AMER 61011 Corporate Fictions

Course unit director: Dr Peter Knight

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Content:
This course will examine how corporations have been imagined in literature, sociological writings and popular culture, focusing in particular on the United States. It begins by covering the legal and historical development of the modern American corporate form in the middle of the nineteenth century, then traces the emergence of anti-trust agitation in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, before looking at developments in corporate life and anti-corporate protest in the second half of the twentieth century, and ending up with contemporary fears and fantasies about corporations in the age of globalisation. The course focuses on a number of key works of American literature that have attempted to make sense of the corporate form of industrial organisation. One of the central questions is whether corporate fictions are always doomed to failure: if the novel traditionally focuses on individuals, how does it represent collective enterprise? Complicating the issue is the fact that at the heart of the invention of the corporation is the “legal fiction of corporate personality,” an adaptation of the 14th Amendment that had originally been intended to grant legal rights to ex-slaves. Although the corporate legal form was designed expressly to by-pass normal standards of personal legal liability, it has nevertheless steadily accrued legal rights as it it were an individual. The nature of corporate personhood has been a recurring concern for not just for corporate lawyers and anti-trust activists but also for American novelists, filmmakers and social theorists.

Credits: 30

Teaching method:
One 2-hour seminar each week over one semester.

Assessment:
By coursework: one 6,000-word essay.

Set Texts:
Copies of the main novels for each week have been ordered for Blackwells. Of the three general histories of the corporation that we will be looking at (Nace, Bakan and Micklethwait/Wooldridge), I would recommend buying Nace’s Gangs of America as it contains the most useful historical summaries. Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Philip Scranton, eds, Major Problems in American Business History (2006) also comes recommended as an introduction to some of the historical controversies surrounding corporations.
Week 1

**Introduction: The Good, the Bad and the Psychotic**

Since its emergence the modern corporation has been praised as the engine of wealth and vilified as the source of social decline. Ambrose Bierce famously defined a corporation as “an ingenious device for obtaining [individual] profit without individual responsibility.” In this week we will set out the terms of this debate, as well as beginning to look at the historical development of the corporate form.

**Set Reading**


**Further Reading**

Naomi Klein, *No Logo*

Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand*

Thomas K. McCraw, ed., *Creating Modern Capitalism*

Larry Schweikart, *The Entrepreneurial Adventure*

David Leverenz, *Paternalism Incorporated*

James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Culture Revolution*

Week 2

**Corruption**

There were comparatively few American corporations in the first half of the nineteenth century, and those that existed were in effect state-granted monopolies for carrying out major public projects where the financial liability was too big for any individual or partnership to bear. This situation, however, was vulnerable to abuse, with corporations bribing state officials in order to be granted the necessary licences. In particular the building of the nation’s railroads was accompanied by unprecedented financial and political corruption, with some truly staggering tales of financial skulduggery. Although the corporation in theory introduced more impersonal forms of business transaction, in practice insider information and personal influence continued to play a vital role. The question is whether this is necessarily true of large-scale business.

**Set Reading**

Charles Francis Adams, “A Chapter of Erie” and “The Railroad System” (1871) [available online at www.yamaguchy.netfirms.com/7897401/adams/adams_list.html or www.archive.org/details/chaptersoferie00adamrich]


**Further Reading**

David Leverenz, *Paternalism Incorporated*, ch. 5

Steve Fraser, *Wall Street: A Cultural History*

Matthew Josephson, *Robber Barons*


Ackerman, *The Gold Ring* (1988)


Week 3  The Rise and Fall of Republican Individualism
One of the apparent ironies of American capitalism is that it was the traditionally valued spirit of individual entrepreneurialism—embodied in figures such as Carnegie and Rockefeller—that single-handedly forged the mega-corporations that in turn crowded out the little man. William Dean Howells had a very conflicted view of the economic changes taking place in the late nineteenth century, and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* captures the contradictory nostalgia for republican individualism in the age of corporate capitalism.

**Set Reading**
William Dean Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885)

**Further Reading**
Brook Thomas, *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (1997), esp. ch. 5 and 8
Howard Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (1991), esp. ch. 6 and 7
Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*
Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand*

Weeks 4 + 5  The Corporate Sublime
What happens when the corporation (in the form of the trust, a legal development of the 1880s that allowed businesses to expand to gigantic size) grows so large that it is impossible to comprehend, let alone represent? And how can blame and responsibility be pinned on these mega-corporations that seem so large that they are like forces of nature? Frank Norris’s novel tackles these issues.

**Set Reading**
Frank Norris, *The Octopus*

**Further Reading**
Walter Benn Michaels, “Corporate Fictions,” in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*
Brook Thomas, “Walter Benn Michaels and Cultural Poetics: Where’s the Difference?” in *The New Historicism: And Other Old-Fashioned Topics*
Christophe den Tandt, “Sublime (Re)production: Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* and *The Pit*,” in *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism*
Week 6 Reading Week

Week 7 Conspiracy and Complicity
If the legal form of modern corporations began to blur the line between individual and collective agency, then who or what was pulling the strings of the market, and the larger theatre of history? Americans had often turned to the rhetoric of conspiracy as a way of giving vent to nativist fears, but towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth they also turned to conspiracy as a form of popular political economy. This week we will look at Upton Sinclair’s muckraking novel about the seemingly manufactured panic of 1907, focusing in particular on how Sinclair and other writers imagined the relationship between complicity, collusion and conspiracy.

Set Reading
Upton Sinclair, *The Moneychangers* (1907)

Further Reading
David Zimmerman, *Panic!: Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction* (2006), ch. 4
Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*
Hofstadter, ed., *Coin’s Financial School*

Week 8 Corporate Totalitarianism
The 1920s saw a backlash against the pervasiveness of the business spirit in American life (think, for example, of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* or Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*), which became part of a much wider critique of corporate-managerial capitalism in the 1930s (e.g. John Dos Passos’s *USA*, or Berle and Means’ *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*). Despite marking an unprecendent surge of American corporate dominance, the post-WWII period also witnessed an agonised reconsideration of the corporation, which became identified as the source of stultifying conformity (for both those who worked for corporations and those who bought its products), which in turn was seen as the thin end of the wedge of totalitarianism. The values of heroic, manly individualism and dissidence cultivated by Beat writers such as William Burroughs, Norman Mailer, Ken Kesey and Joseph Heller were expressed in opposition to corporate blandness, but these fears were also to be found in the popular social theory of the day.

Set Reading
Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955)
William Whyte, *Organization Man*, ch. 1 and Conclusion

Further Reading
Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*

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Week 9  Corporate Paranoia
If corporations have become so powerful, how can you tell just how much influence they have over our daily lives? On the other hand, is that view of corporate power just paranoid nonsense? In this week we will look at Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, one of among several American postmodernist novels that have tried to plot the intrusion of corporations into our minds and even our bodies.

Set Reading

Further Reading
Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*
Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* (2000)
Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*
Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*
Tony Tanner, *City of Words*
Joseph Tabbi, *The Postmodern Sublime*
David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*

Week 10  Transnationalism
What is the relationship between the corporation and the nation state?

Set Reading
Don DeLillo, *The Names*

Week 11  Posthumanism and the Future of the Corporation
How do we imagine the future of the corporation? Will it become like a cyborg, an indestructible entity that has a hive-like mind of its own? And are forms of corporate activity undermining the very notion of individual human agency?

Set Reading

Further Reading
Neil Badminton, ed., *Posthumanism*
N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*
Kevin Kelley, *Out of Control*
Joseph Tabbi, *The Postmodern Sublime*
Dani Cavallaro, *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*
Chris Hables Gray, ed., *The Cyborg Handbook*

Week 12  Better Living Through Chemistry
In this final week we take stock with Richard Powers’s wonderful novel that charts the rise of a mega-corporation alongside the story of one of its victims.
Set Reading
Additional Reading on the History of the Corporation

* = the most important items


*Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul*


