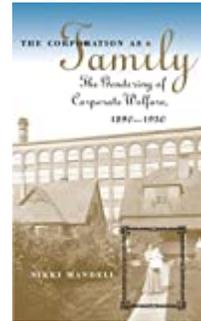




**Nikki Mandell.** *The Corporation as Family: The Gendering of Corporate Welfare, 1890-1930.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. x + 208 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5351-1; \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2685-0.



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## Like a Family? Domestic Narratives in Corporate America

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Nikki Mandell's *Corporation as Family* is a well-researched and detailed account of the rise and fall of corporate welfare work in early twentieth-century America. Drawing on an impressive range of corporate archival sources and primary documents, Mandell describes an important shift in the corporate sphere in this period, as capitalists and reformers began to look for less contentious ways to resolve conflicts with workers. Emerging within the spirit of Progressive Era reform, corporate welfare programs were designed to create a "harmonious partnership" between wage earners and their employers (p. 83). Spearheading these reforms was a new breed of corporate worker, the Welfare Manager. Inspired by reform movements such as the Social Gospel movement, corporate welfare managers worked with employers and wage earners to craft a fundamentally different relationship between labor and capital.

By the 1910s, hundreds (perhaps even thousands, the author suggests) of U.S. companies, including Plymouth Cordage, Met Life, and International Harvester,

had adopted a wide range of corporate welfare initiatives. Based on the idea that cooperative rather than adversarial labor relations would bolster productivity and reduce union conflicts, corporate welfare work entailed everything from improvements in workplace health and safety to financial plans. Some welfare activities involved physical changes to the workplace and its environs, including the installation of safety mechanisms on the factory floor, washrooms, drinking fountains, gymnasiums, break rooms, and landscaped gardens. Sears Roebuck created on-site hospital facilities and employed a full-time medical staff. Other companies attempted to more broadly enrich workers' lives by offering educational, financial, and even athletic opportunities. "Welfare work," as Mandell writes, "became the vehicle through which American business asserted an entirely new relationship between labor and management" (p. 8).

Mandell's central argument is that corporate welfare work drew both explicitly and implicitly upon the image of the Victorian family as a model for an interdependent, cooperative labor/capital relationship. More specifically, the Family ideal served as the frame for the corporate

welfare triad itself: worker, employer, and welfare manager. As the corporate Father, the employer would wisely and benevolently provide for his “family.” In return, his worker-children would pledge their loyalty to the family unit, and diligently toil to help create a successful and productive business enterprise. Finally, the Welfare Manager would serve as the corporate “Mother,” working tirelessly to maintain harmony and stability in the corporate home, and to remind family members of their mutual responsibilities. The family model was also incorporated into the goals of specific welfare programs themselves. Welfare advocates hoped that workers would be inspired to adhere to Victorian standards of thrift, sobriety, and domestic harmony in their own homes as well as in the workplace.

Like most families, however, the corporate family did not fit the ideal. While, as Mandell points out, the Victorian Family model “bound a confusing array of welfare programs into a coherent labor relations system,” ultimately it failed as an effective model for labor relations (p. 83). At the root of the problem lay the fundamental contradiction between a cooperative family unit and a competitive corporate system which placed a priority on efficiency, productivity, and profits. As the author explains, the family model “presumed that deference and loyalty were a fair and necessary exchange for economic security. Welfare workers could not persuade either workers or their employers to act on such an assumption” (p. 130).

While welfare managers enjoyed early success in designing and implementing safety improvements, company lunchrooms, and pension plans, most employers were unwilling to approve welfare practices that might pose a threat to executive power or profits. Welfare managers were unable to convince employers, for example, to grant substantive wage increases or shorter work days, changes that would have made a more immediate difference in workers’ lives. Indeed, employers often used welfare work as a substitute for wage increases, or even as an excuse for cutting wages. Finally, employers often insisted on maintaining tight control over the ways in which workers could use welfare programs. For example, although corporations introduced a broad range of long-term financial benefits such as pension and savings plans, employers exercised their prerogative to change or withdraw these plans at will, and developed strict eligibility requirements that limited workers’ autonomy over their own financial matters.

Wage earners, for their part, usually remained deeply

suspicious not only of their employers but of welfare work and welfare managers themselves. Employees were not fooled by the domestic rhetoric; they found the very idea of a corporate family “alien,” as Mandell notes (p. 130). They resented money spent on “fluff” instead of wage increases; for example, at Eastman Kodak employees grumbled that the welfare manager’s salary itself took funds away from the “real workers” (p. 117). Wage earners also resisted the intended goals of welfare activities to elevate them to middle-class standards of sobriety, thrift, and domesticity. When workers took advantage of welfare work, they frequently did so on their own terms, shaping programs to suit their own needs. Such was the case, for example, when female employees at Joseph Feiss & Company enrolled in company sewing classes in 1913, not to prepare for their future roles as wives and mothers, as welfare officials hoped, but to generate extra income.

The big story here is that of the welfare manager herself (or himself, in many cases). Mandell sets out to address gaps in the literature by examining more closely the welfare worker’s role in creating the modern workplace. She argues that previous studies of corporate welfare have focused too heavily on employer motivations, and have too often assumed welfare managers’ complicity with employers. Rather than merely acting on employer mandates, Mandell claims, welfare managers worked to convince both groups to uphold their mutual obligations within the corporate/family model. While this meant convincing wage earners to adhere to middle-class standards of diligence, thrift, and company loyalty, managers also rigorously worked to hold employers to equally high standards, lobbying for higher wages and shorter work days in addition to other welfare initiatives.

Although many welfare managers were men, Mandell focuses in particular on the experiences of women. As she notes, “The familial assumptions of the welfare system opened the door for women to enter management at an unprecedented level” (p. 155). As “lady managers,” female corporate welfare workers encountered obstinate employers who ignored their recommendations, resentful foremen who felt their power on the factory floor usurped, and suspicious wage earners. Despite these obstacles, for a time these women were immensely successful, both in fostering significant improvements in the workplace and in helping to carve out a professional space for themselves as labor relations experts.

In placing the welfare manager at the center of her narrative, Mandell provides a fascinating gendered analysis of the nascent efforts of welfare workers to con-

struct corporate welfare as a respected managerial profession, and to cast themselves as professional labor relations experts. The familial rhetoric of the welfare movement and the invocation of “corporate maternalism” to explain the role of the welfare manager would appear to stem from the reform tradition of moral authority that informed other social reform movements led by women in this period. However, Mandell convincingly demonstrates that while welfare managers deployed maternal rhetoric to justify their programs, they rejected the notion of female moral authority, and refused to present welfare management as an explicitly female occupation. Instead, she argues, welfare workers recast the “feminine virtues” needed to effectively negotiate between workers and employers as critical business skills. In the process, she writes, welfare managers constructed a “new definition of the professional business manager” (p. 85).

In an interesting twist, Mandell also describes how this marriage of feminine virtue and business skills informed the way male welfare managers approached their profession. In this period, she notes, a “new masculinity” emerged that stressed interpersonal skills and service to others, “a kind of feminization of manhood” (p. 86). She argues that male welfare workers such as W. E. C. Nazro, long-time welfare manager of the Plymouth Cordage Company, were able to inject this newly feminized but manly approach to public service into the “maternal mission” of corporate welfare (p. 87).

By the 1920s, however, corporate welfare had lost its “cultural foundations” (p. 136). Not only did it become harder to cast a maturing workforce as children in the familial scenario, but as the Victorian family ideal itself was replaced by ideas about marital companionship and sexuality, the family was no longer an appropriate model for labor relations. The welfare programs created in the early 1900s were incorporated into a new approach to labor relations, personnel management. Rooted in a consumer, rather than family, model, personnel management used welfare benefits to “sell” companies to potential laborers.

In many ways, the rise of personnel management reflected the success of welfare managers’ efforts to professionalize the field, providing for the centralization of labor policies in well-funded and organized labor departments. However, the women who had led the field a decade earlier now increasingly found themselves frozen out of this professional sphere. The U.S. Government’s efforts during World War I to systematize labor relations policies among wartime contractors (efforts which centered on government-funded training courses excluding

women), the emergence of university business schools restricted to male students, and the lack of a centralized professional association culminated in the development of a labor relations hierarchy that put male personnel managers at the top.

This study both contributes to and complicates the historiography of American business, the social and cultural dynamics of professionalization, and cultural analyses of the Family in American life. Mandell’s analysis of the intersection of domestic and corporate rhetoric is another welcome addition to recent work that places gender at the center of business and labor history. However, readers may feel that the study is at times too broad in its scope. The author’s focus on general trends means that she paints a fairly sweeping picture of corporate welfare work across the country, and pays less attention to possible regional differences in the implementation and impact of welfare work. Nor does the study sufficiently explore regional, ethnic, and racial differences in the working population itself. In other areas, Mandell gives an overly broad picture of findings from the secondary literature, and does not provide a sufficiently clear sense of where her findings fit into or depart from previous scholarship.

Readers may also be frustrated by the sometimes sparse biographical details provided for many of the welfare managers (though such efforts may have been hampered by a lack of source material). On the one hand, we hear a good deal about fascinating figures such as Gertrude Beeks, who worked for International Harvester and who exercised considerable control over the Welfare Department of the National Civic Federation (NCF). As Mandell shows, Beeks’s forceful personality, as well as her anti-socialist and anti-suffrage politics, had a significant impact on the employer-controlled NCF’s ultimate inability to serve as a professional association for welfare management. On the other hand, the book’s discussion of Beeks tends to highlight the lack of similar information about other welfare managers; we are offered only sporadic, tantalizing snapshots of other women’s education, experiences, or background, or even their affiliations with other social or political reform campaigns. The ways in which the political and class affinities of welfare managers may have informed their approach to corporate welfare, especially, receives insufficient attention.

In other respects, however, the book’s broad scope is an asset, admirably demonstrating the wider impact of the efforts of corporate welfare managers. Because of those efforts, welfare activity had become standard fare

in the workplace by the 1920s, even as the welfare manager herself disappeared from view. Today it is taken for granted that corporations will offer—indeed, are often required by state and federal law to offer—benefits ranging from clean bathrooms and cafeterias to credit unions and profit-sharing plans. Mandell’s study provides a comprehensive portrait of the movements that shaped the workplace we know today.

Finally, Mandell’s study is immensely useful for the intriguing questions it raises about the parallels between early and modern workplaces, and for its hints at the origins of the paradoxes of the modern corporation. It re-

veals the roots of a system of labor in which inequities in the labor/capital relationship came to be seen as a matter of individual responsibility, rather than as the result of systemic flaws in a capitalist economy. Now, of course, employees are “team members,” and the same notion of mutual responsibilities and obligations prevails. And, as in the earlier system, the idea of a cooperative partnership between employers and workers remains largely a myth. Far too often, productivity, efficiency, and competition continue to undermine the positive impact of “welfare” programs on workers’ lives, and corporate profits continue to take priority over corporate responsibilities.

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