
In *Endless Novelty* Phil Scranton meaningfully relates such diverse phenomena as the fraternal “shop culture” of mid-nineteenth century machine shops, the style-conscious consumerism spawned by the manufacture and marketing of downmarket jewelry and upscale furniture around the turn of the century, the federal government’s shaping of mandated accounting standards and forbidden trade-governance tactics by the 1920s, and much else. Scranton’s achievement builds on his earlier monographs on Philadelphia’s textile industry, *Proprietary Capitalism* (Cambridge University Press, 1983) and *Figured Tapestry* (Cambridge University Press, 1989). There, Scranton treated Philadelphia’s labor, social, business, urban, and technological histories as a unified industrial history. Here, he extends this approach to a range of industries and a set of cities stretching from Providence to Philadelphia, and west to Chicago. This carefully researched, theoretically informed, and imaginatively structured book will command a broad readership.

Scranton’s central aim is to establish the strength, vitality and significance of specialty production as conducted by small and large firms. Three sections based on national census data (1890, 1909, 1923) make a powerful claim that specialty manufacturing accounted for perhaps half of the national’s total value added in manufacturing (p. 17), an equal share of employment, and economic growth second to none. Biographies of individual entrepreneurs, their firms and associations, and the associated development of industrial districts anchor this volume. In demonstrating these aims, he illuminates topics recently finding favor among business historians, especially those going beyond Alfred Chandler’s writings on managerial capitalism and the rise of big business.

Since specialty production formats were deployed by smaller textile firms, medium-size machinery manufactures, and even industrial giants like Baldwin Locomotive and Pullman, Scranton rejects such commonplace labels as “core” and “periphery,” or big and small business. More fundamental than size, he finds, was a set of specialist strategies quite distinct from the rationalization and standardization strategies that dominated the mass production industries. Instead of price competition driven by technology-fanned economies of speed and scale, specialists in furniture, textiles, and machine building adopted business strategies to limit price competition by keeping consumers focused on quality, style, and product innovation.

Endless novelty was not a formula for success, however, but a format for competition. Scranton’s close attention to the interconnections between the designing, manufacturing, marketing, wholesaling, and retailing of goods allows him to comprehend where the quest for endless novelty led to falling prices, falling profits, unstable employment and industrial misery (the fate of downmarket jewelry makers in the Providence region and, somewhat later, of textile manufacturers in Philadelphia) and where specialist strategies led to prosperous firms, steady employment, and sustained regional development. Manufacturers’ capacities for collective action, typically on a regional rather than national basis, figure in most of the successes. Specialist manufactures might sponsor annual
expositions to showcase novel goods and span the gap between manufacturers and buyers (as in Grand Rapids furniture), or they might sponsor labor exchanges to fill their own immediate needs and ensure that valuable skilled workers remained in the district (as in Cincinnati machine building). Lobbying governments, fighting unions, and forming manufacturers’ associations rounded out their collective actions. Less common were successful efforts to replenish skilled labor through educational initiatives, such as Worcester’s Polytechnic Institute, the University of Cincinnati’s pioneering cooperative courses, and Philadelphia’s Textile School.

Scranton’s richly textured studies of selected industries and cities can stand on their own (his footnotes are a gold mine). Yet his placing of these case studies into a comprehensive framework is even more impressive. At the core is his attempt to understand the dynamics of industrial districts (following leads gathered from Alfred Marshall, Jane Jacobs, and recent work in historical geography). To understand these dynamics Scranton proposes three sets of typologies, for manufacturing formats (specialty, batch, bulk, and mass production), industrial districts, and specialist firms. The latter, four-part typology does the most work. “Integrated anchors” were typically large, self-contained firms that practiced specialist strategies. Philadelphia’s Baldwin Locomotive, Chicago’s Pullman, and Providence’s upmarket Gorham Silver had the in-house resources to stand alone; some anchors like Cincinnati’s Lodge and Shipley fostered numerous start-up firms. “Network specialists” relied on the collective resources of an industrial district to achieve the range of technical competencies needed in that specific sector. In his earlier studies, Scranton found that Philadelphia textile manufacturers practiced an alternative to New England’s Lowell-style mills that vertically integrated the processes of carding, spinning, and weaving cotton textiles, literally putting them under one roof. Network specialists instead relied on contracting for the necessary tasks; the result was a spatially compact production format adaptable to rapid changes in output and style. Smaller, often highly focused “specialist auxiliaries” provided essential products and services. For instance, Manhattan’s publishers and printers relied on auxiliary book binders, type founders, engravers, and lithographers. “Bridge firms” spanned custom and bulk production. Significantly, both General Electric and Westinghouse maintained separate facilities for making staple goods (light bulbs) and custom goods (electrical machinery).

This volume presents a coherent and compelling alternative to the managerial capitalism and big business that has so dominated business history. Greater attention to the specialist-format underpinnings of the classic “mass production” industries would have strengthened Scranton’s efforts to “recast the history of the Second Industrial Revolution” (pp. 3, 6-8, 354). I suspect that the blending of custom and batch work (as in “bridge firms”) was surprisingly important for the chemical, automobile, petroleum, and steel industries.

Thomas J. Misa
Illinois Institute of Technology (Chicago)