

AMER 61011 Corporate Fictions

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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 if 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

Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* (2004) [or documentary film of the same name]

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea* (2003)

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 unprecident 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]

Ted Nace, *Gangs of America: The Rise of Corporate Power and the Disabling of Democracy* (rev. ed. 2005), esp. ch. 6-10

Further Reading

David Leverenz, *Paternalism Incorporated*, ch. 5

Steve Fraser, *Wall Street: A Cultural History*

Matthew Josephson, *Robber Barons*

Richard White, “Information, Markets, and Corruption: Transcontinental Railroads in the Gilded Age,” *Journal of American History* 90.1 (2003)

Ackerman, *The Gold Ring* (1988)

Charles P. Kindleberger, *Manias, Panics, and Crashes: A History of Financial Crises* (rev. ed. 1989)

Maury Klein, *The Life and Legend of Jay Gould* (1986)

Thomas K. McCraw, *Prophets of Regulation* (1984)

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

Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987)

Graham Thompson, *Male Sexuality under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature* (2003)

Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (1982)

David Leverenz, *Paternalism Incorporated* (2004)

Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism*

Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand*

Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.* (1998)

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

Regina Lee Blaszczyk and Philip Scranton, eds, *Major Problems in American Business History* (2006), ch. 8 ("The Age of the Octopus")

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*

Morton Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law, 1860-1970* (1992)

William G. Roy, *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the Large Industrial Corporation in America* (1997)

Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (1988)

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*

Chernow, Ron. *The House of Morgan: An American Banking Dynasty and the Rise of Modern Finance* (1990)

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 unprecedented 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*

Graham Thompson, *Male Sexuality under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature* (2003)

Graham Thompson, *The Business of America: The Cultural Production of a Postwar Nation* (2004)

Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age* (1985)

Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000)

John Plotz, "The Return of the Blob, or How Sociology Decided to Stop Worrying and Love the Crowd," in Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Matthew Tiews, eds, *Crowds* (2006), 203-33.

Adam Curtis, *The Century of the Self*, BBC TV documentary (2002) [available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/AdaCurtisCenturyoftheSelf_0>]

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

Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)

Further Reading

Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*
Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, *The Postmodern Adventure: Science, Technology and Cultural Studies at the Third Millennium* (2001)

Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture* (2000)

Patrick O'Donnell, *Latent Destinies* (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

William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984)

Further Reading

Neil Badminton, ed., *Posthumanism*

N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*

Kevin Kelley, *Out of Control*

Joseph Tabbi, *The Postmodern Sublime*

Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (1993)

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

Richard Powers, *Gain* (1998)

Additional Reading on the History of the Corporation

* = the most important items

- Alborn, Timothy. *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- *Banner, Stuart. *Anglo-American Securities Regulation: Cultural and Political Roots, 1690-1860*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Bensel, Richard Franklin. *The Political Economy of American Industrialization, 1877-1900*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Berle, Adolph and Gardiner Means. *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*. 1932.
- Bowman, Scott R. *The Modern Corporation and American Political Thought: Law, Power, and Ideology*. University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1996.
- Brandes, Stuart D. *American Welfare Capitalism, 1880-1940*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
- Carruthers, Bruce G., and Terrence C. Halliday. *Rescuing Business: The Making of Corporate Bankruptcy Law in England and the United States*. Clarendon, 1998.
- Chandler, Alfred D., Jr. *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. Comparative study of the U.S., Britain, and Germany.
- Chandler, Alfred D., Jr. *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.
- *Chandler, Alfred D., Jr. *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977
- *Cowie, Jefferson. *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labour*. New York: New Press, 2001.
- Davis, Clark. *Company Men: White-Collar Life and Corporate Cultures in Los Angeles, 1892-1941* (2000).
- Davis, John P. *Corporations: A Study of the Origin and Development of Great Business Combinations and of Their Relation to the Authority of the State*. Edited and Introduction by Abram Chayes. New York: Capricorn Books, 1961.
- *Fligstein, Neil. *The Transformation of Corporate Control*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Freyer, Tony Allan. *Regulating Big Business: Antitrust in Great Britain and America, 1880 to 1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- *Horwitz, Morton. *The Transformation of American Law*, vol. 1 and 2.
- Hovenkamp, Herbert. *Enterprise and American Law, 1836-1937*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Hurst, James Willard. *The Legitimacy of the Business Corporation in the Law of the United States, 1780-1970*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1970.
- Kolko, Gabriel. *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916*. New York: Free Press, 1963.
- Kwolek-Folland, Angel. *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870-1930*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.
- Lamoreaux, Naomi. *The Great Merger Movement in American Business, 1895-1904*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- *Leverenz, David. *Paternalism Incorporated: Fables of American Fatherhood, 1865-1940* (2004)
- *Lipartito, Kenneth, and David B. Sicilia, eds. *Constructing Corporate America: History, Politics, Culture*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Livingston, James. *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994)
- Livingston, James. *Origins of the Federal Reserve System: Money, Class, and Corporate Capitalism, 1890-1913*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Livingston, James. "The Social Analysis of Economic History and Theory: Conjectures on Late Nineteenth-Century American Development." *Radical History Review* 76 (Winter 2000): 53-79.
- *Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul*
- *Perrow, Charles. *Organizing America: Wealth, Power, and the Origins of Corporate Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- *Porter, Glenn. *The Rise of Big Business, 1860-1920* (1973/1992)
- Roe, Mark. *Strong Managers, Weak Owners: The Political Roots of American Corporate Finance*.

- Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- *Roy, William G. *Socializing Capital: The Rise of the Large Industrial Corporation in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.
- *Sklar, Martin J. *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- *Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- Wilkins, Mira. *The Emergence of Multinational Enterprise: American Business Abroad from the Colonial Era to 1914*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970.
- Wilkins, Mira. *The Maturing of Multinational Enterprise: American Business Abroad from 1914 to 1970*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974.
- *Zunz, Olivier. *Making America Corporate, 1870-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.