

Paloma Fernández Pérez and Andrea Colli (Eds.). *The Endurance of Family Businesses: A Global Overview*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013. 288 págs., ISBN: 978-1-107-03775-5.

As with many edited collections, this volume is mixed in the nature and quality of the chapters. This might seem a problem but the consequence is that almost all scholars with an interest in “family businesses” will find high quality contributions that match their interests. Therefore, I apologize if my review seems to emphasize some of the areas where the book could have been better. (I will drop the quotation marks around “family business” but note that I find the expression to be too vague to be of much scientific value.)

The title of the book hints at, though it does not explicitly promise, an historical approach. It does promise to be “global.” The introduction also states that the book aims to be “global, longitudinal, and interdisciplinary” (p. 4). These aims are consistent with the commendable recognition in the volume of the diversity of family businesses. In some regards the book succeeds in these aims. It is indeed interdisciplinary; it covers non-Anglo American firms; it has several historically oriented chapters. Moreover, these aims are very ambitious, so failing to fully succeed in meeting them is not a cause for dismay.

In my view the book is at its best when it takes an historical approach. Perhaps the most compelling chapter is that by Professor of History and International Affairs Harold James (Chapter 3). However, the Introduction, co-authored by the editors Paloma Fernández Pérez and Andrea Colli, and Chapter 4 by the historian Colli alone, also contain much of value. These chapters are relatively broad and theoretical, whereas two other chapters (5 and 7) are more inclined to take a more typical historian’s perspective and focus closely on very specific matters (dynastic firms in Sweden and new multinationals from Spain respectively). A challenge for these chapters is to be convincing in their generalizations about specific firms, let alone about implications about broader themes, given the broad purview of companies covered. In my view, Chapter 7 by Guillén and García-Canal is more successful in this endeavor.

Although the authors’ disciplinary backgrounds are varied, further developments could follow from contributions from other disciplines, two in particular. An earlier study of mine found that three disciplines, poorly represented in family business studies, could be of considerable value: law, anthropology, and history (the only one of these represented in the volume). Legal contexts are often noted as important contextual factors to explain the prevalence and endurance, yet there are no legal scholars represented. Similarly, chapters focus on culture (Chapter 6) and refer in their title to “kinship” (Chapter 8). However, the former does not refer to anthropology and the latter does not in fact discuss kinship. (It is, rather, an overview of work by financial economists.)

In many ways the volume reflects the current state of the family business field. Chapter 2 includes an effort to define what the term “family business” means, but consensus is lacking on what is meant by the term (p. 3), a problem this does not stop the authors from referring to management, ownership, or organization all in the same argument. Another common feature is a back-and-forth depiction of the liabilities and the benefits of kinship involvement in business (e.g. Chapters 3, 4, 7, 8, 11). Yet another common feature of the current scholarship is a tendency to dichotomize the world into “family” and “non-family” firms with little effort to provide needed contextualization. James’s chapter (p. 65) provides an example of the recognition of the limitations of this approach, in contrast with specifying the role of specific variables (in this case, firm age).

The volume does not only discuss the longitudinal dimension of firms themselves, but also attends to the development of scholarship in the field (especially in Chapter 1, but also Chapter 9). Moreover, it provides suggestions about topics needing further research and reflection (as in Chapters 4 and 8). As these contributions suggest, the intended audience for the volume is largely that of scholars conducting research or developing theory in this field. For this audience the volume is a valuable addition to the literature.

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