



Ca' Foscari  
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**VENICE SCHOOL  
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# VSM Lectures

San Giobbe Economic Campus, Venice



12th Mar | Aula Saraceno | h.13.00

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## **Historical thinking as analysis, business history, and management education**

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It sometimes seems a commonplace amongst management academics working as quantitative social scientists that historical writing of any sort is no more than a presentation or discussion of mere anecdotes and intrinsically less illuminating than statistical studies. I distinguish between historical evidence and historical thinking and then situate historical thinking as a species of non-statistical analysis. The particular focus of historical thinking, I will argue, lies in the unpacking of generally agency-infused causal sequences. Agency enters this account via the sense-making of embedded actors as well as in the course of those actors making up their minds what to do and intervening to execute those plans. “Cause” gets a deeper conceptualization than one Humean billiard ball striking another. Business history, understood in this context, is not so much an account of the external life course of firms and industries as it is one of how as well as why the moments of those life courses came to be as they were rather than something other—a history, so to speak, of enterprise at the intra-firm actor level rather than of enterprises as collectives.

There are, broadly speaking, two main approaches to management education, one which aims to convey generalities supported by inevitably more or less coarse statistical evidence about what managers should do and another which trains students in sense-and decision-making (in the American context, loosely the Chicago approach versus the Harvard one). Similarly, there are two main varieties of managerial materials, one about present and future decision-making contexts (e.g. “What difference does the availability of increasing availability of individual consumer behavior data and cheap information processing capacity make for particular categories of managerial decisions?” or similar questions about contemporary AI) and one which examines case studies of essentially historic decision challenges (typical HBS-style case studies). In the perspective sketched above, business history is the library from which management academics ultimately learn and against which the proper scope of their conclusions may be judged; and historical thinking as such is core to good in-classroom case discussion.

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