

Discussion

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In commenting on the studies by Messrs. Dolman, Pope and Ragsdale, I would like to discuss the three dissertations on three different levels: in the first place I want to consider how they illustrate some of the problems generic to business and economic history as the historian searches for an appropriate balance between that which is abstract, universal, and general, on the one hand, and that which is highly particular to a time and place and person, on the other. Secondly, I will mention some of the problems of context raised by the three studies. Finally, I will enumerate some of the positive contributions they make to our knowledge of business behavior in America during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

First, in regard to the balance between the particular and the universal, it appears to me that the three studies could be arrayed on a spectrum moving from the highly particular study of Kenneth Ragsdale, to the more generalized, statewide study of Bill Dolman, and thence, to the somewhat more abstract considerations of Daniel Pope's analysis of the advertising industry. Mr. Ragsdale does a superb job of placing me in the Big Bend country, of helping me understand exactly where his mining company was, and what, exactly, that location meant to the men who worked there and to their families. He has an authentic touch for the

country and the ability to convey his perceptions in effective prose. At the same time, his virtue becomes his defect, when he is unable to winnow out his information, to separate the important detail from the trivial bit of data; here, I think he suffers from the lack of a general sense of where his particular subject fits in a broader picture of Western economic development--or even in the quicksilver mining industry of which it was a major component. Mr. Dolman strikes a better balance, I believe, between the universal and the particular. He has inherited a very general interpretive framework from political history, and while one might raise some objections to that framework, it enables him to keep the reader's attention focused on general historical problems while the author develops a substantial body of detailed information to support his conclusions (in passing let me remark that Dolman's thesis and the other two dissertations as well are characterized by an impressive amount of research in both manuscript and secondary materials). Daniel Pope's study, drawing heavily upon economic theory, is the most general of the three, especially in its earlier sections. In his case the result is a very careful dissection of a variety of problems of causation and interpretation--but at the same time, this analysis frequently leaves the reader struggling to regain a sense of periodization and place. In part this is a data problem: the information for the middle of the 19th century is simply not available, and that pulls the researcher toward the end of his time period or

even beyond. In part, too, this is a problem of striking the proper balance between that which is time-place related and that which is abstract and in a sense above history.

Second, let me mention some problems of context raised by the three studies: These are least evident in Mr. Pope's dissertation; he has, actually, a series of contexts and the problem of bringing them together, but I would like to concentrate instead on the studies by Dolman and Ragsdale because both raise the same question. Both use a variant of the robber baron approach to business history. In Ragsdale's case, this leaves him condemning his main subject, Mr. Howard E. Perry; in Mr. Dolman's case, it leaves him attacking the corporations which robbed Texas and its people of their wealth in land. One could of course object to the question itself; it is after all a rather out-dated question; it is getting ragged around the edges from overuse, and I wonder if they could not come up with something inherently more imaginative than the question of whether businessmen were good guys or bad guys. One could also object to the question on the grounds that while it is basically a good question, it is binary, that is it only allows the historian two possibilities and is thus too simple to justify extended analysis. But today I would like to accept the question and suggest that both of these studies get the answers backwards. In the case of Mr. Ragsdale's Robber Baron, Howard E. Perry, I found a subject thoroughly to my liking. He inspired unbelievable loyalty in

other men. He was determined and tough. He was, admittedly, not above cheating when it looked as if he might get away with a bundle of cash. But I found it hard to see as a pirate a businessman who said: "If we dissect men we destroy them. We have to strike a balance and see if on the whole they are not good." In regard to Mr. Dolman's evaluation, my problem is that I cannot see the railroads as the enemy of the people; it appears to me that the railroads and people were on the same side, they all wanted to speculate, grow, get rich as fast as they could and with a minimum amount of trouble from the government--local, state or national. From the lowly surveyors to the Gunter and Munsen Co., to the New York and Texas Land Co, Ltd., and from them right back to the people who voted the various public officials into office--all seemed engaged in a common enterprise called "making it in America." Some were better (or worse) than others. Some were stronger (or weaker) than others. But I can not see the relevance of a simple progressive or liberal moral standard in a society which by his own evidence was highly amoral about its seemingly unlimited resources in land. There was, in short, no clash of public and private interests.

Third and finally, let me enumerate a few of the ways which these three interesting dissertations add to our knowledge of nineteenth and twentieth century business behavior in America. Mr. Pope's dissertation was particularly interesting to me

because of the manner in which he demonstrated a decisive shift in the advertising industry at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Furthermore, he isolates as the major cause of that shift the changes taking place among the national advertisers of brand-name goods. This, I think, adds to a growing body of analysis which focuses on this period of transition as one which was fundamental to the structure of America's industrial economy. At the same time, Mr. Ragsdale reminds us that the economy was changing unevenly, in a series of frontiers, to use his expression. While U.S. Steel was being organized on the East Coast, they were using unbelievably primitive forms of transportation in the Big Bend mining country. While eastern skilled laborers may have been thinking about union, there were also laborers like those Mexicans in the Chisos Company's mines who were light years away from a trade union movement (as they still may be today). Finally, Mr. Dolman's dissertation provides me with powerful evidence of how all-pervading business or capitalistic values were in late nineteenth-century America. This is a theme which Professor Thomas Cochran has developed in a number of publications, and I think Dolman's study offers strong evidence in support of Cochran's basic contention that America was above all a business-oriented society in which business activity and the business point-of view were major forces shaping our most fundamental institutions. While there were deep-rooted conflicts of interest and while rapid change

generated great tensions, most Americans seem to have been agreed about the nature and the objectives of their society.