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**Special Issue: Chronologies, Periods and Events in  
Management and Business History**

|                  |                                      |
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## **Journal of Management History**

### **Special Issue: Chronologies, Periods and Events in Management and Business History**

I take pleasure in presenting this Special Issue of *JMH* focusing on chronologies, periods and events in Management and Business History. The nature of history means that all the events and periods we study are typically ordered into chronologies, often divided down into periods and events; these six papers highlight management and organizational phenomena that have in some way been defined by the periods in which they manifested themselves. All of them illustrate organizations or industries passing through particular ‘change points’, or critical evolutions, which would in some way alter the character of the industry while also presenting important continuities. It is worth briefly reflecting on the concepts of chronology and periodization, and how they characterize the topic, before we embark on the papers of the SI.

The study of history is defined by the western perception of time, which necessitates chronology, and an implicit understanding that the state of the world is constantly changing and evolving, irrevocably. Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker (2014) highlight the peculiar role that chronology plays in history – for historians it is not just that events follow each other, but that they have a distinct social and economic context without which they cannot be easily understood. Further, in practical terms one research agenda is unlikely to be able to deal concisely with the totality of history. This encourages the convenient bookending of history into manageable chunks, known as periods (Jordanova, 2006). These periods may simply relate to a convenient chunk of time, such as a century or particular decade, but for

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3 analytical purposes they are likely to be characterised by incremental change yet at  
4 the same time a particular structural or institutional continuity, such as ‘the long  
5 nineteenth century’ (Hobsbawm, 1962, 1975, 1987) running from 1789-1914 (or  
6 1918), the French Revolution being seen as the point at which the Ancient Regime  
7 was decisively challenged, and bookended by the First World War. Management and  
8 business histories, which do not always relate directly to political history often  
9 appropriate these chunks of time in which institutional stability may be observed.  
10 Further, histories are often presented as periods running between two particular crises  
11 or change points which act as bookends. But yet this approach surely discourages us  
12 from actually focusing upon the change points themselves, which could be a revealing  
13 use of history for scholars interested in fields where adversity is important, such as  
14 change management, strategic management, and entrepreneurship?  
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29 Such change points are often defined by exogenous political, social, economic,  
30 technological, cultural, legal or even environmental changes. They are often further  
31 defined by their particular temporal and spatial dimensions – they may be as short as  
32 1-2 years or even a few months, yet may also run to as many as 5-6 years or more,  
33 and they might be confined to one particular geographical area, city, country,  
34 continent, sphere of influence, or even encompass the whole world. They may include  
35 all encompassing events such as military conflicts – particularly the First and Second  
36 World wars, but perhaps also periods of diplomatic conflict, such as the start and end  
37 of the Cold War. They may alternatively be major economic shocks, such as the Wall  
38 Street Crash of 1929, the Oil Crisis of 1973-4, or the Sub-Prime crisis of 2007-8.  
39 Periods of rapid socio-economic change may also be turning points – the British  
40 1960s, for instance saw the abolition of Resale Price Maintenance in 1964 (Tennent,  
41 2013), before the introduction of Corporation Tax in 1965 (Mollan and Tennent,  
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3 2015), the Sterling crisis of 1966-67 (Schenk, 2010), and a programme of government  
4 sponsored economic modernisation designed to encourage industrial development  
5  
6 (Owen, 1999); all of these things together wrought major changes to the business  
7 environment. This is even before considering the impact of social-cultural change,  
8  
9 such as the creation of the teenager as a distinct category and falling birthrates  
10 (Marwick, 1998). Arguably, these changes hastened the end of gentlemanly  
11  
12 capitalism and ushered in a new, more consumerist yet managerially aware era in  
13  
14 which the post-war consensus between management and labour started to break down.  
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16 Such exogenous change points, which may be characterised as ‘revolutions’, often see  
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18 several events take place together which undermine established cultures or routines  
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20 within business and management encouraging or perhaps even forcing a managed  
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22 response.  
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### 33 **The Papers**

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37 I will briefly introduce the papers individually before considering them in a  
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39 thematic sense.  
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42 Perhaps the most ambitious paper presented in terms of scope is James  
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44 Wilson’s application of deconstructionist theory to the historical development of  
45  
46 operations management theory, an area of study which has cosmetically reinvented  
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48 itself several times, most notably after its professionalization in response to demands  
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50 for ‘scientific’ rigour inspired by the work of Buffa (1961), Skinner (1969) and  
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52 Orlicky (1975) in the 1960s which seemed to redefine operations management as an  
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54 activity for the executive suite not the factory floor. Yet, Wilson points to striking  
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3 continuities stretching back to the era of Taylor and before, or at least rediscoveries of  
4 old knowledge, for instance occurrences of 'lean production' known as 'hand-to-  
5 mouth' buying in the 1910s and 1920s. Inevitably similar concerns continue to  
6 influence the field even as it refocuses itself on supply chain management in service  
7 dominated economies, and splits off project management, one of its earliest concerns,  
8 as a separate discipline. A sense emerges that Wilson sees much new theory as a  
9 rebranding exercise, designed to 'see off' exogenous threats to the discipline's  
10 survival, while in reality preserving its core essence.

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Simon Mollan's paper on free-standing company theory also focuses on  
theoretical matters, though he calls for greater empirical engagement. The free-  
standing company concept was a post-hoc attempt by Mira Wilkins (1988, 1998) to  
categorise a tranche of British overseas extractive companies that appeared not to fit  
the template of the conventional multinational enterprise. Given that these companies  
mostly emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and mostly seemed to ebb away after the end  
of the first great era of globalisation around the First World War, this theory also  
seems to constitute a sort of post-hoc periodisation. Mollan suggests however that the  
imposition of this template onto many thousands of separate business enterprises has  
resulted in an 'ahistorical theoretical object', which lacks ability to explain change  
over time. Thus free-standing companies are rendered a 'zombie category', which  
has acted to stall historical research, with negative consequences for the international  
management discipline.

Focusing more directly on British management history around the First World  
War, Chris Corker draws on research from his Coleman Prize winning thesis to  
examine the experience of Sheffield armaments companies in the 1920s as they  
struggled to adapt to the new reality of peacetime and disarmament. This perhaps

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3 inevitably led to retrenchment and rationalisation, but Corker demonstrates that the  
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5 companies were extremely slow to adjust their strategies to the slowdown in  
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7 government orders, with no real attempt to diversify their activities; indeed it took  
8  
9 some years of losses before the companies responded. This case study reminds us that  
10  
11 the boundaries of historical periods are imperceptible to those who live through them  
12  
13 – even where it was rational to adjust strategy to a radical paradigm change, the end  
14  
15 of the Great War, actors often appear to be slow to respond or even perhaps aloof  
16  
17 from change.  
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21 Nicholas Burton's paper looks at a reverse situation to Corkers' in that it  
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23 studies an industry which was actively benefitting from new government policy, as  
24  
25 the Thatcher government sought to de-regulate saving for retirement in 1980s Britain.  
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27 Oral history is used to interview people active in the industry at the time, to discover  
28  
29 the impacts that de-regulation had on actual product design. Modularity (Schilling,  
30  
31 2000), an idea from systems theory, is used as a lens to understand both changes  
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33 through time but also through hierarchy, including how changes from the demand and  
34  
35 regulatory level influenced product design. Burton's paper is thus methodologically  
36  
37 interesting as it maps changes in the industry across two dimensions. Its conclusion  
38  
39 that this interplay drove the industry became more 'modular' over time as value  
40  
41 chains vertically disintegrated demonstrates that we should not assume periods to be  
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43 homogenous blocks of time, but rather than they can be characterised by complex  
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45 evolution over time, often characterised by twists and turns that make conventional  
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47 narrative employment challenging.  
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51 Laura Singleton's paper, which focuses on the US urban crisis of the 1960s,  
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53 demonstrates the extent to which social circumstances could also impact business.  
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55 Singleton demonstrates that racial tensions in dozens of US cities led to an eruption of  
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3 violence in the summer of 1967; this caused concern significant enough for Corporate  
4 America to cooperate with the mayors of cities including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago  
5 and Detroit to form the National Urban Coalition, supported by companies as high  
6 profile as Chase Manhattan Bank, Time Inc., General Electric and Ford Motor, to  
7 form a National Urban Coalition. This was followed by another body, the National  
8 Alliance of Businessmen, which attempted to work with industry to create new long  
9 term jobs for people from deprived areas. Both bodies ran into difficulty by the early  
10 1970s however, partly because they relied to a large extent on the voluntary part-time  
11 participation of executives, and partly because of a shortage of local goodwill coupled  
12 with intuitional weakness. Both bodies survived until the 2000s, but lacking support  
13 from the highest profile companies, degenerated into localised coalitions. The events  
14 of 1967 appeared to have ushered in a new period of Corporate Social Responsibility,  
15 driven by the urgency of the crisis but this proved to be a false dawn for companies  
16 and communities alike. Periods of crisis can undoubtedly open up new historical  
17 periods, but they may not ultimately have the entirely hopeful outcomes that actors  
18 hoped for.

19  
20 Alex Gillett and Kevin Tennent also consider the interplay between business  
21 and society in perhaps one of the most social of industries – association football, or  
22 soccer. Focusing on the 1980s struggles of an English football club in a declining  
23 industrial area, Middlesbrough AFC, they use the theory of institutional logics to  
24 develop a new ‘institutional logic of professional sport’. To do this they explore the  
25 attempts of the local authority to save the club, important to Middlesbrough as it  
26 represented the town’s chemical and steel industries. But formal cooperation between  
27 the two bodies was ‘blocked’ by the different institutional logics of local government  
28 and professional sport, despite the utility maximising character of both. This case

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3 study reminds us that what is often retrospectively cast as a 'dark age' before a  
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5 defining event that in some way opens up a new 'sunny upland' can be misleading; in  
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7 a classic illustration of the pitfalls of retrospective periodisation it is claimed by  
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9 authors such as Walters and Hamil (2013: 743) that English soccer was declining in  
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11 prestige and importance in the 1970s and 1980s, before the founding of the Premier  
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13 League in 1992, with its increased TV money and sponsorship, somehow made the  
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15 game 'relevant' again and aided its globalisation process. But for contemporary actors  
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17 and policy makers, both in terms of the local authority and the industrialists who  
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19 ultimately saved the club, Middlesbrough AFC was desperately relevant and a cause  
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21 urgently worth believing in despite the poor financial state of the club and the alleged  
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23 poor reputation of the sport. Indeed, this rescue happened in time for Middlesbrough  
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25 to benefit from participation in the Premier League in the 1990s, but football's  
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27 increased commercialisation was in reality an attempt to increase its already existing  
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29 popularity, not to introduce it for the first time.  
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### 35 **The Contribution of the Special Issue**

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39 The papers presented in this Special Issue provide us with an opportunity to grapple  
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41 with one of the under addressed questions in management history as it attempts to  
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43 place itself at the centre of the management studies discipline. While much discussion  
44  
45 centres on how history might be integrated with the broader concerns of social  
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47 science, and how history might become more theoretical, periodisation, and how it  
48  
49 shapes our perception of historical continuity and change remains a theoretical  
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51 concern which emerges from within the history discipline itself. Continuity and  
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53 change are surely critical factors to periodisation; I hope that in this SI we have  
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3 helped historians to think about the extent to which change is an ontological  
4 phenomenon which exists in an empirical sense, or the extent to which it is actually a  
5 construct projected and narrated by historians in a theoretical sense, without the real  
6 consideration that we are writing with hindsight.  
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11 Of the papers here Gillett and Tennent, Burton, Corker and Singleton all  
12 consider change in an empirical sense, though also see within their historical episodes  
13 opportunities for the development of broader theoretical concerns. Gillett and  
14 Tennent's paper seeks to challenge existing periodisation to some extent, though, and  
15 this strand also runs through the papers by Mollan, and Wilson. Both Mollan and  
16 Wilson attempt to deal with periodisation essentially imposed by theorists acting in a  
17 particularly ahistoricist fashion. Mollan, for instance, deals with a question that arises  
18 from the scholarship of Mira Wilkins, a close ally of Alfred D. Chandler, which leads  
19 us into the very heart of our discipline, perhaps challenging Wilkins in the same way  
20 that Lameroux, Raff and Temin (2004) pleaded for a less Whiggish approach to  
21 history. Also looking at the other side of the Whiggism coin is Singleton, whose paper  
22 considers the attempts of America's largest corporations to include those apparently  
23 left behind by their prosperity and dominance. Yet Singleton's paper, which traces  
24 the decline of these efforts over a thirty-five year period, ably shows the dangers of  
25 finalism – what often matters in history is where the case under examination is  
26 considered to end; we as historians can choose to take our leave before the negative  
27 consequences of a course of action or an intervention are revealed.  
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48 Wilson points to further dangers of finalism and presentism inherent perhaps  
49 in theory abstraction from history itself, perhaps even a danger of assumption of  
50 historical fact before empirical study has been conducted. In one the fields examined  
51 by Wilson, Project Management, there has recently been an upsurge of interest in the  
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3 potential of history to reveal the specifics of ‘forgotten knowledge’ in past  
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5 engineering and construction schemes (Söderlund and Lenfle, 2013), a call also  
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7 answered by Gillett and Tennent (2017) elsewhere. Wilson, Corker, Gillett and  
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9 Tennent, and Burton draw our attention further to the liminal periods around the  
10  
11 beginning and ends of different periods, and highlight that it is difficult for historians  
12  
13 to neatly pinpoint where they begin and end.  
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16 Periodisation is, therefore, a form of post-hoc historical theorisation – it may  
17  
18 be useful because we have to start somewhere, but it can also distract from the  
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20 building of chronology as it may lead to the ahistorical assumption that just because  
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22 there appeared to be some form of institutional continuity for a period of time (as for  
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24 instance Wilkins imposes with her thousands of free-standing companies, apparently  
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26 appearing consistent between 1870 and 1914, in many industries and countries), it can  
27  
28 distract us from the empirical reality presented by the flow of events. Therefore, we  
29  
30 need to build a more nuanced form of periodisation, or else, to allude to McCloskey  
31  
32 (1985), we perhaps risk creating continuums of ‘gnomic past’ where little change of  
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34 interest to management historians is assumed to take place, closing down  
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36 investigation. Perhaps a useful route forward would be greater pluralism among  
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38 historians, of the sort called for by the Canadian historian Ged Martin (2004), who  
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40 called for historians to study longer periods in order to avoid the misunderstanding of  
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42 historical context and ahistoricism caused by overspecialisation. Just as management  
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44 historians need to be aware of the need for greater theoretical impact, or indeed  
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46 ‘integrity’ of their work (Maclean, Harvey and Clegg, 2016), they need to consider  
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48 carefully the historical integrity of their work including the underpinning assumptions  
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50 that periodisation and chronology bring.  
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