Nota de investigación/Research note

Oral history and business history in emerging markets

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ABSTRACT

This note describes the motivation, structure, and use of the Creating Emerging Markets (CEM) oral history-based project at the Harvard Business School. The project consists of lengthy interviews with business leaders from emerging markets. By June 2024, 183 interviews had been conducted with business leaders in 34 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Selected interviewees needed at least three decades of experience in business, and they must be assessed as highly impactful. The CEM project was conceived from the beginning as a public goods project. The transcripts of interviews are fully accessible on the project website. They can be downloaded by anyone with an internet connection, and they can be used in research and teaching without permission. The note goes on to explain how the CEM database has been employed in multiple academic publications, targeted at both historical and management audiences, and employing multiple methodologies. Examples include a study of gender and skin color stereotypes in the film industries in India, a comparison of how businesses perceived political risk in Latin America and South Asia, an analysis of business investment in education, and a study of spiritual philanthropy in emerging markets. Multiple methodologies have been employed including coding and the application of machine learning to undertake facial and text analysis of CEM interviews.

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Historial oral e historia empresarial en mercados emergentes

RESUMEN

En esta nota se describe la motivación, estructura y uso del proyecto de historia oral «Creación de mercados emergentes (CEM)» de Harvard Business School (HBS). El proyecto consta de extensas entrevistas con líderes empresariales de mercados emergentes. A principios de junio de 2024 se habían realizado 183 entrevistas en 34 países de África, Asia, Medio Oriente y América Latina. Para ser entrevistados se necesitaban al menos tres décadas de experiencia empresarial y ser evaluados como de gran impacto. CEM fue concebido desde un principio como un bien público. Las transcripciones de las entrevistas están disponibles en la web del proyecto. De esta manera, cualquiera puede descargar este recurso y utilizarlo en investigación y enseñanza. En esta nota se explica cómo se ha empleado la base de datos CEM en publicaciones académicas, dirigidas a audiencias especializadas tanto en historia como en gestión de empresas. Los ejemplos incluyen un estudio de los estereotipos de género y color de piel en las industrias cinematográficas de la India; una comparación de cómo las empresas perciben el riesgo político en América Latina y el sur de Asia; un análisis de la inversión empresarial en educación, y un estudio de la filantropía espiritual en los mercados emergentes. Se han empleado múltiples metodologías, incluida la codificación y la aplicación de aprendizaje automático para realizar análisis faciales y de texto de las entrevistas.

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Recent decades have seen much new research on the business and economic history of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and selected countries in Latin America. In a discipline once dominated by the experiences of Western Europe, the United States and Japan, there is a new and welcome diversity. Moreover, while in the past there was a tendency to problematize the Global South –explaining why institutional voids led to challenges to create modern business enterprises equivalent to rich countries– there is now a recognition that the experience of the Global South was different rather than being inferior to rich countries (Lluch, Monsalve Zanetti and Bucheli, 2021). Austin, Dávila and Jones (2017) coined the term "alternative business history" for the emerging world. This research note argues that oral history can play a pivotal role in further facilitating the business history of emerging markets in recent decades.

There is a considerable constraint on the further growth of the business history of the Global South. The business history of the West has relied heavily on access to corporate records. These are much less available in emerging markets, and even more so after the end of the colonial era in Africa and Asia. Colonial governments in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries often kept extensive archival records, which provide data on business, even if from the lens of the colonizer. The same can be said for multinationals, such Unilever and Ford. The historical archives of Western multinationals are valuable resources for the business history of the Global South before the 1950s, and in some cases afterwards, although again the information is from a particular lens. However corporate archives in the post-1960s period, especially on locally owned firms, are rare. In many countries, there is no tradition of companies maintaining archives, and if archives are retained, there is no tradition of opening archives to academic researchers. Often this is because the histories of firms and families are intermingled. In many countries, especially perhaps in Latin America, there has been a long-running distrust and antagonism towards business in academia and many sections of the population. This hardly incentivizes firms to retain and make available written records of their past.

The absence of corporate archives is a striking feature across Global South. Corporate archives are a rarity in Latin America. In India, the situation is only slightly better. As Chinmay Tumbe (2015), a prominent business historian in India, has observed, "there are thousands of firms in India that have a history of over fifty years and yet, the number of professional corporate archives is in single digits". These include the archives of Tata, Godrej, Cipla, and the State Bank of India. In China, there are extant archives of foreign firms expropriated after the Communist Revolution in 1949, such as British American Tobacco. China's global giants which were started after the reforms of the late 1970s, including Huawei and Tencent, do not allow access to corporate archives. In general, the last decade has seen a strong reduction of access to all historical archives in China, and especially for foreigners (Jones and Comunale, 2019).

Because of the scarcity of historical materials in corporate archives, oral history can assume a special importance in filling this void. The desire to help fill informational voids was the primary motivation behind the Creating Emerging Markets (CEM) project at the Harvard Business School. The project was devised by Geoffrey Jones, who oversaw a set of audio interviews with prominent business leaders in Argentina and Chile conducted by Andrea Lluch, then a Research Fellow at Harvard Business School, in 2007 and 2008. The project was re-launched in 2012 after Strategy professor Tarun Khanna joined as co-director, and it was expanded geographically. CEM has since grown into an archive of 183 lengthy interviews (as of June 2024), most of them on video, with leaders or former leaders of firms and NGOs from 34 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. In Latin America, the project currently has interviews with business leaders based in Argentina (16), Brazil (8), Chile (11), Colombia (13), Costa Rica (4), Mexico (6), Peru (8) and Uruguay (3).

Several criteria were employed to select business leaders who would be interviewed. A starting point was that selected interviewees needed at least three decades of experience in business. The aim from the beginning was to capture how things had changed over time. Many countries in the Global South have undergone rapid change since the 1970s –often taking the form of a transition from extensive state intervention to more market economies– and the project aimed to capture these changes from the perspective of business. The interviews seek to address pivotal moments of transition in the regions. This approach shapes the format of interviews. Typically interviews begin by exploring the family and early life of business leaders, and then proceed chronologically as they built their careers. There is no template of questions, although certain themes are recurring. They include innovation, raising finance, the role of family and succession, government relations, corruption, and the responsibility of business to society.

A second criterion for the selection of interviewees is that they must be highly impactful. This is a subjective measure, but the project seeks advice from Harvard Business School's regional research centers –located in Montevideo, Johannesburg, Dubai, Mumbai, and Shanghai, with outposts elsewhere in their respective regions– and from other regional and industry experts. The definition of highly impactful has broadened over time. The original twenty interviews in Argentina and Chile were focused on the leaders of the diversified business groups which were so prominent in those countries. Over time the interview base has been extended to include, for example, highly impactful NGOs and people employed in cultural industries such as the cinema. Highly impactful small and medium enterprises, such as eco-tourism businesses in Costa Rica, medium-sized but innovative businesses, such as a social enterprise based around organic farming in Egypt, have been added. Whatever the industry, the interviewee is always a founder, long-term leader, or former leader. Relatively few professional chief executives have been interviewed.

CEM interviews take the form of conversations rather than using a Question-and-Answer style format, and they are primarily conducted by Harvard Business School faculty. As of June 2024, 26 current Harvard Business School faculty have conducted interviews, eight former faculty, and three faculty from other Harvard schools. In order to assist scaling, experiments were conducted with other interviewees, including research associates, MBA students and non-Harvard faculty, but it was established that the optimal interviews were conducted by Harvard Business School faculty who had the expertise –and confidence– to conduct lengthy interviews with very senior leaders. A partial exception to this practice is in Latin America. Andrea Lluch was employed for three years as a Research Fellow at Harvard Business School, and she launched

the project with Jones. After leaving the School –but retaining an affiliation with the David Rockefeller Center at Harvard University– Lluch continued to undertake most interviews in Latin America.

The CEM project was conceived from the beginning as a public goods project. The transcripts of interviews are held in the Baker Library and fully accessible on the project website (Creating Emerging Markets). They can be downloaded by anyone with an internet connection, and they can be used in research and teaching without permission. Most Latin American interviews are conducted in Spanish and transcripts are available in both Spanish and English translation, while the Latin American interviews conducted in English have a Spanish translation. In his *Oral History in Latin America*, David Carey has described the project as "an impressive model for multilingual collections". The web page holding each interview contains a summary of each interview and a guide to additional references. In addition, there is a video clip library with approaching 500 clips which can be downloaded and used in the classroom or elsewhere without permission.

The oral history database has been employed in multiple academic publications, targeted at both historical and management audiences, and employing multiple methodologies. There are, of course, some obvious limitations of the data. The selection of interviewees cannot be regarded as "representative". Rather it reflected subjective assessments of impact, as well as the willingness of the interviewees to engage in an open discussion of their careers which would be made available on the web. In order to avoid providing a Harvard platform for miscreants, people who were suspected of ethical transgressions were excluded, creating a bias towards more virtuous figures. There was a considerable bias towards family members, except in Africa where executives were more prominent. Only 42 of the total 183 interviews are women, which reflects the under-representation of women in business in many countries. In some countries there were specific biases. All eight of the interviews conducted in Turkey were with secular business leaders, while Islamist business leaders have been the fastest growing group since the 1990s. These limitations are inevitably mentioned by referees, but the fact that publications have survived the referring process in high quality journals– indicates that the dataset is also perceived as having more benefits than drawbacks.

A few examples of publications using the CEM database show how the interviews can be used to explore multiple subjects. Among the articles published in business and economic history journals, Sheth, Jones and Spencer (2021) used the CEM interviews to explore gender and skin color stereotypes in the film industry in India between 1947 and 1991. Bollywood was, and is, enormously important in world cinema, producing at least as many films as Hollywood, though at much lower levels of profitability. However, its history is enormously challenging to explore. Between Indian independence in 1947 and the 1990s the Indian government refused to recognize it as an "official" industry, so it was organized informally, with considerable criminal money involved in funding. As a result, written archives are non-existent. Oral history offered a path out of this void. Using CEM interviews with prominent actors and actresses, the article was able to document how Bollywood, the largest cinema in India, privileged paler skin over darker skin, and preferred to present women in stereotypical ways lacking agency. The CEM material was supplemented by another database which drew on a television talk show in Hindi and Urdu languages.

While Sheth, Jones and Spencer (2021) used the CEM interviews in a straightforward way, quoting the interviewees at length, other publications using the CEM materials employed more formal methodologies. Jones and Comunale (2018) examined how businesses perceived political risk in Latin America and South Asia. Using QSR-NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, the study developed a set of first-order coding to describe and identify different types of political risk cited by interviewees. Thirty-seven discreet examples of political risk were identified. The study then undertook repeated cycles of coding in order to develop a second order set of risk categories. Five categories of risk were identified across the two regions: corruption, excessive bureaucracy, macro-economic and policy turbulence, political instability, and violence. What emerged were strong regional differences in perceptions and responses to risks. Macroeconomic and political turbulence was the biggest perceived source of risk in Latin America. Excessive bureaucracy was the biggest source of perceived risk in South Asia.

A different methodology was employed by Giacomin, Jones and Salvaj (2021) who employed the CEM database to examine business investment in education in emerging markets since the 1960s. The article used a sample of 110 people interviewed for the CEM database by October 2018 to create descriptive statistics concerning both engagement in education and motivation of business leaders. The study showed that more than three-quarters of the business leaders invested in education as a non-profit activity. It then identified three different types of motivations: values driven, context focused, and firm focused. It is difficult to think of an alternative source of data which could have identified motivations, but the major contribution of the CEM database was to allow regional comparisons. The study found significant variations in terms of investment execution, structure, and impact. In South and Southeast Asia, there was a preference for long-term investment in primary and secondary education. In Latin America and Africa, some initiatives sometimes had a shorter-term connotation, but with high-profile projects in partnerships with foreign universities and international organizations. In terms of execution, foundations emerged as a preferred way of structuring investment in education across all geographies, but specifically among large family business groups.

A striking feature of CEM is that it has also provided a source for articles in top-level management journals as well as in business and economic history. Typically, this has involved employing coding methodologies in a more rigorous fashion than in historical journals. An early example was Gao *et al.* (2017), published in *Strategic Management Journal* which used the database to explore the importance of reputation in facilitating corporate longevity in emerging markets. The study combined induction and deduction to propose reputation as a meta-resource that allowed firms to activate their conventional resources. Reputation was conceptualized as consisting of prominence, perceived quality, and resilience, and the study developed a process model that illustrated the mechanisms that allowed reputation to facilitate survival in ways that persisted over time. As of June 2024, the article has attracted a significant 426 citations according to Google.

A second publication in a top management journal was Giacomin and Jones (2022) which was a study of philanthropy

in emerging markets, published in the *Journal of Business Ethics.* This study triangulated CEM interviews with external public information. From the CEM database, it employed 70 interviews from eighteen countries featuring business leaders linked to foundations. A philanthropic profile for each interviewee was created as a basis for triangulation. For each interview, statements about their philanthropy and the work of their foundation were isolated. The result was a total of 218 Text segments compromising over 14,000 words. These statements were then used to investigate the ethics of their philanthropy using a grounded theory method with quotes interpreted as a record of each interviewee's motives and perceptions of their activity. The study performed multiple readings of the text segments to develop a data structure. As a first step, there was manual-open coding using a list of over 40 keywords which obtained about 45 first order terms. The data was then analyzed again and there was axial coding to determine seven second-order themes. The broad conclusion was that philanthropic foundations in emerging markets had distinctive characteristics from their counterparts in rich countries. The study identified this as "spiritual philanthropy" which, drawing on family traditions, culture, and religious values, emphasized charitable giving and social responsibility. The study theorized that as business leaders in emerging markets are more directly exposed to dire social, educational and health deprivation than their developed country counterparts, they were more focused on delivering immediate benefits to communities in their home countries, and less inclined towards grandiose "world making" seen especially with large US foundations.

A final example of innovative methodology was Choudhury *et al.* (2019) published in *Strategic Management Journal* which employed machine learning to facial and text analysis of CEM interviews. This experimental article used both interview transcripts and videos and employed three different methods –unsupervised topic modeling of text data to generate new measures of textual variance, sentiment analysis of text data, and supervised machine learning coding of facial images with a convolutional neural network algorithm, to examine CEO oral communication. The study produced interesting predictive results, including showing that chief executives who were more dramatic expressing themselves were less likely to engage in major acquisitions.

Finally, it should be noted that the CEM project has also produced significant teaching materials. Jones, Khanna, and Wright (2018) and Jones *et al.* (2019) are Harvard Business School teaching cases employing CEM video materials to teach corruption and innovation in emerging markets respectively. Jones and Harrell (2024) use one of the CEM interviews as the basis for a case on the Egyptian social entrepreneur Helmy Abouleish, who together with his father Ibrahim built a successful organic farming business in the Egyptian desert from the 1970s, and engaged in major educational and cultural investments in that country, motivated by Anthroposophy and Islam. These cases have published Teaching Notes or Teaching Plans to assist instructors using the cases.

CEM might be best seen as a pilot project which has demonstrated how oral history can bring value to contemporary business and economic history. It is exciting to envisage the creation of similar projects with different selection criterion –say middle managers of large corporations or founders of small and medium-sized companies, or labor leaders– and the development of innovative methodologies using Artificial Intelligence and other methods to exploit the new materials.

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