

INTERVIEWS: NSB

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Harvard Univ 2005  
 Entrepreneurial history  
 November 8, 1956  
 (Cambridge, Mass. - dinner)

Some support for certain of these  
 views in Europe

Research Center in Entrepreneurial History, Harvard University

Present: Arthur H. Cole  
 Arthur Smithies  
 Oscar Handlin  
 Alexander Gerschenkron  
 Fritz Redlich  
 Bernard Bailyn  
 Frederic C. Lane (Visiting Professor from Johns Hopkins University)  
 A. J. Meyer

This was a dinner meeting set up by Arthur Cole probably as a consequence of NSB's earlier conversation with Gerschenkron, when NSB argued that the expiration of the RF grant to the Research Center created a problem because Cole was retiring and that entrepreneurial history was essentially a projection of Cole's interests and personality. Who would carry on?

Cole made no effort to set the pitch for the after dinner discussion, so NSB felt it was his task to make the evening something more than social. In order to start discussion NSB raised the following questions:

- 1) What was likely to be the main drift in economic history over the next decade or so, granted that economic history had had a kind of renaissance in recent years?
- 2) What, more narrowly, would or should be the future of economic history at Harvard in the foreseeable future?

The discussion also embraced two other questions fairly quickly, which NSB also posed:

- 1) Was there a shortage of economic historians in the sense that there were jobs for economic historians which Harvard was unable to supply?
- 2) In the training of economic historians was there a strong case for clustering graduate training and research at perhaps one or two places on the grounds that (a) a single economic historian in a good graduate department of economics is a lonely fellow because economists regard him as an historian and historians as an economist, and (b) that research in economic history requires a large outlay in library research materials and/or foreign travel for the economic historian to do his research.

Naturally no sharply pin-pointed answers to these questions resulted, but the following points were made in the course of a lively discussion lasting about

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Research Center in Entrepreneurial History - continued

two hours:

1) A feeling that economic development, or more broadly economic growth, was fast becoming a focal point or a unifying theme for economic historians. Admittedly, however, there was very little work going on in the economic history of Latin America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, or even India. In Japan the case was much better.

2) A consensus that economic history was growing closer to economics and away from history in that it was basic economic themes which gave orientation to studies in economic history, e.g., migration and population movements, urbanization and industrialization, capital accumulation and economic specialization, etc..

Parenthetically here the point seemed to be accepted that area centers produced little that was worthwhile until the problems of the area were approached from the angle of particular social science disciplines such as economics, political science, sociology, history, etc..

Gerschenkron was emphatic, however, in contending that an approach to area problems on an ad lib basis from the disciplines would not give nearly as good results as a center with a research program and cited the Russian Research Center as proof. Against this it was pointed out that in Far Eastern studies at Harvard it was John K. Fairbank working alone who had created the field, i.e., it grew out of his own interests and was not created.

3) There seemed to be some consensus that the argument for clustering economic history in research and graduate training was a strong one. At the same time most people felt that to remove economic history from most graduate schools in economics would be unfortunate. NSB would agree with this but all the same would feel from RF's point of view the cluster would have to be the main basis for support.

4) Very little emerged on the question of what to do with economic history at Harvard, although A. J. Meyer made a few feeble attempts to argue for entrepreneurial history as a good approach. So did Gerschenkron. But NSB felt that Oscar Handlin and Bernard Bailyn were only lukewarm on this.

A good discussion even if no solution!