Imagine a New York City in which people scoffed at Donald Trump's claims of self-made success not just because he inherited approximately $44,000,000, but even more because his notions of self-improvement and ambition never included enhancing any community—local or global. Likewise, imagine a modern Western culture in which the goals of "individualism" called for individuals—rugged or otherwise—to challenge and improve themselves in order to improve their communities. Imagine boasting about being self-made because that fulfilled ambitions for citizenship!

That would describe the modernity that Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) wished for us. Such would be the modernity for which he had intended to serve as a role model. He left business pursuits as soon as he had what people then called "a competence," and spent the rest of his life in science and public service, most famously, founding a new nation. Nonetheless, Franklin's example and writings came to inspire and guide countless youths to individualist, narrowly focused, material success.

Thomas Mellon (1813-1908), founder of Mellon Bank and father to the powerful Andrew Mellon, exemplified our modernity, not Franklin's. As a boy, Mellon found a "dilapidated" edition of Franklin's writings. He credited that discovery with setting him on a path away from his father's farm and its harsh and
boring labor toward entrepreneurial opportunity and fortune. Mellon proclaimed that Franklin "inspired" him "with new ambition" to prosper, providing the "turning point of [Mellon's] life" and teaching him how to aim for "wealth and fame." With this inspiration he determined that, he, too, would "work his way up in the world." A grandson later confirmed that Mellon "revered Benjamin Franklin above all men and Franklin's name frequently was on his lips. The boys in our family literally were brought up on Franklin. . . . Franklin became a sort of genie of the Mellon family. I cannot exaggerate the influence."²

Nowhere does Mellon indicate that Franklin inspired him to become a community benefactor. Instead, Mellon's ambitions and accomplishments ceaselessly targeted his and his family's economic successes.³

Self-making’s Historical Roots

How did Franklin’s narrative of self-improvement, worldly but not material ambition, and public service evolve into a very different and potent narrative? The modern narrative, instead, inspires and legitimates material, individualistic ambition, justifying claims on collective resources such as public esteem, public assets, political power, and material fortune.

The eighteenth-century Franklin embodied a mid-way position in the evolution of self-making from a much earlier spiritual and community-oriented ideal into an individualistic ideal that came to legitimate worldly, material, and self-interested ambitions. Although not a Calvinist himself, Franklin grew up in that tradition, born close in time and place to the deadly Salem witch trials that manifested an early stage of cultural struggles in transition toward individualistic
At the core of the Calvinist tradition was a powerful sense of individuals’ debt and, therefore, responsibility to God and God’s community. That notion of self-making called for building one’s character to do service. As John Winthrop, a founder and governor of Massachusetts, declared in 1630, “the end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord.” Although social and economic inequalities were inevitable, they were entirely of God’s creation and did not reflect individuals’ merits. Thus, success raised, not lowered, responsibilities to God’s community. Expected to pursue affluence, Calvinists often found themselves caught in a tension that Boston minister John Cotton described in the early 1600s as “diligence in worldly business, and yet deadnesse to the world.” They meant to prosper, but selfishness and pride remained sins.

Some Consequences of the Self-made Conceit

U.S. public policies long ago succumbed to what became the “conceit of self-made success.” For instance, American history is replete with instances of elites making claims on collective resources such as public esteem, public assets, political power, and material fortune. Donald Trump’s ruthless demands for all of these rank among the most offensive and bizarre. Much earlier, in 1832 on the cusp of the narrative’s transition, Henry Clay famously used the phrase “self-made men” in the U.S. Senate while defending the American System and federal support for manufacturing. Clay praised Kentucky manufacturers as “enterprising and self-made men” who deserved the nation’s favors because they had “acquired whatever wealth they possess by patient and diligent labor.”
Clay’s was certainly the most famous use of the phrase “self-made” in the early Republic. Nonetheless, Clay’s use was not the first—not even in Congress, where a fellow Kentuckian had preceded him. In 1817 Alney McLean had argued that men “among the lower and middle walks of life ... as to property... who might be styled self-made men” were worthier of election than the “more wealthy” because of their “talents, morality, industry, and integrity.” McLean drew upon the centuries-old call to serve community by building one’s character and working diligently in one’s vocation. The true measures and rewards of success in this older narrative were spiritual and communal, not worldly and personal. In contrast, Clay’s usage reflected what has become the standard connotation in mainstream discourse, a tribute to worldly success. Moreover, whereas McLean lauded “self-made men” for what they could do for the nation, Clay praised such businessmen in order to garner support from the nation.

Tensions between the two interpretations raged during the nineteenth century in the United States and Britain. Social Darwinists gloried in what they interpreted to be the heroism of individuals who rose to worldly success despite daunting obstacles. On the other hand, Social Gospelers worried that industrial and urban growth, along with rapidly expanding inequality, reflected and exacerbated diminishing community loyalties. Such heated debates elicited intense and voluminous declarations of ideology. Despite the wealth and power promoting Social Darwinism, Social Gospelers held their own better than we might now expect, providing the foundation for Progressivism and the New Deal. Nonetheless, so successful were Social Darwinists in this competition for cultural authority that they
ultimately defined the dominant national ideal. They even claimed the famous Social Gospeler Horatio Alger as one of their own, although not one hero in his countless popular boys’ stories got rich or “pulled himself by his bootstraps” without help from others.13

According to a popular advocate of Social Darwinism in 1888, “The chief glory of America is, that it is the country in which genius and industry find their speediest and surest reward. Fame and fortune are here open to all who are willing to work for them.” Neither “class distinctions nor social prejudices, neither differences of birth, religion, nor ideas, can prevent the man of true merit from winning the just reward of his labors in this favored land.” Therefore, America was “emphatically a nation of self-made men, and it is to the labors of this worthy class that our marvelous national prosperity is due.”14

This quotation, typical of innumerable such paeans to individualism and worldly success, highlights some of their psychological consequences. Material success, for instance, became a measure of character. Scholars and social workers who work on poverty-related issues today see the effects on poor people of an ethos that tells people daily that their failures are entirely their own doing. Conversely, the arrogance of the successful can be astonishing, as when George W. Bush told Oprah Winfrey during a televised interview in 2000 that he had received nothing but “love” from his parents.

By 1900, “self-made success” reverberated throughout American culture, with consequences in public policy. For instance, in 1909, John Kirby, Jr., accepted the presidency of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) with a rousing
speech that presumed that the state’s proper role was to support businessmen. What justified the NAM in this expectation? It spoke for the “great army of men of wealth and influence” who arose “from the humblest conditions in which men are born.” Such men “yesterday were struggling to get the upperhand of poverty” but “are to-day in easy circumstances and to-morrow will be numbered among the class of men who constitute the bone and sinew of the Nation’s prosperity.” Having “started in life with nothing but principle and pluck,” they were the men who had earned the right to the nation’s respect and support.\(^\text{15}\)

These allegedly self-made men truly believed that they had earned that “wealth and influence” and that they, therefore, knew best how to direct the nation’s resources.\(^\text{16}\) As Kirby said, they were “men of intelligence and character, patriotic men, to whose keeping the future of the country can safely be entrusted.” The support that the NAM and other businessmen expected and received included state opposition to labor organizations “in the cause of righteous industrial independence,” as well as protective tariffs, the U.S. Department of Commerce, and the Panama Canal.\(^\text{17}\) Businessmen in Puritan New England, or even Franklin’s era, who claimed that public resources were their due by virtue of their “wealth and influence” risked public scorn. Calvinist John Winthrop would have accused them of a “covetous and corrupt heart,” as he did Robert Keayne in 1639.\(^\text{18}\) For the last century or so, however, the champions of individualist, material success have called for our collective support with a free conscience and to public acclaim.

How and Why Business Historians Can Challenge the Fallacy of Self-made Success

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The self-made fallacy also devalues teamwork. Yet, anyone who fails to appreciate the value of cooperation and coordination will fail at most any professional endeavor, day-trading and gambling excepted. I need not document this for an audience of business historians. This understanding is only one reason why business historians, collaborating with their colleagues in management and organization studies, avoid seduction by the illusion of self-making and are well suited to disabuse others of it.

People knowledgeable about how businesses and other organizations operate appreciate the importance of teamwork. They also understand the necessity for coordination, flows of authority and responsibility, and communication within an organization, even a small one. They have always grasped that firms need access to external finance and that they are, therefore, exposed to the demands and influences of funding sources. As well, they increasingly realize the intricacies and complexities of interactions between organizations and the state. All of these understandings immunize us against too great an emphasis on individual agency.

Instead, our field, if anything, has erred too far in the other direction, minimizing the efficacy of individuals and, too often, defining “the firm” as the unit of analysis. Some of us, such as Alfred Chandler, erred more on the side of historical determinism than on “the great man theory of history.” Business history analyses still feature trends that individuals can shape but that are not subject to individual “will” in Nietzsche’s or Thomas Carlyle’s sense. Individuals prosper to the extent that they innovate and excel within trends, such as industrialization, bureaucratization, urbanization, etc. We remain safe from the self-made conceit.
We can do more, as well. Per H. Hansen argues that “a cultural and narrative approach” can improve business historians’ insights and impacts. Challenging the self-made fallacy offers a cluster of opportunities for doing so. The narrative's lauding of self-made heroes also constructs a set of historical memories that shape cultural identities. Mads Mordhorst urges us to challenge these dominant narratives with counter-narratives that can shape a better future.¹⁹

Business historians can also begin to move others away from the dominant Western illusion of self-made success. We can, for instance, attack it directly. In Pull I argued explicitly against the possibility of self-made success in business (and, by implication, other professions) because of the importance of social capital in all professional interactions. My current work tracks back into early modern history to recover the communal and religious sources of self-making’s cultural potency.

Business historians can also challenge self-making narratives in their analyses of organizational dynamics or of the interactions between firms and their financial or political environments. Almost every publication presents an opportunity for a sentence or two to help whittle away at the narrative’s bulwarks. If we have audiences among business students or their faculty, we can critique individualistic presumptions that do neither individuals nor their employers any good. I hasten to add that I do not intend that we advocate a diminution of personal responsibility for productive work. The trick is to appreciate the balance between individuals’ efforts and their contexts, with the ultimate goal that successful people will recognize their debts to their communities.
Another model for doing this work radiates from the pages of Andrew Popp’s *Entrepreneurial Families: Business, marriage and life in the early nineteenth century*. In this deeply documented and graceful monograph, we learn about John and Elizabeth Shaw, who built a successful firm with a “long and distinguished” life. Popp could have reconstructed John Shaw into a self-made hero. That, however, would have required ignoring the roles of Elizabeth Shaw, other connections, and complex conditions—too often standard practice. Instead he set out “to de-centre or, instead, re-humanize the economic by considering it in the context” of building a life as well as a firm. Moreover, for “John and Elizabeth Shaw their entrepreneurship and family business existed in service to a greater set of priorities that ordered their decisions and choices as they followed the project of trying to make a life that they could consider good.” In other words, they believed that family, community, and philanthropy were fundamental to gaining and legitimating their material acquisitions as they wove together “religion and earthly reward.” These are people whom Benjamin Franklin would have admired, who “improved” themselves in service to both ambition and duty.20

1 Andrew Mellon became one of the world’s financial leaders, was Treasury Secretary to three presidents, and built the art collection that formed the basis of the National Gallery of Art.

3 Mellon’s charity was of a private sort, assisting people with whom he had personal contacts or relationships. Mellon, *Thomas Mellon*, 47-79.


8 For the classic statement of Social Darwinism’s justifications for using state resources only on behalf of the fortunate, see any of the many editions of Herbert Spencer’s 1884 *The Man versus the State*. Among other points therein, he expressed his concerns that a paternalistic state discouraged individuals’ efforts at self-improvement.


12 As Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explain in *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday,
1966), cultural and ideological presumptions come to the fore under stress. Thus, both individuals and groups will make their values explicit under pressures that challenge their views or interests.


15 John Kirby, Jr., “Address of Mr. John Kirby, Jr., in Accepting the Presidency of the National Association of Manufacturers, May 19, 1909,” *American Industries* 9, no. 8 (1 June 1909): 5-10.


17 Kirby, “Address,” 10.

