

**Charles F. Sabel, Jonathan Zeitlin, eds..** *World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. x + 510 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-49555-4.



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The essays gathered in this collection build upon the ideas presented more than a decade ago in Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin's influential article "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production".[1] Indeed the arguments laid out then bear so significantly upon this collection that some recapitulation is in order. Based in large part on Sabel and Michael Piore's earlier work, that 1985 essay emphasized the persistence of small firms in "advanced" industrial societies as well as the economic success of "flexible" firms using multi-purpose machines and skilled labor to make specialized products for niche markets. Moreover, Sabel and Zeitlin expanded upon those observations and launched a broader attack on some of the more fundamental tenets of the economic historiography of industrialization. Foremost among their objectives was to reconsider the received wisdom elaborated by such prominent authors as David Landes and Alfred Chandler who, it was argued, privileged the role played by mass production in the development of the modern industrial economies. The explanatory power of the mass production model of industrialization, Sabel and Zeitlin wrote at the time, was weakened by a

number of historical inconsistencies, including the obvious persistence of small firms using batch-production techniques. They also questioned the dominant assumption that self-interest and economic rationality ultimately determined economic decision-making and industrial development rather than political institutions or cultural predispositions. Indeed the mass production factory-based model, Sabel and Zeitlin concluded, was "merely a restatement of what happened, not the summary expression of an inevitable logic of interest and efficiency."

In contrast to what they perceived to be an overly-deterministic model, Sabel and Zeitlin repeatedly emphasized a "many-worlds history of industrialization" that shifted attention toward a more protean approach to technological development, an approach based principally upon the recognition that a "craft alternative" continued to thrive in "industrial districts." These districts developed a self-reinforcing dynamic. In them, small firms used highly skilled labor and adopted new technology; they were as likely to cooperate as they were to compete; and they successfully pro-

duced a wide range of products for a variety of differentiated markets. Moreover, these districts constructed an alternative community of sentiments in which children brought up to a trade acquired a set of tacit rules governing their conduct. These rules promoted forms of "fair" competition at the same time that they attached moral sanctions to destructive economic behavior. Therefore, these districts tended to be characterized by hitherto unrecognized forms of collaboration both between employers and employees and among the small firms themselves.

Such a wide-ranging thesis did not go unchallenged, of course. The flexible specialization model in general drew criticism from those who argued that it did not adequately characterize the nature of mass production, that it misrepresented the effects of small-scale specialization on labor, and that it replaced one set of teleological assumptions with another.

Generally, the essays presented in this collection do not attempt to directly respond to these criticisms. Instead they seek to amplify and elaborate the historical and institutional contexts within which the "craft alternative" was tried and tested. Moreover, the articles are discursively located within Sabel and Zeitlin's alternative reading of the history of western economic development that was also briefly suggested in their original article. At that time, Sabel and Zeitlin had offered a "reconceptualization" of the industrialization process that emphasized the fact that the history of mechanization was not necessarily the history of throughput. They proposed instead a tripartite historical schema and it is roughly this periodization that informs this collection. Thus the first essays in this collection focus on why and how some regional ancien regime industries adapted and survived through the means of flexible specialization to changing markets and competition; a middle group of essays, roughly covering the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, illustrates the struggles that took place in several sec-

tors between models of mass production and those of flexible specialization; and a final group emphasizes the contemporary success of several flexibly-specialized industrial sectors.

The essays on late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century manufacturing constitute some of the most compelling case studies in the book as well as nearly one-half of its bulk. Taken together they investigate not only the adaptability of several trades to both changing markets and technology, but perhaps more significantly emphasize the social, political, and institutional foundations for their relative success. The exceptionally interesting essays by Alain Cottureau and Beatrice Veyrasat adopt comparative approaches that highlight the sources of the flexible specialization's competitive advantage over mass production techniques. Under conditions of what Cottureau has called "collective manufacture," (p. 82) institutional practices and social relations developed that both shared risks and tamed competition among both domestic workers and manufacturers. One such institution, whose essential importance remains largely understudied, was the mutually-respected price-list ("tarif" in France and "Preisverzeichnis" in Germany), but there were others including the important regulatory functions performed by the Conseil de Prud'hommes in France or more local organizations such as the Societe d'emulation patriotique in the Swiss canton of Neuchatel. These institutions, it is argued, reflect a corporate or collective response to competitive pressures that ensured the viability of craft production and facilitated a flexible approach to production through negotiation rather than conflict. Moreover, their survival apparently contradicts the so-called "British model of industrialization" not only in terms of the advent and introduction of mechanization, but also in terms of its assumed structural supports of private property, free trade, and "cynical individualism" (p. 107). These arguments, it should be added, are extended in different ways in the contributions of Carlo Poni on Lyons silk merchants and Rudolf Boch on the

Solingen cutlery trades. When taken together, these essays may serve not only to draw attention to the distance that separated the ideological thrust of the British model, or more accurately the Lancashire cotton-spinning model, from contemporary practice but also to stimulate further research into that model's own historical viability.

The second set of essays, on the conflict between mass production and flexibly-specialized systems, elaborates the ways in which individual sectors responded to both the threat and temptation of de-skilling, the adoption of single-purpose machinery, and the cultivation of mass markets. The contributions here, including those by Alain Dewerpe on the Italian engineering firm Ansaldo, Zeitlin on British engineering, and Peer Hull Kristensen and Sabel on Danish dairy cooperatives, are highlighted by Philip Scranton's sparkling essay on American textile manufacturing. Rather than succumb to the idea that there is an "immanent logic to historical change" (p. 342), Scranton emphasizes the "situational particularities" (*ibid.*) that characterized different sectors of the trade and which led some branches to adopt mass production and others batch production techniques. Not only does Scranton outline the comparative risks and advantages to both bulk and batch production, he also attempts to establish the fact that different branches of the industry exhibited relatively coherent "clusterings of decisions" (p. 313) on a wide variety of issues including finance, marketing, management, and labor relations. Such attempts to delineate a spectrum of industrial possibilities are similarly characteristic of Zeitlin's contribution, which argues that British engineering firms "selectively adapted" to mass production techniques giving rise to hybrid forms, and Dewerpe's interesting case study of the ways in which the same firm adopted both craft and mass production methods under different market and political conditions.

The final group of essays emphasizes three regional success stories of flexible specialization:

Vittorio Capecchi on the Bologna packaging industry, Jean Saglio on the transition from comb-making to the plastics industry in Oyonnax, France, and Hakon With Andersen on Norwegian shipping, brokerage, and insurance. They share as well an emphasis on the importance of social and institutional linkages that served to share information, encourage collaboration, and reduce risks. In the case of Bologna, Capecchi argues that the Bolognese packaging industry developed first as an "industrial subsystem" (p. 393) of engineering through the creation of a multitude of new firms from one "mother" firm, relying on both indigenous skills and local university talent. For Norway, Andersen discusses the creation of links between many small "frontline" shipping and shipbuilding firms and "supporting" groups, such as brokers and insurers. Through the creation of a complex of marketing and sales organizations, certification and classification organizations, shipbuilders' associations, collaborative research projects, and the like, small Norwegian shipping firms from the north-west were able to compete with large-scale integrated firms by sharing information. Finally, Saglio's essay is most notable for its innovative attempt to understand the situational rationality of local actors as they comprehend the ways in which their trade and local society functions as well as their own place in the scheme of things.

These essays, therefore, are a welcome contribution to the historical debate that began with the publication of Sabel and Zeitlin's article in 1985. They attempt to extend our knowledge in several critical areas as well as offer a nuanced approach to the way in which the industrialization process needs to be understood. Naturally, in a project of this scope some discordant elements creep in. For example, there seems to be a relatively weak consensus on the precise nature of mass production, many authors preferring to adopt alternative terms such as "serial production," "routinization," or "standardized production." Similarly, the fundamental dynamism of the "industrial district" is

replaced at times with alternative classificatory schemes such as the "industrial subsystem" or the "collective manufacture." Finally, the editors themselves, in a relatively brief introduction, appear to be pushing the argument in newer directions, towards the understanding of economic history both as a postmodern narrative project and as a rule-making process. Such arguments may not immediately resonate among economic historians, and indeed deserve to be pushed further, but they may very well help to refashion the questions they ask.

Note

[1]. *Past & Present*, No. 108, August 1985, pp. 133-76.

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