

Foreword

The volume that follows is the outcome of a multiunit project sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Universities that involved scholars from Bocconi University and the Universities of Milano (Bicocca), Bologna, Modena, Firenze, and Siena.

The task of writing this foreword falls to me as coordinator of the project but the reality is that this book had two determined editors as well as excellent authors so my role is almost superfluous. I cannot help but remind readers that this is an important book as it represents a significant moment for reconciling the two ‘souls’ of Italian business history. On one side there are those who, having studied in depth several cases of companies or sectors, thought that the story of Italy could be considered in a Chandlerian perspective in the sense that big business was absolutely critical to the nation’s development. On the other side are scholars with a strong quantitative inclination. Using an extensive database, *Imita.db*, on Italian joint stock companies, these scholars seemed inclined to consider the role of large firms as of secondary importance and thought that for Italy there was a more realistic path to development with its emphasis on the weight of small businesses and non-heavy industrial sectors. I am known as belonging to the former group and once, having written that at the end of the 19th century the word ‘industrialization’ in Italy was synonymous with ‘steel’, I was semi-seriously accused of not offering quantitative support nor archival evidence of my affirmation.¹

Indeed, ‘Chandlerians’ are not so naïve as to think that in its process of industrialization Italy embodied a model based on big business American-style. Instead, we are well aware that:

- the actors of development were different,
- the Gerschenkronian substitutive factors, especially the State, were very much present and, hence, politics ended up playing a different role than in the United States and in other advanced European nations; and,
- that the weight of small business is by far greater than in the tale told by Chandler.

Nonetheless, for Italy big business (in sectors such as metallurgy, engineering, chemicals, and electricity) *was* the engine of growth, especially in the phases of more intensive growth such as the glorious two decades starting in 1950, when it looked as if it would be possible to catch up with the ‘first row’ nations.

‘. . . the overall contribution of the large firms to the “Italian wealth” has been extremely relevant from all points of view and . . . it had, at least in the course of the first three-quarters of the century, been growing’. This sentence, which you can read in the editors’ introduction to this book, highlights (supported by the formidable quantitative work done by Giannetti and Vasta’s team² that built up the *Imita.db* database) a merger between the *esprit de geometrie* and the *esprit de finesse* which characterized Italian historiography. Furthermore, all this is favored by the fact that both ‘currents’ are well aware of the articulation and of the peculiarities of the economic fabric of Italy where big business is placed side-by-side with very dynamic small firms that act either alone or within industrial districts, with local municipalized companies or cooperatives that are politically oriented in some way, with niche or mid-size companies that now seem to be the most representative of the lively national economy.

In closing, it is my firm conviction that this volume highlights an important step ahead for Italian business historiography with its innovative aspects (for example, the attention to the action of foreign multinationals, the attempt to measure the real boundaries of the State-owned enterprise system, and the effort to trace the history of the Italian *mittelstand*) and a direction of research that invites further investigation so as to give an increasingly realistic portrait of the historical evolution of the Italian enterprise.

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NOTES

1. F. Amatori (1997) ‘Italy: the tormented rise of organizational capabilities between government and families’, in A.D. Chandler, Jr., F. Amatori and T. Hikino, *Big Business and the Wealth of Nations*, New York and Cambridge: MA Cambridge University Press, 246–76; J. Cohen and G. Federico, *The Growth of the Italian Economy 1820–1960*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 67–68.
2. R. Giannetti and M. Vasta (eds), *Evolution of Italian Enterprises in the 20th Century*, Heidelberg, Physica Verlag (2006).