabh), was established in 1990 and focuses on banking history and the preservation of related archival material. Although eabh's formal membership consists exclusively of financial institutions, 66 in 2017, it has an academic council chaired usually by an internationally prominent academic historian. It sponsors scholarly activities throughout Europe, and its annual conferences gather together historians, archivists and banking representatives. Like GUG it has an office in Frankfurt and currently employs two academically trained staff in addition to a secretary general. For individual business historians, however, the most important European-wide professional organization is clearly the *European Business History Association* (EBHA). Established in 1994, it currently has about 150 members. EBHA is an

organization of individual scholars and lacks the wealthy institutional members that give GUG and eabh such deep financial pockets. Apart from facilitating academic contact and collaboration, EBHA organizes an annual congress and biannual workshops for PhD students. For many years EBHA's administration was concentrated mainly at the *Centre for Business History* in Glasgow, but since about a decade it has been handled by GUG's office in Frankfurt, whilst Glasgow runs the archive of the association.

Besides these umbrella organizations there exist in many European countries a number of specialized societies for specific topics relevant to BH. A working group on the history of savings banks (*Arbeitskreis für Sparkassengeschichte*) existed in Germany for many years. But a parallel organization on Swiss banking history, seems to have petered out already during the 1990s. The same seems to have happened to the UK-based, informal *Monetary History Group*. It seems its last activities happened in 2012. The *British Banking History Society* is another example. Its focus is not general history of financial institutions but the special issue of cheques and their history. Indeed, almost all of these specialized societies have such narrowly defined interests that we do not here include them as professional associations for BH.

Company archives, however, are very near to the heart of BH. In many European countries business archivists have organized their own professional associations, such as the *Comité pour la Valorisation des Archives d'Entreprises* in Belgium, and these typically have close contacts with the respective national societies for BH. The largest business archival associations are probably the British *Business Archives Council* and the German *Vereinigung der deutschen Wirtschaftsarchivare*, the last with more than 300 members. Usually these archivists do not pursue historical research beyond their own firm. That limitation applies also to most collective archives, such as the *Schweizer Wirtschaftsarchiv* in Basel. Still the borders between activities of company archivists and business historians and their respective professional organizations are not always clearly cut. Typically the historians have the widest range of research and scholarly activities to which archivists contribute from the sidelines. Yet in Sweden the situation is reversed; there the archivists are the more active party. The *Centre for Business History in Stockholm* is a centralized non-profit organization, which hosts no less than 7000 corporate archives. It also organizes the researching and writing of commissioned works in BH. In 2017 it permanently employed 31 persons and four associated researchers (<http://naringslivshistoria.se/en/>).

BH in Europe has established several different media for the distribution of its research, above all scholarly journals. There is, however, no common European journal, only national ones. In 1956 the German *Tradition* (renamed *Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte* or *ZUG* in 1976) started publication, followed one year later by the British *Business History*. In Italy *Imprese e Storia* was founded in 1990, and France followed in 1992 with *Entreprises et Histoire*. The Italian journal interrupted publication in 2011, but the other three are thriving and internationally known. Several book series in BH also exist. Some are bound to a specific publishing house, such as Oxford University Press's *Comparative Perspectives in Business History*, while others are sponsored by a BH society, such as GUG's *Schriftenreihe zur Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte*. BH societies also publish yearbooks on BH, for example the Spanish *Revista de Historia Económica y de la Empresa*. Over the years some of these yearbooks have been discontinued: *ASSI's annale di storia dell'impresa* or the *German Yearbook on Business History* (1981–1995). Banking- and financial history has at times had several dedicated journals of its own: the *Institut International d'Histoire de la Banque* in Geneva published an *International review of the history of banking* (*Revue internationale d'histoire de la banque*) between 1968 and 1990, and the Deutsche Bank issued *Studies on economic and monetary problems and on banking history* between 1965 and 1989. The only such speciality journal that still exists in 2017 is ebha's *Financial History Review*, established in 1994. *Accounting, Business and Financial History* (today *Accounting History Review*) was established in 1990 and published mainly on issues of accounting. I do not know of any electronic forums or blogs on BH other than those accessible under EBHA's home page www.ebha.org/?seite=networks. Its website also lists links to home pages of initiatives such as N.I.R.F.F. (*Network of Interdisciplinary Research in Family Firms*). Moreover, the EBHA keeps its members updated on upcoming events, jobs offered and so on through its *Newsletter*, which is sent to all members by e-mail.

Suggestions to Revitalize Business History in Europe

I am not sure that all colleagues will share my view that the state of BH in Europe is not entirely satisfactory, but I assume no one will deny that there is room for improvement. Steps to revitalize the discipline need to be undertaken on a country-wide basis as well as at individual institutions. The respective discussions need to be pursued on both a local and a national level; much can be learned from exchanging information and experiences. We have several brilliant examples where initiatives have met with impressive success (see below).

Small steps should not be ignored. BH can become more visible among the general public, for example, by awarding prizes for research publications or by taking up neglected topics such as the history of personal management and so on (except for biographies of top managers BH has little to offer on company employees). Major steps of revitalization, however, need strategic networking and cooperation:

1) More attractive courses and teaching

BH is not a mandatory field of study and has no guarantee that students will enroll in its offered courses. Students are attracted by interesting topics. Sometimes attraction can be increased by a simple change in course title. Louis Galambos, who teaches at the Johns Hopkins University, told me that since changing the name of his course from «*economic history of the United States*» to «*the history of capitalism*» student attendance has doubled. Business historians have had success with advanced courses focusing on single distinguished large firms, such as *IG Farben*. Nowadays a course on the history of Apple, Microsoft or Google would probably attract many students.

2) Gender balance

BH must recruit more qualified women into the discipline and keep them there. BH's public standing and attraction for students would undoubtedly be enhanced by it having a more balanced division of men and women scholars. For example, in 2014 75 per cent of the approximately 350 Spanish economic historians were men.²⁶ Since ca. 50 percent of them were over 50 years and therefore not far from retirement, the coming opportunity to achieve a balanced gender distribution in the profession should not be missed. I do not have exact figures for other countries, but what is mentioned by respondents matches my personal impressions. Male dominance in BH is perhaps even stronger in other countries than in Spain. To revitalize the discipline it is absolutely necessary to use replacement opportunities to establish a gender balance in BH throughout Europe.

3) «Think big»

BH should think big and launch important projects. Big projects not only attract attention, they also stimulate and motivate researchers and students. What can be done by a single person or by a small group is exemplified by the case of Gelina Harlaftis at

²⁶ Nuria Puig to H.G.S., e-mail dated 01 May 2014.

the Ionian University in Corfu: «What I am trying to do is to trigger interest from shipping companies to form private archives in order to be able to have students/researchers work with them. [...] I will probably undertake to create and organize an Onassis Business Archive (with a team of archivists) and write a commissioned history of all his business (with a team of researchers) [...] This will be a major step towards the formation of private shipping archives in Greece, as imitation works very well in the Greek shipping milieu [...].»²⁷ In this respect it followed the path of GUG, which used to first advise on the construction of an enterprise-archive and then caring for writing its history. Indeed Harlaftis' proposals were successful, even though at the moment Greece surely is not an easy place to obtain research funding. Our point is that this case shows even in an unfavorable environment it is possible to launch important projects. A different version of the same general theme is the establishment of large-scale national projects that involve colleagues from several institutions. A good example is the Dutch national research program on Dutch business in the 20th century called BINT (*Het Bedrijfsleven in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw*). BINT was established in 2002 by the Business History Research Group at the University of Utrecht and has collaborating researchers from the Netherlands Economic History Archive (NEHA), Erasmus University Rotterdam and the University of Eindhoven. Its research approach is internationally comparative with the intention of identifying typical national characteristics. The program has published many monographs as well as had a special number in *Business History Review* in 2010 <www.bintproject.nl.

4) Strategic teaching networking inside home institutions

Of great importance for BH's standing inside home institutions is its engagement in teaching. Its institutional position would be clearly strengthened by having mandatory courses in specific fields of study even though this entails a certain reduction in autonomous control over resources. Such anchoring in a curriculum is also subject to disciplinary and personal rivalry and thus not always achievable, but overtures should not be dismissed without good cause.²⁸ Since economic history and business history

²⁷ Gelina Harlaftis to H.G.S., e-mail dated 24 May 2017 and information from her e-mail dated 12 May 2017.

²⁸ In the 80s my mentor Wolfram Fischer turned down the proposal of the Faculty of Economics at the Free University of Berlin to make a course in economic history a mandatory part of its foundational curriculum on the grounds that marking 250 essays each semester was an unacceptable obligation. Accepting the proposal would presumably have anchored the Fischer institute's position within the Faculty. Without a guaranteed role in teaching it had few defenses when faced with dissolution in the late 1990s.

are in most cases bound to each other, the former needs to be defended as much as business history itself. Several forms of BH curricula can be imagined (if the Harvard method is under consideration, remember that HBS case studies are accessible online www.thecasecentre.org/educators/ordering/whatsavailable/collections/harvard).

5) Strategic alliances with other scholarly disciplines

According to Andrew Godley cross-disciplinary alliances are being successfully pursued by a number of British colleagues: «So until relatively recently the evidence in support of business history research entering mainstream management studies was muted. But now the world appears to be changing. Accounting historians (notably Steve Toms) have led the way here, with a much stronger tradition of intellectual cross-fertilization between accounting and accounting historians than between management and business history scholars. But the potentially significant transformation very recently has occurred in the field of organization studies. The key figure here is Mick Rowlinson, who has prosecuted the case in favour of the historical method among this community with remarkable energy and effectiveness.²⁹ The result is that British business historians are now very active in the leading European learned society for organization studies (EGOS) and the leading management and finance journals have seen increasing numbers of UK-based business history scholars publish articles here: *Journal of Management Studies*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, as well as *Organization Studies*, to name only the most obvious. Business history has maintained a track at the British Academy of Management's annual conference for several years (thanks to Bill Cooke, John Wilson and Kevin Tennant). Judging by publications and conference participation, it seems increasingly to be the case that the historical method has gained a wider legitimacy in the broad field of management studies [...]. And while it is still premature to judge whether business history will become a truly significant sub-field in management studies, never mind a core element of the business school curriculum, recent events are more than encouraging.»³⁰

²⁹ For Rowlinson's most recent initiative see [http://aom.org/STF-2014/#History and Organization Studies: Toward a Creative Synthesis](http://aom.org/STF-2014/#History_and_Organization_Studies:_Toward_a_Creative_Synthesis) [last access 22.5.2018].

³⁰ Andrew Godley to H.G.S., e-mail dated April 2014.

Another example of strategic alliances, here international rather than interdisciplinary, is the EU-funded *Erasmus mundus international master's* program. Based at the *Centre for Business History in Scotland* this master's degree involves choosing courses taught at two other universities (Barcelona, Göttingen or Rotterdam). The advantages are manifold and include besides the 3.6 mn Euros generated an attractive master's program where students receive a truly international education, which in return secures the employment of colleagues at four universities. Moreover, such contracts support the continued existence of the respective BH facilities, for university administrators love international contracts (as long as they work) and are unwilling to undermine them.

6) Strategic networking with business leaders

Visible networking with business leaders in workshops and other public events underline the importance of BH. This is already regularly practiced by ASSI in Italy and GUG in Germany, but it can be improved by broadening the audience and by being taken up in other countries. A recent addition is the international workshop in business history for «international scholars and leading business actors»³¹ arranged by the Kurgan-van Hentenryk Chair in Business History at the Solvay Brussels School of Economy and Management at Free University of Brussels. Its present incumbent, Kenneth Bertrams, held the first workshop in May 2017 on «The Entrepreneurial State and the Innovative Enterprise». Another possibility for such networking is to strengthen the ties between the *Family Business Network* and our historical family-business research, carried out in several countries as well as on the European level by N.I.R.F.F.

7) More active competition for national and international funding

All countries have some form of special funding for excellent research, and this is supplemented by additional funds administered by the European Union's European Research Council (ERC). BH researchers should be active competitors for such funding. Admittedly, applications for ERC funding are especially labor-intensive and success is by no means granted. Yet approved, and even rejected, applications for national and international research funding demonstrate our discipline's vitality. A

³¹ See www.solvay.edu/kurgan-van-hentenryk-chair-business-history [last access 22.11.2017].

sizable project based on outside funding underscores BH's academic credentials and thus importantly increases its standing and influence within its home institutions.

8) International networking

Finally, international networking can revitalize BH in Europe. The comments by Nuria Puig, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, sum up well the benefits of evaluating national preconditions and learning from and cooperating with international colleagues: «All this seems to suggest that Spanish BH (and continental European BH for that matter) is ripe to embrace the new US historical approach known as History of Capitalism. Its advocates define it as a methodology built on the traditions, topics and research methods of economic, labor and business history. They like to quote Karl Polanyi and even Karl Marx, two authors with whom the majority of academic economic and business are familiar. Could the History of Capitalism save business historians from the threats of hard economic history, increasingly hard management studies, case study writing, and commissioned company history, laying the foundations of the complex, hybrid, broad minded field it used to be? This is not the place to discuss whether the History of Capitalism is a new methodology or approach, or rather a genuinely US strategy to counteract the effects of the expulsion of business history from history and economics departments and business schools. Yet in my view Spanish business historians, like many of their European colleagues, are paying more attention to the self-examination of hard economic history unleashed by the Great Recession or the rapid development of management studies than to what still looks like a US-centric phenomenon.»³²

Conclusion

At the end of my career as business (and economic) historian I am puzzled, not to say worried, about the future of our discipline. During the last few decades we have tremendously improved BH's reach and the quality of its teaching, research and publications. It is even possible that during the last two or three decades we have improved more than during all the previous years taken together. But our institutional influence and the demand for our products have not kept pace with this growth in scholarly quality. While business schools and

³² Nuria Puig to H.G.S., e-mail dated 01 May 2014.

departments of economics and history were expanding in numbers of students and teaching personnel, BH (and economic history) stagnated or was cut back. Colleagues of my generation are usually quite content with their personal situation (and with good reason), but the younger generation cannot and should not be. The end of the Cold War in the 90s seemed to have settled the question of which political-economic system was superior, and with that resolution general political support for BH in particular and economic history in general has dwindled in the West. But all other questions – about growth, success, legitimacy and so on – are still on the table. The well-being of academic disciplines is indeed related to the political environment. And that environment is malleable. A revitalization of BH is indeed possible if we mobilize our discipline's energy and imagination to convince political decision-makers as well as students and the public at large that what BH has to offer society is attractive, useful, important and even necessary. I envisage that such a mobilization would start with two steps: a discussion to what extent the presentation here describes the situation in one's own country; and a debate on how to improve the existing situation. If my contribution helps to these ends, I would be entirely happy.

Address of the author: Prof. Dr. Harm G. Schröter, University of Bergen, AHKR, 5010 Bergen, Norway, harm.schroter@uib.no

Appendix I

**Opinion poll on Business History (BH) amongst
EBHA-members**

Just set a cross, please!

My country is _____

(Please, think of the last 10-15 years)

Business History (BH)

A) In general BH became more important

	<u>agree</u>	<u>neutral</u>	<u>disagree</u>
more in quantity			
more Prof.s			
more researchers			
more students			
more bachelors			
more masters			
more PhD.s			

B) BH became better in quality

better books			
better in teaching			
better methods			
better questions			
better			

Yourself

	<u>agree</u>	<u>neutral</u>	<u>disagree</u>
I do like			
I have not			
I would like			
I would like			

I would like to teach more			
sometimes I can combine			
for supplementin			

I cooperate with colleagues

	agree	neutral	disagree
outside my			
In my			

I have support from

own assistant	students	secretary
--	--	--

I work at a

Dept. of History	Business School	elsewhere	free

Own further remarks:

Thank you!

Appendix II

Questionnaire for distinguished persons

I know you are very busy, but may I ask you a favor anyway?

I need your help with information on your country on the last 10-15 years.

How would you describe the emergence and situation of research in Business History in your country?

Key-words you may think of:

Quantity

In absolute terms the situation is going: up - stagnating - down

(and in relation to other fields of research: up - stagnating - down)

Estimate on number of professorships before – today

(Own professorships on BH? Or BH as part of economic / social history?)

Estimate on number of emerging scholars before – today (PhD / after PhD)

Estimate on number of students before – today

Organization:

Own organization for BH? Own journal for BH? (for both: please write the name)

Allocation in Dept. of History, Business Schools or other Dept. or organizations?

Cluster of researchers one or two or more persons in a department?

Are there free-lance colleagues making their living by writing BH? Many?

Are there special enterprises offering commissioned business history? Many?

Were there waves of demand? (e.g. like 1990-2010 in Germany for BH on the Nazi-period)

Focus of research

Commissioned works – scholarly – less scholarly?

Chandlerian tradition?

Cliometric orientation?

Other approaches, topics and ways - which ones?