

Of Business Biography, Media Romance, and Corporate Family Drama

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In October of 1990, Ted Turner and Jane Fonda appeared together on CNN's *Larry King Live* talk show to promote her latest fitness video, "Jane Fonda's Lean Routine," which gave the show's host a chance to blush, gush, and gossip about the pair he called "America's most famous couple." After a lot of small talk about what a "regular girl" Fonda was and about how Turner was a "romantic guy" who remembered "little things" and had learned to really love exercise, King finally popped the question. "I'd be remiss, guys, if I didn't ask what everyone wants to ask. Are there any future nuptials planned?" [King, 1990].

Turner and Fonda put off the query with a teasing "not yet." But theirs was not the only media marriage prefigured in the moment. Warner Home Video was the sole distributor for the Fonda aerobics empire, which boasted sales of over five million tapes, including five of the top ten selling videos of all time. Time Warner Inc., among other things the world's second largest cable operator, already owned 20 percent of the Turner Broadcasting System as well. Later in the interview, Turner also sidestepped questions about persistent rumors that Time Warner might try to purchase CNN completely. Turner and Fonda would tie the knot within the year. The two corporations would not fully consummate their union for another six. Still, both marriages were already taking place in a simultaneous and symbolic sense on the screen. At the end of the interview, Turner's son Rhett called from Tokyo, where he was working as a CNN cameraman, in an awkwardly orchestrated opportunity for Larry King to conclude by beaming, "It's all in the family!" [King, 1990].

At the press conference announcing the proposed sale of Turner Broadcasting five years later, Turner nodded his approval when Time Warner chair Gerald Levin likewise stressed, "We've always been family." Exactly what he meant became clear later that night when these two "newlyweds" also

¹ I completed my dissertation, "The Legend of Ted Turner and the Reality of the Marketplace," under the direction of Professor Allen Tullos in the Graduate Institute of Liberal Arts at Emory University in August, 1995. Also on my dissertation committee were Professors Matthew Bernstein, Dan Carter, and David Cook. A book version of the project is currently under contract with the University of California Press.

appeared on the Larry King show, and Levin revealed – dare I say intimately? – “we’ve known each other for more than 20 years, and I would have to say during that period, probably three or four times, Ted has proposed marriage.” Meanwhile the press wrapped the deal between their respective companies in familial, conjugal, even sexual imagery. “After weeks in a long, slow dance together,” ABC Nightly News reported, “today they made it to the altar of the joint press conference” [“Text of TBS/Time Warner Merger Press Conference; Transcript # 769-1” *CNN News*, September 22, 1995; King, 1995; Donvan, 1995].

I completed my dissertation on Turner just four weeks before the Time Warner deal hit the headlines. Since I summarized that work in a paper that appeared in *Business and Economic History* in the fall, I will do so only briefly here, then summarize also how I am building upon it by exploring the way Turner’s media legend mobilizes his entire life story in the service of recasting the central tenets of corporate liberalism during a period of historical transition. Turner is such a creature of the market that his personal biography is also the biography of the new ways corporate capital has come to represent and legitimize itself over the last twenty-five years. Even his romance with Jane Fonda and the family drama surrounding his father’s suicide take on this legitimizing function, and for this reason I propose that we pay them some serious historical attention.

The dissertation started from the observation that the information available about “Captain Outrageous” – a.k.a. “the Mouth of the South,” “The Superstation Superman,” and “The Prince of the Global Village” – had been so colored by hyperbole and dramatic license that, in its present form, it could not serve as the basis for any reasoned historical assessment of his significance. To fill that void, I undertook a critical investigation of that which had been so obviously ignored in the rush to lionize Turner, the many necessary historical preconditions, social pressures, and business constraints that have shaped his actions and contributed to his wealth and power. A useful study of Turner, I argued, would have to supplant the popular emphasis on his personality with the organizing principle of capital, understood not simply as the raw material of economic activity, but in the broadest sense as the complex set of dynamic social relations that sustain capitalist society itself. This led me to “follow the money” in the journalistic sense, seeking out financial, legal, and corporate records, interviews with Turner associates, and even his unpublished autobiography in order to reconstruct how he actually made his fortune. The size of this task called for triage. I included an extensive account of the strategic and financial development of Turner Advertising/Turner Communications up through the launch of the Superstation in 1976, but glossed over a similar history of CNN and Turner’s various expansionary business deals of the 1980s and ‘90s in order to conclude with an analysis of Turner’s rhetoric of media deregulation, expansion, and global do-goodism.

In the first chapter, for example, I corrected the popular impression that Turner is a self-made man who as a 24 year-old college dropout rescued his late father’s “failing” outdoor advertising business and single-handedly “turned it

around” in the face of “overwhelming odds” by dint of his driving will to succeed and innate business acumen. Probate records and other sources show that before Turner’s father killed himself, he had constructed an outdoor advertising company worth roughly around \$3.2 million, on debt of about \$1 million (in 1963 dollars). The company’s combined annual operating cash flow from operations topped \$1 million, and it came complete with excess amounts of prime downtown real estate that could be sold off to service the debt. More importantly, federal largesse in the form of the 1954 Tax Code had turned billboards into tax free cash cows – special, accelerated depreciation schedules could be used to shield revenues in such a way that they could be plowed back into expanding operations. Every seven years you could simply sell the company to yourself and jump-start the depreciation clock all over again, which the Turners did. In other words, there was no failing family business for Ted Turner to rescue in the first place, which was why he was able to start spending months at a time out on the sailing circuit shortly after his father’s death [Guthey, 1997].

In subsequent chapters I showed that similar dynamics complicate the image of Turner as an untutored genius who singlehandedly revolutionized the media landscape by mixing together UHF television, cable, new programming formats, major league sports, and satellite technology, all in ways no one had ever imagined possible. With respect to every visionary Turner “breakthrough” I revisited, a whole network of intersecting causal factors come into play, including economic, regulatory, and social developments in broadcasting, cable, and satellite technology; other people’s ideas, decisions, connections, and skills; and even more slippery cultural shifts beyond any individual’s control. This kind of investigation remains crucial for establishing the fact that Turner’s legendary autonomous agency is to a great extent a fiction. But it also replicates the notion – central to popular biography itself – that we must peel away the façade of media image to get to the hidden truth that constitutes (in this instance) Ted Turner’s “real” significance. And since the truth I highlighted was structural in nature, I risked leaving readers with the self-evident but otherwise not-too-interesting conclusion that *someone* would have eventually created a superstation and a CNN even if Ted Turner had never existed. While it won’t do to replicate the popular insistence that Ted Turner is the master of his fate and the prime mover of the “communications revolution,” neither will the assertion that “capital pulled all the strings” help to explain Ted Turner.

The way around this dilemma is not to dismiss Turner’s biographical legend, but rather to re-examine it closely according to the central organizing principle of capital as well. Such an investigation would share some of the subject matter of more traditional biographies, but would not approach Turner’s personality as some sort of interior force that shapes external reality. It also would have to resist importing capital as a deterministic “thing out there” that explains human behavior in any mechanistic fashion. Instead it would look at how Turner’s activities – along with the endless media retelling of the legendary story of those activities over the years – form part of a broader set of human activities that have as their end result the reproduction of the capitalist

social order. From this perspective Turner's personality, his love life, and his relationship with his father all count as important historical evidence because of the ways they have come to represent and reinforce new forms of capitalist and corporate organization and legitimation.

For even if the image of Ted Turner's unfettered agency is a fiction, it is still a fiction with agency, rhetorically persuasive because it both reconciles and recasts the classic liberal tension between individual autonomy and the encroachments of collective government, bureaucratic, or corporate organization. Turner's image reframes the corporate liberal response to this dilemma for the new historical moment historians have called neo-Fordism, post-Fordism, the rise of flexible accumulation, or the era of deregulation and globalization. This new moment parallels the turn-of-the-century transformation in the fabric of capitalist and corporate organization Martin Sklar and others associate with the rise of corporate liberalism itself [Sklar, 1988]. But it elevates entrepreneurial imperatives and market relations as solutions to problems previously resolved by corporate liberal emphases on rationalization, bureaucratization, and regulatory intervention.

In this context, Turner's rhetorical effect trades on a pseudo-populist challenge to the corporate control of the media in order to legitimize that control on new terms. It does so by personifying the corporation in less threatening, anti-bureaucratic ways, and by enacting in one person the symbolic insertion of the entrepreneurial principles of individual agency, innovation, and chaos into the bureaucratic organization itself. Turner's most important achievement is not the accumulation of great wealth, the creation of a few new cable channels, nor the innovation of alternative ways to exploit existing broadcast properties over new lines of distribution. He is most important for the hype itself, for the way he has come to serve as a popular icon for the shift towards what we might call corporate neo-liberalism.

For example, because Turner has become such a walking, wisecracking symbol of unfettered individual agency, his "marriages" to "Jane Warner" and to "Time Fonda" provoked remarkably similar reactions and even outcries. An anonymous Turner intimate in a recent *Vanity Fair* article recalled that many of Turner's good-ol' boy cronies were shocked when he married "Hanoi Jane." "There was a real undercurrent of betrayal," the source said. "How could he do this? Ted, the great embodiment of the American capitalist system, how could he marry her?" [Conant, 1997]. An op-ed piece published in the *Atlanta Journal* and Constitution the day after the announcement of the Time Warner deal likewise demanded "Say it ain't so!" of Captain Outrageous directly. "Say you aren't selling out and succumbing to the suits at Rockefeller Center...you're about to become the problem you've railed about through most of your career" [Williams, 1995]. Turner's combined response to both complaints is fascinating. "How could somebody who's been his own boss go and work for somebody else after 35 years?" he asked in a speech to a collection of media executives in the fall of 1995. "Well, when I married Jane Fonda, I mean, I was taking a real risk there, too. Cause she's got a lot of ideas, and she doesn't exactly toe the party line, you know." After mimicking his own pliant acquiescence to Fonda's

many demands, Turner concluded, "If I can do that I can probably live with the executives of Time Warner. At least they let me go home at night, and I get a few hours a day when I'm free and I can do whatever I want." [Conant, 1997].

As in the bedroom, so in the boardroom. Turner's analogy capitalized on the popular perception that while both new partners promised to hoist his star still higher, they threatened to eclipse it as well. His new wife did so largely because of her past iconic associations with the two arch enemies of American macho autonomy – communism and feminism – both of which raised the specter of entanglement, encroachment, and collectivist constraint on individual (male) freedom. At the same time Fonda's own celebrity aura, outspoken self-assertiveness, financial independence, and even the fact that she is the same age as Turner, all challenged his status as the very model of individual agency and corporate virility. For the maintenance of the Turner legend, it became crucial for the media to highlight the way Fonda has sacrificed her own independence for the sake of Turner's. She has become the ultimate corporate "trophy wife," who by all accounts "has wrapped herself body and soul in her new incarnation as Mrs. Ted Turner." [Conant, 1997]. As she admitted in one televised interview, "I can't imagine any movie that I ever made or could make in the future that...would be worth giving up the three months of being with Ted" [ABC, 1993]. Fonda also has become a vehicle for the 58 year-old Turner to reassert his sexual prowess. *Newsweek* reported last year that Turner had blurted out during a phone conversation with a Time Warner executive that he had to go make love to his wife [Roberts, 1996]. And during a gathering of board members at his ranch, *Vanity Fair* recently revealed with relish, Turner allegedly pointed out various places around the property where he had done so [Conant, 1997].

Turner placed his autonomy and macho mystique in symbolic jeopardy by merging with Time Warner as well. He has complained throughout his career about how large media corporations threaten his freedom and violate his rights as a little-guy entrepreneur. As recently as 1994, when Time Warner kept him from making a bid for CBS, Turner charged in a speech before the National Press Club that his major shareholder was cynically holding him back so it could go out and buy a network for itself. "Unfortunately, I haven't been around as long as Time Warner and I don't go back 75 years and [didn't have]. lots of time in previous generations to build up a huge amount of capital for me to inherit and move forward with," Turner observed wryly. "I had to do almost all of it myself." In order to better contrast his own individual agency with the nefarious tentacles of such a corporate behemoth, Turner recalled a CNN report on female genital mutilation in northern Africa. "Most people don't know about it, but millions of women have their clitorises cut off when they are 10 or 12 years old, so they can't have fun in sex," he said. "Between 50 and 80 percent of Egyptian girls had their clits cut off. I mean, how about that? You talk about equal rights. You talk about a barbaric mutilation." Turner went on to explain that he took the story so personally because, in a like manner, Time Warner was both feminizing and emasculating him. "Well, I'm in an angry mood. I'm angry at that too. I'm being suturized [sic] by Time Warner,

and the women are being suturized... That's exactly right, and I don't like it any more than they do..." [Turner, 1994].

News reports of the Time Warner deal resurrected these words in order to muse publicly about whether Turner's new boss would allow him to have fun in business anymore either. But a *Wall Street Journal* article in March of 1997 sought to allay such fears by reasserting Turner's image as the consummate corporate cowboy. "A lot of people expected Mr. Turner would ride off into the sunset after he sold his Turner Broadcasting System Inc. to Time Warner," the *Journal* said. "Instead, he is off on a wild ride through the world's biggest media empire, crashing into top executives' personal fiefdoms, abruptly canceling deals, asking impertinent questions about lavish expenses, and generally giving Time Warner a one-man dose of culture shock" [Shapiro, 1997]. Not surprisingly, *Time* magazine also has insisted that the sale to Time Warner strengthens rather than stifles Turner's ability to take decisive actions and shape the media universe. *Time's* article on the FTC approval of the deal, not incidentally titled "A Marriage is Blessed," opened by noting that the principals in the deal had circled each other like "prizefighters," "vultures," and "lovers" before the decision. It concluded, "As for Ted Turner, the merger liberates his lofty ambition from the shackles of cash-strapped circumstance. After years spent as a relative small-timer, the mercurial entrepreneur finds himself vice chairman of Time Warner, at the center of the world's largest programming engine" [Krantz, 1996].

Louis Galambos suggested over twenty years ago that business historians ought to query the public image of big business in America as an important historical force in its own right [Galambos, 1975]. I clearly agree, but I'm not so sure verbal symbols can be quantified in the manner of an equilibrium analysis, as Galambos tried to do. As the media buzz that swirls around Ted Turner and Jane Fonda demonstrates, images are by definition messy, dense facts that call on historians to risk qualitative analysis, imaginative interpretation, and even playfulness. Symbols are deceptive creatures, and can have multiple referents. This is also true of what has been presented as the most personal and tragic chapter in the Turner story, his father's suicide in 1963.

Biographical portraits of Turner paint a man locked in a struggle with the ghost of his tyrannical father, the latter rendered as a hard-driving patriarch who beat a desire for success into his son with a coat hanger, but who crumbled under the pressures of success himself. Turner has spoken of his relationship with his father often, with biographers and reporters, in the unpublished autobiography, in "intimate," televised heart-to-hearts with professional empathetics like Barbara Walters and David Frost, and in many public speeches before crowds of thousands. Far from just an inner secret or personal tragedy, then, the story of Ed Turner's suicide has become quite a public affair, a communal ritual played out on the stage of the popular, commercial media. With Turner's help, it has become the foundation of Ted Turner's saga of success and triumph over adversity, the key to unlocking the secret of his relentless drive and unquenchable ambition. Of course, the repeated insistence on the personal, psychological nature of the tale is at odds

with the public and repetitive nature of the telling. But that does not mean that we should dismiss such pop-psychoanalyses of Ted Turner completely. There is a hidden truth to the Turner family drama, but it is hidden in plain sight, not in the recesses of Ted Turner's childhood memories. We can talk about that truth in psychoanalytic terms, paying close attention to complex processes of denial, projection, and transference – but we are not just talking about processes that may or may not be going on inside Ted Turner's head.

Attempts to isolate the “inner psychology” of entrepreneurs maintain that they often overcompensate for a lack of adequate emotional nourishment during childhood by means of a variety of defense mechanisms – among them a heightened affinity for competition and aggression, an almost self-destructive reflex towards taking risks, a propensity toward mood swings, and a self-dramatized sense of grandiosity. Manfred Kets de Vries of the European Institute for Business Administration argues that these narcissistic tendencies actually can serve the entrepreneur well in the construction of the firm, which comes to perform an adaptive function as a sort of transitional object through which the entrepreneur can re-enact his fantasies, master his anxieties, and achieve separation and autonomy from the encroachment of a threatening and overpowering authority figure [Kets de Vries, 1996].

At first glance this seems like a very apt description of Ted Turner himself. But my approach leads me to question what we get when we apply psychoanalytic techniques to those individuals who figure so prominently in what Thurman Arnold once called the “folklore of capitalism.” If we seek to understand the symbolic life of the entrepreneur, we cannot look exclusively to an inferred reconstruction of some elusive “inner theater.” We must consider first and foremost the limits and pressures exerted by the primary realm where the entrepreneur acts out his role, that is, the readily observable theater of economic activity, the market itself. On that stage, Ted Turner has come to serve as a sort of transitional object for corporate liberalism – in a double sense. He is the dashing leading man in corporate liberalism's own fantasy of separation, autonomy, and mastery over corporate encroachment. And he has played that role during a period when the corporate liberal strategies for maintaining that fantasy have shifted dramatically.

The popular, commercial media don't re-enact the Turner family drama so often simply because it reveals something about Ted Turner himself. They do so because it also speaks a set of larger truths about the culture of corporate capitalism. Turner presents the spectacle of a man whose inner life is virtually indistinguishable from his outer life; his personality is so perfectly in confluence with the cultural representation of that personality, and with corporate capitalist culture itself, that there is no point in distinguishing between them. When we analyze the dreams and demons, and even the love-life of Ted Turner, the great risk-taking entrepreneur, businessman-hero, and communications visionary, therefore, we are analyzing at that same instant a complex set of cultural fantasies and neuroses about Ted Turner, about entrepreneurship, about business enterprise, about the burgeoning global electronic communications systems, and about the corporate, government, and economic forces that shape their development.

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