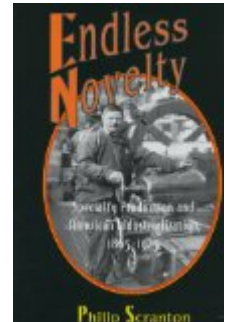


Philip Scranton. *Endless Novelty: Specialty Production and American Industrialization, 1865-1925.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xiv + 415 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-02973-3.



Reviewed by Matthew W. Roth

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Moving outward from his well-known studies of Philadelphia textile production to a broader geographic and industrial base, Philip Scranton offers a wide-ranging interpretation of the Second Industrial Revolution in his new book, *Endless Novelty*. Scranton focuses on the production of machinery (machine tools and electrical equipment), styled consumer goods (fashion textiles, jewelry and silverware, furniture), rolling stock (Baldwin locomotives and Pullman cars) and the printing and publishing trades. Presenting the various enterprises in their respective urban contexts, the narrative starts in Philadelphia during the 1870s and then proceeds in sequence to Providence, New York, Cincinnati and Grand Rapids through the 1880s. For the period 1893-1912 we revisit all these cities, with additional side trips to the Pullman works outside Chicago and the large specialty production shops of General Electric (Schenectady) and Westinghouse (near Pittsburgh). A long concluding chapter examines the course of batch and specialty production through World War I, the postwar recession, and the regulatory skirmishes of the 1920s.

In a successful effort to provide readers with a broader understanding of industrial economy and society, Scranton interprets batch and specialty producers as alternatives to Chandlerian throughput enterprises (see Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand*). He draws on national census data to establish a context of significance for batch production: it was roughly comparable to routinized production in terms of employment, revenues, and value-added in manufacturing. Avoidance of price-based competition was the Holy Grail for batch producers, who sought to elevate novel design or product quality above purely dollar-based considerations in the marketplace. Mass producers shared this fundamental strategy of averting excessive price-cutting, but their tactics differed. Mass producers attempted to eliminate uncertainty by dominating their markets, while batch producers creatively adapted to circumstances they could not control. The core of the book consists of Scranton's exceptional insights into the myriad adaptations developed by batch producers, including methods of accounting and

shop-floor control, customer relations, and choices in production technology.

Scranton makes a valuable contribution by suggesting fundamental patterns among batch and specialty producers. As a result, we can begin to think about them as something other than subordinate or marginal enterprises that fall outside the putative mainstream of big business. Scranton identifies three main categories of manufacturers among those that did not exclusively pursue routinized production and mass marketing of standardized goods.

The first category, "integrated anchors," includes two sub-types. Large "bridge" firms combined massive throughput in some lines with the skill-based production of highly specialized goods in others. General Electric serves as a "bridge" prototype, with its light-bulb factories pumping out product that numbered in the millions while other plants meticulously made high-priced goods such as steam turbines and electrical generators. The second group of integrated anchors encompassed all phases of production in a specialty sector. Providence's Gorham Silver exemplifies this group: a medium-sized producer that integrated backward into primary metals processing and also pursued in-house the full range of craft and industrial skills demanded by its diverse lines of goods.

Scranton's second major category of batch producers consists of the "networked specialists"--producers of similar (though not identical) goods, usually linked as well by close proximity. The furniture trade in Grand Rapids and machine tools in Cincinnati both exhibit the crucial characteristics that Scranton identifies for this category. In each case, without a dominant player setting their course, a dozen or more medium-sized firm cooperated across a range of functions. They set up multi-firm trade shows for marketing. They negotiated as a united front with shippers. They collaborated in labor strategies such as jointly funding institutions for training workers and maintaining

sectoral unity against workers' activism. The third category, the "specialist auxiliaries," provided goods and services to other producers and solidified sectoral competence on a metropolitan scale.

Endless Novelty takes a central place in the efforts to complement the historiography of big business that might as well be called the Chandler School. Recent efforts by Mansel Blackford, Jonathan Bean, and others have outlined the contours of small-business history in America, and now Scranton offers a conceptualization of the vast middle ground between truly big and genuinely small. By taking in the specialty businesses of vast enterprises such as General Electric, as well as extending the model to fit the numerous, mostly small, "specialist auxiliaries," Scranton also points toward an encompassing, operations-based approach that addresses business large, small and in-between. As often happens in pioneering studies, the demands of revisionism sometimes extend the argument unnecessarily. These illuminating observations regarding batch producers cannot replace Chandlerian analyses of how certain sectors spawned large, oligopolistic, market-controlling firms and how their methods of management made those firms tremendously durable. Scranton studies sectors and firms that do not fit that model. He is correct in stressing that both approaches are necessary for a comprehensive understanding of American industrial and business history.

Endless Novelty also addresses, to varying degrees, the history of technology and urban history. The metaphorical power of the Ford assembly line might make historians of technology particularly vulnerable to the fallacy of reading the past backward from a known result, such as describing the lack of mass-production technology in nineteenth-century woodworking as a "failure."^[1] Scranton exposes rational decision making among woodworking firms that seriously undermines such observations: the markets for fashion-sensitive styled goods, such as furniture, rewarded produc-

ers who creatively utilized highly adaptable, skill-based production processes. We might also infer from Scranton that the "flexible mass production" at General Motors in the 1920s had a number of precedents among the metal-using industries and was not simply a response to and elaboration of Fordism. Despite his fresh perspective, the author misses a few opportunities to connect with his predecessors. Nathan Rosenberg's venerable but still cogent observations on the machine-tool industry are, strangely, absent from the book. Scranton's emphasis on product diversity might seem at first to contradict Rosenberg's thesis of technological convergence, in which tool builders applied solutions devised for one set of clients to the problems of other sectors. Scranton also discerns, however, the practice of standardizing sub-assemblies within a strategy of client-specific product specifications. Perhaps others will explore the fruitful line of inquiry that would incorporate both the Scranton and the Rosenberg views in a new reading of the complex and influential machine-tool sector.

Scranton offers a tentative typology of industrial cities, informed principally by Jane Jacobs's idiosyncratic writings on urban economies. He means to start a discussion, not end one, and in that light there is little to fault. He is correct to suggest that distinguishing among types of industrial cities makes an excellent point to initiate dialogue between business history and urban history. Too much of the historiography of American cities begins with the idea that industrial growth produced a monolithic urbanization, which then becomes the focus of study.[2] It is legitimate for Scranton to leave to others the job of bringing business history more fully into engagement with the contributions of such urban scholars as Eric Monkkonen, Allen Scott, and Henri Lefebvre.[3] When they do, Scranton's work on institution building by groups of specialty manufacturers should be part of the synthesis.

As these last comments suggest, Scranton succeeds admirably in the goal of connecting the stories of shop floors and cluttered offices with broader themes in American history. Gender and masculinity? Scranton points out how that literature has not yet mined the promising topic of shop culture. Consumerism and the rise of consumer society? Scranton fills in the all-important story of where diverse consumer goods came from, and notes as well how the historiography of retail enterprise has not extended into the wholesaling dynamics that connected producers with the venues of consumption. The list of issues that radiate out from this work could go on much longer.

In sum, *Endless Novelty* deserves to be read not only by historians of business but also by all scholars whose interests touch on the workings of the American economy. It is lively, engaging, admirably researched and rich in biography and incident. The author has challenged the reigning paradigm that all industrial enterprises must be wedged into the polar categories of Chandlerian large or something else small. Thanks to Scranton, we have a new third alternative.

(The reviewer thanks Professor Edwin Perkins (USC) for sharing his thoughts on the book and for his comments on the first draft of this review.)

Notes:

[1]. David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production*. (Baltimore, 1984), p. 57.

[2]. This notion was indeed present at the creation of modern urban history, as in Samuel P. Hays, *Response to Industrialism*. (Chicago, 1959).

[3]. Eric Monkkonen, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns, 1780-1980* (Berkeley, 1988); Allen J. Scott, *Metropolis: From the Division of Labor to Urban Form*. (Berkeley, 1988); among the works of Lefebvre now translated into English, see especially "Indus-

trialization and Urbanization" in Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, trans. and eds., Henri Lefebvre, Writings on Cities_. (Oxford, 1996).

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