

AT THE MARGINS OF BUSINESS AND COMPANIES: EDGES, WASTELANDS, BORDERS, THIRD PLACES, INNOVATION

In France and around the World, Business historians, and more generally studies on the history of major companies and business history, have mainly focused on the origins, evolution, key players, and functioning of companies, with fewer focusing on a set of objects, rationales, or players on the margins. What qualifies for being considered as marginal? One example is subcontractors (in value chains), often SMEs, which are impacted by the strategies of their clients. But we can also mention areas of cooperation and competition, fields of monitoring or foresight, the place of individuals or groups considered, in various ways, to be marginal, and more generally third places, middlegrounds, edges, and border objects of all kinds.

The Paris 2026 conference project is built on a spirit of intellectual and disciplinary openness. It aims to bring together as wide a range of researchers as possible from different traditions in the humanities and Social Sciences and from different countries. We look for contributions that approach their topic from a historical perspective or that they address issues related to the historical dynamics of companies. In addition to collaborations and exchanges between French and foreign teachers and researchers, the aim of this conference is also to promote exchanges between the academic world and public or private economic actors interested in the history of business and companies, their positioning and functioning, their performance, their structures and strategies, and, more broadly, that of organizations and all those who live and work in them. The aim is to encompass both the more traditional study of companies and firms as well as marginal actors, alternative organizational forms, informal sectors and relations between larger more central firms and frontiers and boundary objects.

While we mainly encourage proposals on the themes presented below, papers dealing with any other subject related to business and corporations history, particularly from a comparative perspective, will also be considered by the program committee. In this context, contributions from the fields of history, management, sociology, law, political science, and, where applicable, other disciplines are welcome. The conference does not intend to limit itself to research exclusively focused on the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Individual or collective proposals dealing with French and foreign companies operating in France are eligible. Proposals dealing with French or foreign companies operating abroad in relation to France (e.g., within the French-speaking world or former colonies, etc.) are also eligible. Both individual papers and proposals for complete sessions are eligible. Of course, papers dealing with other places and countries are also welcome, as far as there is a link with France and its cultural or economic zone of influence (Subsidiaries of foreign companies implemented in France or in its former colonial zone, Companies doing business with France, Companies employing French staff even abroad, etc.)

- Location:

Paris Dauphine-PSL University (Place du Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny, 75016 Paris).

On-site stands will be available to public and private partners (history or management journals, history or management associations involved in business history, presentations of corporate or public archive services (for the record, in 2023, there were 12 stands). Finally, a bookshop will offer books on corporate history.

- Dates: June 23-26, 2026

- Agenda:

The conference will begin with a doctoral school (10 students) on Tuesday, June 23. A keynote speaker will open the scientific discussions on the evening of Tuesday, June 23. The sessions will take place from Wednesday morning to Thursday evening, with several plenary sessions. Sessions on publishing (Meet the Editors) and careers are planned for the weekend. Friday will be devoted to organized visits with partners.

- Languages:

Proposals and presentations (individual papers or sessions) could be made in either English or French.

- Expected attendance:

Approximately 300 (for the record, 280 participants attended the 2023 conference)

- Organizing committee:

Eric Godelier (Chair, École Polytechnique), Dominique Barjot (Paris Sorbonne University), Hervé Biauxser (École Centrale - History), Jean-Philippe Bouilloud (ESCP Europe), Romain Buquet (École Supaero), Michel-Pierre Chelini (University of Artois), Sébastien Damart (Paris-Dauphine University), Albert David (Paris-Dauphine University), Laurent Ducol (CTHS – ASCSHS), Gilles Garel (CNAM), Simon Godard (Sciences Po Grenoble-UGA), Anne-Marie Granet (University Grenoble Alps), Sandrine Kott (University of Geneva), Muriel Le Roux (CNRS – IHMC- ENS-Paris 1), Alain Michel (University of Evry Paris Saclay), Radouan Mounecif (University of Paris-Sorbonne), Roger Nougaret (CTHS), Véronique Pouillard (University of Oslo), Francesca Sanna (University of Toulouse), Nicolas Marty (Entreprises et Histoire).

- Scientific council of 15 members:

Araceli Almaraz, president of the Mexican Economic History Association;
Youssef Cassis, Institut Universitaire Européen de Florence/ European University Institute of

Florence ; Anne Dalmasso, University Grenoble Alpes; Leslie Hannah, London School of Economics; Carola Hein, Delft University of Technology.; Liliane Hilaire-Perez, EHESS Paris; Katja Castryck-Naumann, Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe (GWZO); Kenneth Lipartito, Florida International University; Manuela Martini, Lumière Lyon 2 University; Charles François Mathis, Univ Paris 1/IHMC; Małgorzata Mazurek, Columbia University; Angelo Riva, PSE- INSEEC Business School ; Andrea Schneider, Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte; Edouard Vasseur, Ecole nationale des chartes-PSL; Kazuhiko Yago, Waseda University;

- Prospective sponsors and partners:

Most of the sponsors and partners from the previous congress will be approached as in 2019 and 2023.

For the record, in 2023, the congress received the following support: BNP Paribas, Société Générale, Saint-Gobain, Crédit Agricole, BNF, ANMT, Comité pour l'histoire de La Poste, ENS, École Polytechnique, CNRS, Université Evry Paris-Saclay, Université Paris-Sorbonne, Université Paris Nanterre, CNAM, etc.

- Proposed budget:

The budget will consist of support received from public and private partners, as well as registration fees.

- THEME

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Recently, the proliferation of industrial and service platforms has greatly reinforced the monopolistic nature of large companies while outsourcing, or even marginalizing, a large proportion of the players who contribute to their prosperity, sometimes to subcontractors, sometimes to certain “gray” areas of the economy. From the perspective of employment and economic activity, it is understandable why, over the past ten years, 60% of employees and

80% of businesses (mainly sole proprietorships) worldwide have been operating in the informal economy (ILO Report, March 2023).

This encompasses three components: 1) the informal sector, 2) informal activities within the formal sector, and 3) within households. The main criteria for informality are as follows: (i) the absence of business registration, accounting, tax payments, and social security contributions; (ii) undeclared jobs without social security coverage and other “precarious jobs” (Charmes, J. Ed., 2012). These three examples show that the issue of the “margins” of business is essential to understanding the real dynamics of capitalism in France, in the French-speaking world, in Europe, and around the world.

Marginality is not understood here as a fixed and static property of individual or collective actors in businesses or places. On the contrary, the “marginal” nature of a group of individuals or a specific space, within or outside the company, cannot be identified in a univocal or ahistorical way. This conference aims to analyze the question of margins and the process of marginalization in a dynamic and historical way. We plan to develop our thinking along four lines.

1- Preserving and analyzing “margins”: concepts, sources, and methodologies for the history of companies in France or in the French-speaking world:

First, it is important to examine the concept of boundaries and margins in the history of business thought (black box, firm point, agency theory, legal personality, entrepreneurial enterprise, managerial enterprise, value chain, stakeholders, etc.). In this regard, the question of sources for understanding these margins must be examined.

2- Actors at the frontiers and margins of French or foreign companies:

Attempting to assess the importance and weight of actors located at the frontiers or margins of French and/or foreign companies involves answering a few fundamental questions: Who are the individual or collective actors that can be considered to be on the margins? Under what circumstances did they emerge or were they pushed to the margins or frontiers? Is it possible to establish a typology? What relationships do they have with the actors, processes, or institutions “at the center”? Do they have a positive or negative impact on the overall dynamics of the company, region, or country? Can we therefore identify a specifically French or French-speaking model of organization and management?

This requires identifying certain actors on the margins, both internal actors (e.g., temporary workers, short-term contracts, etc.) and external actors (subcontractors, networks, etc.). It is important to consider systemic marginalization linked to certain criteria, such as gender or ethnicity, and its effects on company dynamics.

3- Places and third zones (brownfields, etc.):

Defining and discussing margins includes the issue of “marginal” physical locations or spaces, which are sometimes created deliberately or are the result of a series of more or less controlled actions or processes. This covers internal spaces within the company (design,

production, management); integration into the value chain (factory, inventory, sales, finance, etc.); but also external spaces such as integration into urban or natural spaces (including the issue of brownfield sites) and the issue of subcontractors. Some companies have implemented strategies to control the surrounding area, for example in the 19th century to control the labor market around steel mills, or more recently to keep local residents away and thus avoid complaints about pollution and environmental damage. The issue of what has been called “industrial spillover,” which blurs the boundary between the interior of companies and their environment, may be addressed.

4- Processes of marginalization and disruption (economics, management, innovation, etc.):

The actors, places, ways of thinking, and ways of doing things presented above are the result of practices of representation or rules constructed step by step throughout history, more or less consciously, by actors who conceive of them individually or collectively. Decisions, rules, and standards are developed to ensure their success. Institutions are put in place to guarantee their sustainability. What are the contexts that allow these processes to emerge? How do they develop? What are the constraints that limit their emergence?

In turn, what are the impacts of these processes on companies, their organization, or their strategies? In this regard, it is necessary to take into account the specificities of the functioning of the labor market and social relations, the weight of associative and cooperative organizations in the economic dynamic, entrepreneurial and managerial issues (risks versus innovations), accounting, financial, and marketing practices, personnel management, integration into global capitalism, the role of state regulations, etc.