

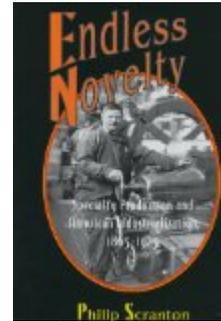
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip Scranton. *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xiv + 415 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-02973-3.

Reviewed by B. Zorina Khan (Bowdoin College)

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Philip Scranton's past research has illuminated our understanding of "proprietary capitalism," or a mode of production based on small artisanal shops and domestic manufactures. His current book explores the history of the Second Industrial Revolution from the perspective of specialty production, and is to be recommended as essential reading for anyone who wishes to fully understand the progress of American manufacturing after the Civil War. It is a densely structured, exhaustively detailed discussion of the role of custom and batch production in American industrialization in the pre-World War II period. Exhibitions such as the Centennial Exhibition in 1876 and the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 served to showcase these examples of American creativity and excellence in manufacturing. Scranton is persuasive in his view that useful business history requires the analysis of the enormously complex network of transactions that linked technology, marketing and employment, and that this objective is best achieved through the study of businesses in the "putative periphery."

He argues that although many consumers clearly value differentiation, uniqueness and quality, it is still necessary to emphasize the role of "Endless Novelty" for the benefit of students of industrial organization. American dominance in manufacturing is typically traced from the factories of Lowell, through the assembly lines of Ford, to the boardrooms of giant corporations that are held to be dependent on the mass production of standardized products. In the process, the implicit assumption is made that organizations evolve linearly from small scale, inefficient modes of production, to large productive enterprises that benefit from economies of scale and scope. Scranton argues that the relentless glare of the spotlight on the rise of the modern corporation has blinded re-

searchers to the role of specialty manufacturing. Part of their myopia is, he charitably concedes, due to the lack of systematic data and tidy modes of analysis that economists weight so heavily when deciding which topics are worthy of analysis. Scranton suggests that this area of industrial organization is more suited to the talents of historians, with their reverence for description and attention to details. This contention may be true, and one cannot refrain from admiration at the creative use of biography as metaphor, the masterly weaving of myriads of diverse examples to illustrate the main theme, the apt quote from a file extracted from a remote and hitherto unexplored archive. At the same time, this work likewise illustrates the danger of information overload that may arise in the absence of a cohesive theoretical superstructure of the sort that economic analysis provides.

Scranton does provide a coherent conceptual framework, by distinguishing between custom, batch, bulk and mass production methods. Custom and batch modes were flexible and directed towards changeable market demand; bulk and mass production arguably involved more routinized methods in stable markets. Scranton analyzes regional differences in the strategies and outcomes of specialty firms and contends that their importance increased over time, especially in the older trade centers of the Eastern Seaboard. The book also includes 23 tables drawn primarily from the manufacturing censuses that attempt to distinguish between classifications of specialty or mass production. But these data are not entirely informative because, as the author points out, his categories relate more to approaches than to specific institutions or sectors; for instance, specialty and mass production could be combined in a single firm. He contends that it is still possible to identify sectors that were dom-

inated by one or other approach, such as cigars, kitchen accessories, sewing machines and cheap watches (bulk and mass production), or carpets, leather goods, tools, hats and women's clothing (specialty). Historians of individual industries and firms are certain to contest these divisions. Because census divisions don't match Scranton's conceptual boundaries, the tables are of limited utility in assessing the quantitative importance of specialty production relative to other sectors of the economy, and how this changed over time. Nevertheless, one can hardly fail to be impressed with an account that ranges over 93 industries, and yields insights into the operations, functions, and characteristics of lace and carpet weavers, furniture-makers and jewellers; as well as assessing the activities of metalworkers in Connecticut, apparel designers in New York City, and fine chemicals in Philadelphia.

The book also includes numerous individual case studies, such as an account of George Corliss's career in the postbellum custom and machinery trades. Corliss, a skilled machine designer, used family connections to finance and market his inventions and patents. Many transactions depended on mutual trust between suppliers and clients. As a sole proprietor, Corliss did not delegate authority, and was a demanding but fair employer, who was able to ensure the quality and precision that specialty machine building required. Through the experiences of small machine-shop owners who created networks that intersected both the social and economic spheres, Scranton convincingly delineates the advantages of small scale production. Specialists adopted diverse modes of operation and, through innovative pricing and product differentiation, achieved both profitability and efficiency in

input and output markets. For instance, tool builders in Cincinnati, although they accounted for only a small fraction of national output, provided a highly reputable product in a trade where reliability was paramount, and were thus able to extract higher returns than their size might warrant. Still, specialty producers were not averse to fixing prices or acting collectively to increase their influence, so their profitability does not necessarily signal efficiency.

Scranton finds that even firms which entered the mass production market retained their specialist capabilities. Thus, mass production has never been fully achieved, for firms like Armour and American Tobacco employed specialist inputs. Rather than merely peripheral historical artifacts, the latter were critical to the process of industrialization. In the modern economy standardization may even be decreasing in relative importance as the business world becomes more complex and changeable. Making to order and eschewing large inventories, these firms are responsive to market demands and technological change. Technological change itself enhances the ability to tailor outcomes to individual tastes, such as software that can generate a wide variety of individualized musical compilations that can be recorded to disks. Now as much as then, American dominance in manufacturing depends on the individualism and creativity which Scranton's impressive book celebrates.

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