Historical Foundations of Entrepreneurship Research

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Acknowledgements

Systematic research on entrepreneurship has now been conducted for about 40 years, emerging in the 1980s, even though pioneering contributions on entrepreneurship could be found as long back as in the 17th century. As we see it, it is now time to make historical reflection about and within the field, and our main argument in the book is that ‘history matters in entrepreneurship research’.

The origins of this book came out of a joint discussion at the Academy of Management Meeting in Philadelphia in 2007. Because we both are interested in historical aspects of research, particularly entrepreneurship – Franz as the former Division Chair of the Management History Division and active member of the Entrepreneurship Division within the Academy of Management, and Hans as author of several books and articles on the intellectual roots of entrepreneurship research – our conversation obviously focused on the historical, or rather ahistorical, character of entrepreneurship research. Entrepreneurship had evolved into a rather ahistorical research field, and we were convinced that it was timely to introduce a stronger historical understanding in entrepreneurship research.

This book directly resulted both from our conversations and our views about the entrepreneurship field. First, we believe that contemporary scholars can learn much from earlier research on entrepreneurship, which makes it unnecessary to ‘reinventing the wheel’ every time we start a new study (Part I). Second, we believe that research on entrepreneurship has become more and more theory driven, in a large part from borrowing concepts and theories from many different disciplines. In order to import these concepts and theories, however, we need to understand the assumptions on which these theories are based and the intellectual roots from which these theories have evolved (Part II). Third, we believe that we have a lot to learn from the knowledge achieved in the field of economic history, and an understanding of the historical setting and institutional context in which the entrepreneurs operate (Part III).

The process involved in the production of the Historical Foundations of Entrepreneurship Research has been long and hard, but at the same time challenging and rewarding. In the beginning of the process we selected some of the most prominent and senior researchers and asked them to write a chapter that would cover some of the most important concepts and theories in entrepreneurship research today. We were encouraged to find a very positive reaction from the authors, and it was obvious that our book proposal was timely. The
writing and reviewing process has been intensive, and the chapters have gone through three rounds of reviews and revisions. A highlight in the process was the symposium that we organized at the 2008 Academy of Management meeting in Anaheim, California. Despite the 8:00 a.m. session time, we were thrilled to see a crammed seminar room, which convinced us that interest existed in the story that we tried to tell.

First of all, we will take the opportunity all the authors involved in the book. We have been very critical and demanding in our reviews, but throughout the process the authors have been extremely positive and always made a very professional work in their revisions of the chapters, especially in keeping the time deadlines. Second, we want to thanks Francise O’Sullivan and her staff at the Edward Elgar Publishers who always have been very supportive and helpful. Finally, we have been dedicated to the topic and taken every possible occasion to discuss the book and its content, and it would be impossible to individually mention the large number of people who have discussed the subject with us, but it has always been fruitful discussions and we will thank everyone for giving us the opportunity to discuss and reflecting on this critical topic.

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