



University of Connecticut

Department of Economics Working Paper Series

**Chandler in a Larger Frame: Markets, Transaction Costs, and
Organizational Form in History**

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Working Paper 2003-16

June 2003

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In 1977, when Alfred Chandler's path-breaking book *The Visible Hand* appeared, the large vertically integrated "Chandlerian" corporation had dominated the organizational landscape for nearly a century. In some interpretations, possibly including Chandler's own, *The Visible Hand* and subsequent works constitute a triumphalist account of the rise of that organizational form: the large vertically integrated firm arose and prospered because of its inherent superiority, in all times and places, to more-decentralized market-oriented production arrangements. A quarter century later, however, the Chandlerian firm no longer dominates the landscape. It is under siege from a panoply of decentralized and market-like forms that often resemble some of the "inferior" nineteenth-century structures the managerial enterprise had replaced.¹

What to do with a triumphalist history of something no longer triumphant? The menu of intellectual alternatives is short. One could reject Chandler's account as having been wrong from the start.² One could deny that the large corporation is less successful and superior today than it was in the

¹ I take this assertion as a starting point rather than as something to be demonstrated. For various kinds of evidence, however, see Lamoreaux, Raff, and Temin (2003); Langlois (2003); Sturgeon (2002); and Zenger and Hesterly (1997).

² An alternative that some writers have long been suggesting. See for example Sabel and Zeitlin (1985).

past.³ Or, most interestingly, one could attempt to reinterpret Chandler in a way that preserves the essence of his contribution while placing that contribution in a frame large enough to accommodate both the rise and the (relative) fall of the large managerial enterprise. This last alternative – if done right – has the great advantage of preserving the essence of Chandler’s remarkable and profound insights while at the same time extending our understanding of the economic theory of organization.

In April, 2003, there appeared in print two long essays attempting this third approach. One is the work of the formidable trio of Naomi R. Lamoreaux, Daniel M. G. Raff, and Peter Temin (henceforth LRT); the other is my own paper called “[The Vanishing Hand](#).” Rather than rehash my own attempt to reframe Chandler, I propose to devote the first part of this essay to comparing my account with that of LRT. There is much common purpose and a good deal of overlapping explanation in the two papers; and I will choose to see the essential differences that remain as complementary rather than contradictory. Armed with this general comparison, I then examine how the two papers address what

³ It may not be entirely unfair to suggest that Chandler himself has taken this approach. For example, his account of the rise of the electronics industry after World War II (Chandler 2001) is at pains to stress the contribution of large firms like IBM, and it invites us to see the rise of this industry as akin to, if not identical to, the original Chandlerian revolution of the late nineteenth century. What this fails to stress is that the “large” firms today – like Intel and Microsoft – are far less vertically integrated than traditional Chandlerian firms and are imbedded in thick market-like networks more akin to traditional industrial districts. IBM is one of the few genuinely Chandlerian firms to make the transition to the New Economy, but it did so by radically de-verticalizing and by emulating its more specialized competitors. For my own account of the rise of the electronics industry, see Langlois (1992a, 2002) and Langlois and Steinmueller (1999).

is perhaps the fundamental post-Chandlerian puzzle. Although transportation and communication costs appear to have been declining in secular fashion since antebellum times, organizational structure has not change monotonically. Instead, it has followed a pronounced hump-shape pattern over time, moving from highly decentralized to integrated back to decentralized again (LRT 2003, p. 429-430; Langlois 2003, pp. 377-379). Why?

A “new synthesis.”

Both LRT and “The Vanishing Hand” are fundamentally Chandlerian in orientation. They are homages to Chandler far more than critiques. But, as LRT observe, Chandler’s achievement was largely descriptive, and it lacked an underlying theory of organizational change (LRT 2003, p. 406). The fundamental aim of both papers is to supply this missing theory.

The first place LRT look for theory is in the work of Oliver Williamson (1985). A dominant figure in the present-day economics of organization, Williamson had self-consciously attempted to explain the rise of the Chandlerian firm as the “product of a series of organizational innovations that have had the purpose and effect of economizing on transaction costs” (Williamson 1981, p. 1537). In Williamson’s account, vertical integration in the Chandlerian firm arose in response to incentive problems – especially in the face of asset specificity and asymmetric information – that disinclined potential market partners from investing in appropriate assets. LRT are anxious to adapt some of Williamson’s

basic apparatus to their own goal of explaining the Chandlerian firm as one element in a diverse array of possible organizational forms. (This indeed is one major theme of their paper: that there are not just markets and vertically integrated firms to be explained but also many kinds of hybrid forms that mix aspects of market and hierarchy.)

The fundamental idea that LRT take from Williamson is that one can explain organizational form largely if not entirely as a response to incentive problems created by asymmetric information. In this respect, the theory LRT supply to Chandler fits snugly within the mainstream of the modern neoclassical economic of organization⁴ (Milgrom and Roberts 1992). There are many useful and important ideas here; and LRT use this theory to good advantage, especially in their discussion of America before the Chandlerian revolution, a discussion rich with both historical texture and economic explanation. It is also here that the overlap with my story is greatest. In discussing the antebellum period and the beginnings of the Chandlerian revolution, I also have occasion to cite issues of asymmetric information as part of what I call the evolutionary design problem organization had to solve.

⁴ In the footnotes, LRT (2003, pp. 409n14 and 410n16) do invoke the idea of path dependency, citing David (1984), and claim affiliation with the evolutionary theories of North (1981) and Nelson and Winter (1982). But they never seem to make use of this affiliation, at least not in any explicit way. Moreover, in an earlier footnote, they distinguish their effort from that of "The Vanishing Hand" precisely on the grounds that the latter "takes recent experience as the culmination of a process of economic evolution" (LRT 2003, p. 405n3). I return to this claim below in a slightly different context.

My quarrel with this mainstream approach lies not so much with its substantive results as with its implicit explanatory claims. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the philosophy of asymmetric information. Nicolai Foss and I (1999) have pointed out the strange explanatory dichotomy under which the mainstream economics of organization operates. In this literature, the world of transacting is a jungle of contractual hazards, asymmetric information, agency problems, and opportunism; by contrast, the world of producing – the business of figuring out what to make and of learning how to make it – is a carefree land of perfect information and given blueprints. But surely knowledge must be as imperfect and costly in production as in transacting. Following the lead of Richardson (1972), Nelson and Winter (1982), and others, a growing group of writers has begun to see as central the problem of how economic agents and their organizations acquire economic *capabilities* – the limited and costly knowledge of how to produce.⁵

Drawing on the literature of economic capabilities, Paul Robertson and I (1995) have proposed an evolutionary theory of what we call business institutions, that is, of markets, hierarchies, and the many hybrid forms that live between and around markets and hierarchies. What drives the theory is the costs

⁵ When Chandler himself addressed directly the issue of the appropriate theoretical underpinnings of his work, he came down firmly in the evolutionary capabilities camp (Chandler 1992).

faced by various business institutions of acquiring economic capabilities suitable to the profit opportunities they face. Three factors are important.

- *The pattern of existing capabilities in firm and market.* Are existing capabilities distributed widely to many distinct organizations or are they contained importantly within the boundaries of large firms?
- *The nature the economic change called for.* When technological change or changes in relative prices generate a profit opportunity, does seizing that opportunity require a systemic reorganization of capabilities (including the learning of new capabilities) or can change proceed in autonomous fashion along the lines of an existing division of labor?
- *The extent of the market and the level of development of market-supporting institutions.* To what extent can the needed capabilities be tapped through existing arrangements and to what extent must they be created from scratch? To what extent are there relevant standards and other market-supporting institutions?

One pattern typical in the history of business institutions emerges when existing capabilities are largely under separate ownership – or, to put it loosely and somewhat inaccurately, the existing production system is coordinated through market mechanisms – and a profit opportunity arises that requires systemic reconfiguration of those capabilities. Simultaneous change in several stages of production would likely render obsolete some existing assets and call

for the use of capabilities not previously applied in the production of the product. Under this scenario, the vertically integrated firm arises because it can more cheaply redirect, coordinate, and where necessary create the capabilities necessary to make the innovation work. Because control of the necessary capabilities in the firm would be relatively more concentrated than in the existing organizational structure, such a firm could overcome not only the recalcitrance of asset-holders whose capital would have to be creatively destroyed but also the “dynamic” transaction costs (Langlois 1992b) of informing and persuading those who possess the necessary capabilities.⁶

This scenario is of course the Chandlerian revolution. With the lowering of transportation and communications costs in the America of the nineteenth century, there arose profit opportunities for those who could create mass markets and take advantage of economies of scale in mass production. Examples range from steel and farm machinery to cigarettes and branded goods. In all these cases, profitable improvements in product attributes and costs⁷ required the creative destruction of existing decentralized systems of production and distribution in favor of systems involving significantly different capabilities.

⁶ More generally, dynamic transaction costs — or, more generally still, dynamic *governance* costs — are the costs of not having the capabilities you need when you need them (Langlois 1992b).

⁷ In many of these cases, the non-price attributes of the products may initially have deteriorated in consumer eyes as mass-produced items substituted for particularized or hand-made ones. But any such disadvantage was, of course, rapidly outweighed by reductions in product price. I return to this point below.

A concrete example might help. Consider vertical integration in the early years of the Ford Motor Company. LRT (2003, p. 419) tell some interesting stories about how Ford used techniques like the \$5 day and gender-coding of work to mitigate some of the agency problems of the moving assembly line. But, of course, this doesn't explain Ford's high level of vertical integration. LRT go on to describe Ford's strategy of classic mass production: making a more-or-less undifferentiated product with a fine division of labor and specialized tools. In furtherance of this strategy, and unlike his early competitors, "Ford pursued a strategy of vertical integration in order to reduce costs and insure a ready supply of parts that precisely fit his specifications" (2003, p. 420). But why did vertical integration reduce costs? Why couldn't independent vendors produce a ready supply of parts to Ford's specifications?

Robertson and I (1989) tell the story a different way. Begin by noticing that the moving assembly line was not about assembling cars; it was about *making parts*. To accommodate his mass-production strategy, Ford needed to invent new ways to make parts fast and cheap. Existing suppliers were typically generalists who used batch techniques: a radiator supplier might well be a firm whose principal business was making tin buckets. Mass producing parts called for a systemic change in the process of production. In effecting this change, it was far less costly for Ford to make the parts himself than to try to manipulate a grossly ill-adapted supplier network. Why didn't Ford teach his suppliers the techniques of mass production and then buy from them? The very simple

answer is that he couldn't teach them what he didn't yet know. Inventing the moving assembly line – or, rather, many different assembly lines for many different parts – was a process of capability-building that required lengthy trial-and-error learning. To say that the suppliers lacked the incentives to make the necessary investments may be true as a Scholastic point, but it scarcely captures the reality of the situation.

None of this is to say that issues of incentives and asymmetric information are never part of the story. Consider the case of Singer Sewing Machine, which in the late nineteenth century slowly replaced a network of commissioned sales agents with its own regional sales offices staffed by salaried employees who could demonstrate the machines, repair them, and offer credit to buyers. LRT explain this (and similar integration in other industries) in terms of Williamson's "externality principle": independent distributors failed to invest in necessary assets and exert adequate sales effort because they understood that other distributors could free ride on those investments. The evidence for this interpretation is persuasive. On the other hand, theory also suggests that such free-rider problems can be solved by adopting a different contracting structure such as territorial exclusive dealing or resale price maintenance⁸ (Carlton and Perloff 1999, pp. 405-408). Why did Singer choose vertical integration?

⁸ Evidently, Singer's territorial contracts with independent dealers were not exclusive, inducing the dealers to free ride on Singer's reputation while pushing other brands of sewing machine (Jack 1957). Exclusive dealing would have eliminated that particular problem.

Chandler's account (1977, pp. 302-306) actually stresses Singer's invention of management techniques for selling sewing machines.⁹ In part, the company needed to figure out how to manage the geographically dispersed distribution of a complex and expensive consumer product – and it was easier to learn and teach these management techniques through wholly owned branches than through contract.¹⁰

We can never have a complete explanation of organizational form without attending to the transaction-cost (asymmetric-information) problems those forms help solve. But our explanation is in danger of being even more incomplete if such problems are all we pay attention to. For one thing, transaction-cost issues are seldom the *drivers* of organizational change, even though they may influence the shape of the final product of organizational change. As the railroad and the telegraph lowered transportation and communication costs in the late nineteenth century, it became economical to package goods centrally (as in cigarettes) or to coordinate the distribution of goods centrally (as in mail-order retailing). This created problems of asymmetric information that organization had to solve by

⁹ Chandler also notes that Singer was rolling in free cash flow, and much of its vertical integration into things like timberland and an iron mill may have been the result of a weak selection environment.

branding and other means (Kim 2001; but cf. Langlois 2003, p. 368n25). But these transaction-cost problems did not *drive* the organizational change. What drove the change were factors affecting production costs and production technology.

And sometimes transaction-cost explanations don't seem very helpful at all. Consider the problem of explaining the continued – perhaps even accelerated – dominance of the Chandlerian corporation in the middle years of the twentieth century. LRT devote little space to this period, and their treatment is essentially descriptive – a paraphrase of Chandler. For good reason, there is no mention of asymmetric information or transaction costs. But that doesn't mean theory is entirely helpless. The story is in part one of path dependency and a relatively attenuated competitive environment. Because of the path of vertical integration on which the large enterprises had set out, capabilities tended to develop within that integrated structure rather than outside of it. This was especially true to the extent that the internally grown capabilities were relevant to the major technological developments of the era. At the same time, many large American firms benefited from a certain amount of *de facto* protection after the Japanese and European economies were devastated in World War II. This

¹⁰ “Transactions cost considerations played a significant part in the determination of the extent of both forward and backward integration. Even when suppliers and distributors were competent and reliable, they were often unable to deliver on schedule and in the quantity and quality required by the new capital-intensive industries. Distributors were often slow in returning sales revenues to the manufacturer or in providing necessary marketing services and information. But the initial move forward into distribution and marketing by entrepreneurs in the new industries of the Second Industrial Revolution was that often suppliers and distributors had neither sufficient knowledge of the novel and complex products nor the facilities required to handle them efficiently” (Chandler 1992, p. 87).

environment was ripe for the pattern of firm growth that Edith Penrose (1959) had theorized about – the spreading of internal capabilities over a wider set of activities.

Chandlerian firms are not the only possible response to problems of asymmetric information; neither are they the only possible response to the need to rearrange economic capabilities. Consider a second scenario that flows from the Langlois-and-Robertson explanatory framework. Suppose that, when exogenous forces call for a realignment of capabilities, institutions exist – or can be cheaply created – to channel change into a decentralized pattern. In such a case, change can proceed in autonomous fashion along the lines of an existing or a developing division of labor.

This scenario can play itself out in a number of ways. Indeed, it was at work even in the era of the Chandlerian firm. Branding by large multi-unit firms was one solution to the problems of quality guaranteeing that arose with high-volume trade. Another was standards. By the middle of the nineteenth century, lowered transportation and communications costs made possible bulk shipment of wheat from the mid-west. This necessitated the mixing together of wheat from many different farmers, which destroyed traditional small-scale mechanisms of reputation based on the identity of the farmer. As a result, farmers no longer had strong incentives to maintain quality. The Chicago Board of Trade addressed the problem by creating standard categories of wheat and

eventually by hiring inspectors to enforce the standards. The resulting system was one of high-throughput market exchange, with a bit of hierarchy added in by the Board of Trade (LRT 2003, pp. 414-415). As Alfred Marshall insisted, markets as well as firms require conscious organization (Loasby 1990, p. 120).

This is by no means an isolated case. In “The Vanishing Hand” I mention a more recent example: the creation of standards in home mortgage lending by the Federal National Mortgage Association and other banking institutions (Jacobides 2002), which led to the creation of alienable securities in home mortgages and an ongoing de-verticalization of the home mortgage industry. An even more dramatic example is that of personal computers, which I have written about extensively elsewhere (Langlois 1992a). Here standards generated a modular system that allowed entry points for market players at virtually all vertical and lateral stages of production (Langlois and Robertson 1992). Notice that in these (late twentieth century) cases, the development of market-supporting institutions creatively destroyed the existing system of capabilities contained within Chandlerian firms. This scenario is the *unmaking* of the Chandlerian revolution.

Explaining the hump.

In setting forth our framework, Robertson and I explicitly describe the process of explaining organizational form as “necessarily complex and historically contingent” (Langlois and Robertson 1995, p. 3). Both scenarios – as well as

others – can occur and have occurred throughout the last 150 years, and both will continue to occur. But to tackle the question that LRT and I both address – why was the large Chandlerian firm relatively more dominant in the past and relatively less dominant now? – one has to pay attention to systematic changes in boundary conditions. Transportation and communications costs have fallen monotonically since antebellum times; population and per capita income have risen in secular fashion (LRT 2003, pp. 429-430). These are the boundary conditions to which both they and I apply our contingent theories in order to confront the post-Chandlerian puzzle.¹¹

What LRT and I – and others – observe is that, although the boundary conditions seem to have changed monotonically, organizational form has not. In the antebellum era, the population of organizational arrangements consisted almost entirely of decentralized, market-oriented, and relational forms. In the era Chandler chronicles, the large managerial corporation clustered into an important and perhaps dominant place in that population. In the last quarter

¹¹ In the penultimate version of their paper, published as a prestigious National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, LRT single me out (twice!) as poster child for the view that “the organizations that appear to be characteristic of the present era [are] a new endpoint toward which history has been evolving” (LRT 2002, p. 58). What distinguishes their work from mine, they say, is that I see “see the economy of the 1990s to be the last stage in a historical evolution” (LRT 2002, p. 2n3). After I protested to the authors and supplied them with the final version of my paper, they eliminated the former reference and changed the latter to the slightly more ambiguous claim, cited earlier, that my paper “takes recent experience as the culmination of a process of economic evolution” (LRT 2003, p. 405n3). Culmination? If this claim is intended to mean that (unlike them?) I am a follower of Nelson and Winter (1982), then I embrace it warmly; if it is intended to suggest that I see evolution in teleological or historicist terms, then it is extraordinarily wide of the mark. For my views on the non-teleological character of evolutionary explanation, see Langlois (1986), Langlois and Everett (1994), and Sabooglu and Langlois (2001).

century, the relative importance of the large managerial corporation has declined, as has its typical level of vertical integration – which makes the population of arrangements today begin to look a lot more like the antebellum one. Keeping in mind the population logic of this claim, we might loosely say that vertical integration started low, increased, and then decreased again even as the boundary conditions changed monotonically.

In what is an important substantive contribution to the discussion, LRT (2003, p. 430) draw our attention to the income variable. Classic mass production had generated economies of scale by optimizing on a standardized product. That product may have represented no consumer's ideal bundle of attributes; but the price was so low that, on a value-per-dollar basis, the undifferentiated product dominated higher-priced specialty goods. As incomes continued to grow in the twentieth century, however, consumers began to be willing to pay for higher-quality and more-individualized goods. Born of the era of classic mass production, Chandlerian hierarchies proved too inflexible to compete against networks of agile specialist firms for the custom of these wealthy buyers.

Of course, transportation and transaction costs must matter, too. For one thing, antebellum consumers had even lower incomes, but they were served by markets and relational contracts. LRT appeal here to Paul Krugman's (1991) core-periphery model of industrial location. Roughly speaking, the model predicts that, when transportation costs are high, production takes place nearby

to consumption; as transportation costs decline, it begins to pay to locate production in a core and ship to the periphery; but as transportation costs decline further, the core-periphery structure starts to become less pronounced.¹² LRT take from this the message that, when transportation and communications costs are high, “economic activity tends to be local and consequently small in scale. When communication is virtually instantaneous, as on the Internet, and transportation is very cheap, then, all else equal, economic activity can be located virtually anywhere and even tailored to individual needs. When communication and transportation costs are neither prohibitive nor trivial, however, there are advantages to be obtained from concentrating productive activity in specific locations *and in large firms*” (LRT 2003, pp. 429-430, emphasis added).

Notice that, taken literally, this is not by itself the explanation we seek. To the extent it addresses the point at all, Krugman’s model predicts “large firms” only in the sense of price theory (producing a lot of output) rather than in the sense of Coase (incorporating many activities or stages of production). Krugman’s model is about where firms locate, not about how they are organized. Indeed, most of the book cited (and much of Krugman’s other work) suggests that the core ought to look like a Marshallian industrial district. But if we take

¹² At least in the version of the model cited (Krugman 1991, p. 111), reswitching never actually occurs, as the value of the key parameter never gets bigger than one even for zero transportation costs.

the “reswitching” idea as an analogy, and incorporate the income variable, we can in fact arrive at an approach to the puzzle.

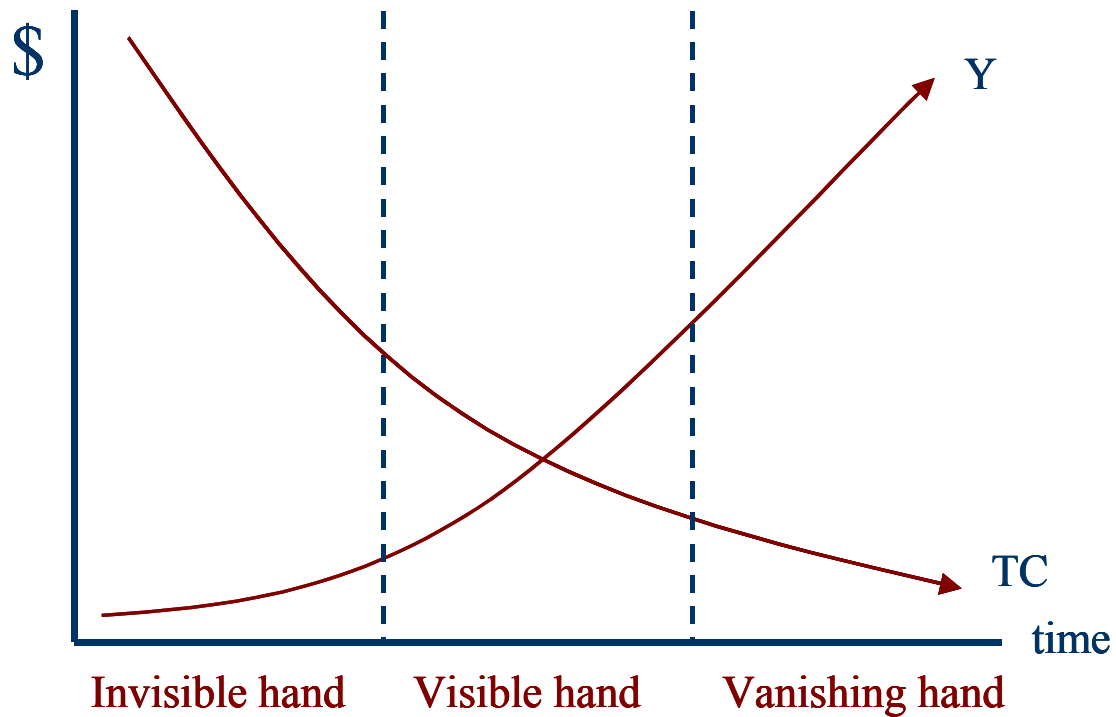


Figure 1
The Lamoreaux, Raff, and Temin explanation?

See Figure 1. Early on, high transportation and transaction costs (TC) dominate the story. Production has to be small-scale and relational, and a low level of income (Y) only reinforces that fact. In today’s economy, income dominates the story, as consumers demand distinctive and individualized products, which are best supplied by agile market-oriented and relational forms. A low level of transaction and transportation costs either reinforces this tendency

or, if it fails to reinforce it, the TC effect is swamped by the demand effect.¹³ In the middle, when incomes are still relatively low but transportation and transaction costs are falling, Chandlerian firms work best. Of course, we still need a theory of *why* Chandlerian firms work best in this intermediate range. Perhaps Williamson will do. Middling transportation costs permit classical mass production of undifferentiated products, and middling incomes induce consumers to accept those products. Classical mass production calls for dedicated machinery, suppliers, etc., and this implies highly specific assets. As incomes rise, however, consumers become less willing to accept standardized products, the need for highly specific assets lessens, and internal coordination becomes less desirable.¹⁴

¹³ It is the focus on the demand side that distinguishes the LRT explanation from otherwise similar explanations that rely solely on arguments about changes in transaction costs arising from present-day computer and communications technology. Of course, a naïve account that appeals only to modern computer and communications technology is inadequate, since, as Coase (1937, p. 397n3) pointed out, whether new technology favors markets depends on whether that technology lowers the cost of market exchange more than it does the costs of hierarchical control. Sophisticated arguments must contain an account of why modern technology favors markets over firms. In a paper published a bit ahead of the Internet curve, Malone, Yates, and Benjamin (1987) present just such a sophisticated argument. They isolate two factors that determine the boundaries between market and hierarchy: asset specificity and the complexity of product descriptions. The latter refers to “the amount of information needed to specify the attributes of a product in enough detail to allow potential buyers ... to make a selection” (Malone *et al.* 1987, p. 486). Modern technology shifts the margin in favor of markets along both dimensions. Flexible manufacturing technology reduces the specificity of assets, and higher-bandwidth communications technology can transmit complex product information more cheaply.

¹⁴ This implies both good news and bad news for Williamson. On the one hand, it endorses his view that asset specificity is the fundamental determinant of vertical integration. On the other hand, it suggests that his key variable is rapidly losing its significance in the modern economy.

This explanation is strikingly congruent with my own. Where LRT rely on Williamsonian asset specificity, I appeal to a broader notion of *buffering* that I borrow from the “cybernetic” theory of organization developed in the 1960s and 1970s¹⁵ (Galbraith 1973; Simon 1960; Thompson 1967). And whereas LRT discuss rising incomes and lowered transportation and communications costs, I talk about *the extent of the market*, which varies positively with population and per capita income and negatively with transportation and communication costs (political as well as technological).

When the extent of the market is small, clearly production will be local, small in scale, and oriented to markets. As extent of the market expands, it pays to take advantage of economies of scale in high-throughput systems. The demand-side certainly matters: because relatively low-income consumers are willing to accept undifferentiated products, this high-throughput production can take the form of classical mass production, which requires a high level of buffering by internal management in order to actualize potential scale economies.¹⁶

¹⁵ Buffering mechanism are various features and designs intended to insulate the organization, especially a high-throughput system, from environmental variation. Such environmental variation includes, but goes well beyond, the threat of hold-up because of opportunistic behavior.

¹⁶ Chandler (1992, p. 81) argues that high-throughput facilities “demanded the constant attention of a managerial team or hierarchy. The potential economies of scale and scope, as measured by rated capacity, are the physical characteristics of the production facilities. The actual economies of scale and scope, as measured by throughput, are organizational. Such economies depend on knowledge, skill, experience, and teamwork - on the organized human capabilities essential to exploit the potential of technological processes.”

But the supply side also matters. “In the beginning there were markets” is Williamson’s (1975, p.) famous heuristic dictum. For him, a fair comparison between markets and hierarchies implicitly requires us to assume that the same capabilities are available through contract as would be available to hierarchy. I have been at pains to suggest that, from a historical and evolutionary perspective, this heuristic leads us astray. Especially in times of significant economic transformation, internal organization may arise precisely because the relevant capabilities are not cheaply available through contract. As time passes and the extent of the market grows, however, we should expect markets (that is, “contracting” broadly understood) to become more “capable” (Langlois 1992b).

As time passes, all other things (including extent of the market) equal, the outlines of new capabilities will become sharper; activities will become more routine and better understood; and capabilities will thus begin diffuse to others.¹⁷ Moreover, economic agents can be expected to discover techniques other than integration for mitigating problems of asymmetric information. As the extent of the market grows, all other things (including knowledge) equal, it will pay to incur the set-up costs that markets and market-supporting institutions (like formal standards) require. Moreover, as markets become thicker, assets are likely to become less transaction specific (because there are many more

¹⁷ In the terminology of Malone, Yates, and Benjamin (1987), product descriptions will become more standardized and interpersonally shared, thus reducing the complexity of the information that has to be exchanged in transaction.

potentially similar transactions) and relative minimum efficient scale is likely to decline in general.

In the end there are markets. This is not a historicist claim, merely a claim that history matters. Williamson's catch-phrase is self-consciously ahistorical. To apply any contingent theory, including Williamson's, we need to look at history. We need to look at boundary conditions and at how those boundary conditions change systematically.

In principle, a Chandlerian revolution could happen again if a radical change in technology or exogenous factors creatively destroyed existing market capabilities and rendered existing market-supporting institutions irrelevant. In the small, this is happening all the time. But if we are considering the question of dominance within the entire population of organizational forms, then *absolute* levels of the extent of the market have to matter. For one thing, larger markets can support more "general specialties" (Stigler 1951) or "general-purpose technologies" (Helpman 1998). A Chandlerian firm starting up today can plug into modern financial markets, modern banking, containerized shipping, Federal Express, personal computers, and the Internet without having to reinvent those stages of production itself. This suggests that, not only should we expect Chandlerian forms to occupy a smaller niche in the population of firms as the extent of the market grows, but we should also expect those firms to be less vertically integrated on average.

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