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The Corporation as Family: The Gendering of Corporate Welfare, 1890-1930 (review)

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declining production, foreign competition, downsizing, environmental issues, and corporate consolidations) will inspire the reader to turn the page, only to find (alas!) the endnotes. Judging from Roger Olien's excellent essay on the oil and gas industry in *The New Handbook of Texas* (1996), I eagerly anticipate a succeeding volume.

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Nikki Mandell. *The Corporation as Family: The Gendering of Corporate Welfare, 1890–1930*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. x + 208 pp. ISBN 0-8078-2685-5, \$49.95 (cloth); 0-8078-5351-8, \$19.95 (paper).

American employers, like their employees, viewed the late nineteenth-century transformation of the workplace with alarm. They worried that the growing distance between themselves and their employees was eroding their relationships with workers and undermining their efforts to control workers and work processes. To address these concerns, several employers began experimenting with welfare programs in the 1880s, and by the 1920s, according to Nikki Mandell's new history of welfare work in the United States, "80 percent of the nation's largest companies conducted at least some type of welfare work" (p. 4). Mandell's book, *The Corporation as Family*, focuses on welfare managers, the social context that influenced their work, and their efforts to shape labor relations in the modern workplace. In contrast to earlier scholars, Mandell treats welfare managers as important actors in their own right and not simply as allies of employers. She provides us with a lively portrait of the women and men who first sought to manage labor relations, adding a needed dimension to existing histories of management and contributing to a growing literature on gender and business.

Mandell argues that welfare managers, nearly half of whom were women, looked to the Victorian family as a model for workplace relationships. They adopted family metaphors in part because this language resonated with late nineteenth-century concerns about the health of American families. At a time when many observers worried that families, especially working-class families, were in crisis, welfare managers promoted the workplace as a space for learning and practicing proper family roles. On another level, welfare managers sought to use the metaphor of family to regulate the relationship

between employers and employees. Employers, as “corporate fathers,” were to provide workers with economic security while also modeling the benefits of the work ethic. Employees, like children, would respond with obedience, gratitude, and a commitment to self-improvement. Welfare managers were the “corporate mothers” who would help both parties fulfill their roles.

Business leaders warmed to family metaphors in part because those metaphors made the hierarchical relations of the factory appear natural and benevolent. The language of family provided a useful alternative to another way of talking about labor relations: the language of class. Other scholars, including Angel Kwolek-Folland (*Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930*, 1994), have noted the attractiveness of family metaphors to business leaders, but Mandell offers a new perspective on why welfare managers used the language of family. She argues that welfare managers favored this language precisely because it provided an alternate path to reforming the corporation. Mandell recounts numerous cases in which welfare managers pressed “corporate fathers” to fulfill their familial role by providing living wages, improving job security, and implementing shorter hours (p. 49). Previous scholars stressed the efforts of welfare managers to reform workers, whereas Mandell provides evidence that welfare managers were also important actors in an early struggle to shape the modern workplace.

Mandell uses her archival research to add depth and complexity to our portrait of the welfare manager. Some of the welfare managers in Mandell’s book fit the mold of the middle-class reformer, but many were from working-class backgrounds. Some viewed workers as “merely unenlightened children,” whereas others were highly attuned to the many challenges facing workers in an age of industrial transformation (p. 115). Sometimes her welfare managers challenged their corporate bosses; at other times, they were eager to serve their employers’ interests. These contradictions also complicated the efforts of welfare managers to construct a professional identity for themselves. On the one hand, welfare managers adopted the language of maternalism to stress their feminine attributes of sensitivity and intuition, thus defining themselves in opposition to foremen, their competitors for authority over managing labor relations. On the other hand, welfare managers, cognizant of the dangers of gender hierarchy, “carefully avoided defining their new positions as inherently feminine” (p. 88). Instead, they argued that their decision making was rooted in system and science, not in maternal knowledge (p. 92). Mandell’s discussion of maternalism should be of interest to a broad range of feminist scholars, because she shows how women

in the early twentieth-century business world, in contrast to their female colleagues in government and nonprofits, viewed maternalism with some suspicion.

Despite their efforts, welfare managers never achieved the authority and influence they hoped for. Mandell argues that they failed for a variety of reasons, including poor leadership. More important, their close identification with the family model damaged their bid for authority in the workplace. Employees never accepted the family model in part because “corporate fathers” refused to honor their part of the bargain by paying living wages and providing adequate leisure time. Simultaneously, the familial model marginalized “corporate mothers” and their work. In the end, female welfare managers were muscled out by male personnel managers who “emphasized the masculine components” of their work (p. 156). Welfare work did not disappear; it was subordinated to the new personnel departments that began to emerge in the 1920s. Mandell’s book highlights elements of welfare work that persisted, including efforts to make the workplace more homelike. Mandell also introduces us to elements of welfare work that vanished, enriching our understanding of early struggles to shape labor relations in the modern corporation.

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Samuel P. Black, Jr., and John Paul Rossi. *Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Automobile Insurance: Sam P. Black, Jr., and the Rise of Erie Insurance, 1923–1961*. New York: Routledge, 2001. xv + 358 pp. ISBN 0-8153-2915-6, \$70.00.

Because of the narrowness of the authors’ focus and their methodological approach, *Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Automobile Insurance* may disappoint those hoping to gain significant insight into entrepreneurship and the history of the automobile insurance industry. Samuel P. Black’s first-person account of his career with Erie Insurance comprises most of the text, but John Paul Rossi uses the opening section to argue for the significance of Black’s career. After reviewing varying interpretations of entrepreneurship, Rossi sides with Joseph Schumpeter and equates the term with innovation. He argues that Black exemplified entrepreneurship because he developed innovative products and approaches and established an innovative culture at Erie Insurance.