Where Lie the Boundaries of the Corporation? Explorations in "Corporate Responsibility" in the 1930s

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Historians, appropriately, have given careful attention to that pivotal era in the consolidation and structural reorganization of American big business at the turn of the twentieth century – and to the legislative, journalistic, and labor union reactions to that transformation [Chandler, 1962; Chandler, 1977; Keller, 1990; Lamoreaux, 1985; McCraw, 1984; Sklar, 1988]. Within two decades, from about 1885 to 1905, the emerging corporate giants drastically altered the relationships in power and dominion amongst such basic social institutions as the family, the church, the local community, and the state. Some private businesses now loomed so large as to dwarf other institutions; they even absorbed some of the functions previously stipulated as parts of these other domains.

For several decades, giant corporations strove to acquire the extent of social and moral legitimacy commensurate with their size and power. From 1897 through World War I, Louis Galambos observes, "managers of the nation's largest corporations were preoccupied with the need to consolidate their firms and... obsessed with problems of solidifying their oligopolistic market positions." Already, by the end of this period and increasingly in the 1920s, virtually every one of the largest corporations was proclaiming itself to be, not merely a business, but an "INSTITUTION." Often that word was set literally or figuratively in capital letters and infused with all of the connotations of civic beneficence that the term "institution" had acquired in its association with hospitals, courts, churches, universities, and philanthropic foundations. Before the end of the 1920s, Owen D. Young of General Electric was characterizing the giant corporation as a key social institution; in the mid-1930s General Motors persistently proclaimed itself "a public institution" or "a public-minded institution." In 1942, in his analysis of *The Future of Industrial Man*, Peter F. Drucker pronounced "the big centralized concentrated mass production unit" to be the society's "representative social institution" [Marchand, 1998; Galambos, 1979, p. 273; General Motors, 1935, n.p; *Saturday Evening Post*, June 23, 1934, pp. 30-31; October 24, 1936, pp. 48-49; Heald, 1970, p. 198; Drucker, 1942, pp. 60, 78; Drucker, 1946, p. 140].

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Such a transformation, from novel (and generally suspect, if not actually feared) interloper amongst basic social structures to the status of the nation's "representative institution" provokes interesting questions about the means by which this transformation was achieved and the quandaries and adjustments in thought that it occasioned. Since the terms "scale" and "scope" have already persuasively and authoritatively been applied to certain changes in the giant corporation that were part of this transformation, I have found myself frantically casting about for yet another "s" word to designate certain additional significant elements in the corporation's quest for broader legitimacy that were not entirely encompassed by either scope or scale. The word that I have seized upon is "sphere," by which I mean not merely the size of operations or the range of products produced and marketed, but the breadth or range of involvement by the corporation in social, cultural, and political realms beyond those deemed necessary in the early days of most large corporations – a notion to which Richard Eells has applied the terms "corporate reach" and "institutional reach" [Eells, 1967, pp. viii, 165]. One of the promising fields for future business history, I believe, lies in the analysis of both the opportunities and the dangers which corporate leaders and other Americans saw in the expansion of the sphere of the large business enterprise. I find particularly intriguing what I think of as the "second phase" of the giant corporations' quest for social and moral legitimacy that commenced with the Great Depression of the early 1930s.

Suddenly under attack after a "golden age" of popular approval during the 1920s and forced to take drastic measures of retrenchment, many of the nation's largest corporations soon perceived their legitimacy (and the standing of the entire economic system) as now placed in dire jeopardy. The public seemed prepared for massive government intrusions into new social/economic territories: the initial publication by *Fortune* magazine of its new public opinion polls disclosed that over three-fourths of those surveyed agreed that the government should "see to it that every man who wants to work has a job" – an "assumption by the government of a function that was never seriously contemplated before the New Deal." Corporate leaders, shocked at such support for economic heresy and stunned by their own sudden loss of status, reacted at first with a "touchy defensiveness" [*Fortune*, 12 (July, 1935), p. 67; Bernays, 1965, p. 399; Heald, 1970, p. 174]. Economic conditions seemed to call for "hunkering down" – withdrawing from all ancillary involvements and getting back to narrow, basic business fundamentals – and many major corporations did so for an interval of two or three years. But as it turned out, one of the most striking transformations within big business over the entire course of the 1930s was not a contraction of the sphere of corporate activities and commitments. Quite the contrary, many major corporations, by the end of the 1930s, had not only reconnoitered the boundaries of their corporate domains but had expanded their conceptions of the social, cultural, and political role of the corporation. Their experiences under siege, through a kind of reciprocal response, led them to invade new realms beyond the corporation's accustomed boundaries. As they mobilized their public relations resources, as Richard Tedlow has observed, "to try to 'sell the American way of life to the

American people,'" they came to feel a compulsion to leave no outlying territories unoccupied [Tedlow, 1979, p. 59].

What do I mean by venturing beyond corporate boundaries? If we could have positioned ourselves as proverbial flies on the walls of corporate executive offices in the late 1930s, what boundary-stretching, even boundary-shattering, deeds and preoccupations might we have observed? At General Electric we might have found President Gerard Swope selecting the right "next-door neighbor" type of woman to serve as hostess on a GE radio program or setting forth detailed critiques of GE magazine advertisements [BBDO, October 9, 1931, p. 14; GE, October 13, 1937]. At General Motors, we would find prominent executive Donaldson Brown struggling to devise the perfect formula for GM plants to use in determining their contributions to local community chests – or proposing a major new corporate committee to project and analyze long-range social trends. At Western Electric, we might observe executives mulling over expansion of the staff of "employee counselors" as they reviewed the latest reports on the psychology of workers in the relay test room or reflecting on the sudden maturity displayed by the United States Steel Company in hiring industrial relations counselor, Arthur Young, Western Electric's advisor during the Hawthorne experiments, to command U.S. Steel's new industrial relations department [Gillespie, pp. 69, 80-89, 179, 214]. At Johns-Manville, we might find president Lewis Brown studiously appraising a mock-up of his company's annual report and a newsletter for employees to see if they had sufficiently attained the popular, overwhelmingly photographic style of *Life* or *Look* magazines, while at the offices of J.P. Morgan and Company we might well catch a fly's-eye glimpse of senior executive Thomas Lamont dashing off a memo to the president of U.S. Steel, warning that there were too few "little words" in the draft version of a letter to stockholders or in the company's annual report. Another set of covert visits might well find General Foods' President Colby Chester devising questions for a public opinion survey and, at IBM, discover Thomas Watson pondering how many artists from each region of the nation should be represented in the company's art purchases for the year [*Sales Management*, November 15, 1937, pp. 18-20, 86; *Advertising and Selling*, December 2, 1937, p. 48; *Forbes*, April 1, 1938, p. 22; Lamont, February 3, 1938, September 24, 1937, February 21, 1940; Gibbs, 1947, pp. 16-17; Bogart, 1995, pp. 273-74]. Meanwhile, back at General Motors, we would find president Alfred Sloan once more taking pen in hand to insist that more "tuneful" works – with a "reasonable amount of melody" – be performed by the symphony his corporation was sponsoring for radio broadcasts [NBC, January 2, 1935, April 15, 1935].

Before we indict these top executives for inexcusable micromanagement, or dismiss their activities on the grounds that businessmen have always had hobbies and leisure preoccupations, we would do well to explore the connections between these "diversions" and major, sphere-enlarging projects undertaken by their companies. Corporate investment in the 1930s in the tracking of public opinion, in the shaping of popular culture, in the political and economic education of the public, and in the devising of linkages between factory and local community reached new proportions, as did the integration of these concerns structurally into the corporation, often as part of a new or expanding department of public relations.

I should hasten to say that none of these boundary-expanding corporate activities of the late 1930s can be called unprecedented. In every case, business corporations at some time, perhaps even in several instances, had occupied such territory before. In single communities, especially in "company towns," entrepreneurs had sometimes involved themselves in virtually every aspect of the social, cultural, and moral lives of the residents. This had been particularly true of such utopian business communities as that of Pullman, of the Cadburys in England, or of Milton Hershey and of such extraordinarily paternalistic employers as Henry Heinz or Robert Paterson of National Cash Register [Alberts, 1973; Buder, 1967; Dellheim, 1987; Mandell, 1997; Nelson, 1995 (esp. pp. 99-118); Zahavi, 1988]. What was new during this second, 1930s stage in the quest for corporate legitimacy was the national magnitude of many of the corporations involved, the breadth of corporate involvement, and the extent of structural institutionalization of various broader activities within the corporations.

Those who had proposed "forward-looking" expansion of the sphere of business involvements during any era, even when such activities were confined to more obviously utilitarian ventures such as the creation of research and testing laboratories or the cultivation of community goodwill, had needed to withstand the tests of an emerging, early twentieth-century credo which envisioned successful businessmen as those who knew how to "stick to business" – confining themselves to that realm of activity that they knew best and not diverting their attention to peripheral, probably frivolous, matters [Tebbel, 1947, p. 126; Eells, 1967, p. 155]. Historian Charles Cheape captures this attitudinal legacy in the title of his excellent biography of Du Pont's Walter Carpenter – *Strictly Business.* [Cheape, 1995].

In the 1930s as business leaders challenged such axioms they couched their expansionist proposals in such phrases as "obligations," "wider responsibilities," and "long-range" or "broadened" visions. Owen D. Young of General Electric remarked in 1936 that, as "a great public institution," GE had to accept "more and more obligations for public disclosure and public activities" [Young, 1936, p. 21]. Colby Chester of General Foods admonished fellow industrialists that it was "no longer sufficient for the business man to fashion a better garment, to reduce its costs," just as the president of American Rolling Mills warned them that "[w]e can no longer be merely manufacturers of steel, of automobiles..." The American businessman, Chester asserted, could no longer "consider his work done when he views the income balance in black at the end of an accounting period." Now it was "necessary for him to demonstrate the social virtue of these accomplishments to the public" [Chester, January 22, 1936; *Advertising and Selling*, (March, 1939), p. 87]. Alfred Sloan of General Motors entitled a 1936 essay "The Broadened Responsibilities of Industry's Executives." Later he would look back with pride to his perception that "business management must expand its horizon of responsibility...[and] no longer confine its activities to the mere production of goods and services" [Sloan, 1936, pp. 358, 369-70; Sloan, 1941, p. 145].

The corporations' extended involvements were not whimsical or impractical diversions, such phrases implied, but large-minded, far-sighted visions of what was *necessary* for business success in a new, more complex, world. The goal was still business achievement as measured by the old, practical standards. But the methods, considerations, and sphere of activities now had to be adapted to the new conditions of doing business. Several years later, Paul Garrett, Vice-President for Public Relations at General Motors, attempted to justify the newly enlarged sphere of corporate involvements somewhat apologetically by reflecting back upon what big business had learned during the 1930s. A previous generation of businessmen, he observed, could never have envisioned "the winding chambers in the labyrinth of public attitudes through which the men of management must [now] successfully pass" to obtain their fundamental goal of profit [Garrett, 1944, pp. 16-17].

The "labyrinth of public attitudes" which they confronted in the 1930s, in the view of most corporate executives, was primarily the contrivance of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. Actually, a wider range of developments had impelled business to broaden its horizons and extend its boundaries. Not the least of these were the increasing separation of ownership from management in large corporations (with the concomitant elevation and extent of autonomy of the professional corporate manager), the advancing complexities in the products produced and in techniques of marketing, and the emergence of radio as a primary medium of communications. But the political threat of New Deal policies loomed most prominently among the specters that inspired corporate activism. Especially after Roosevelt's reelection victory by a stunning margin in 1936, businessmen recoiled with chagrin at their failure to influence what seemed clearly to be an economically illiterate citizenry. The re-education of the common man now emerged as a major corporate "responsibility."

The political success of the New Deal made corporate executives particularly conscious of vital territories beyond the corporation's traditional borders – territories whose allure and vulnerability as power vacuums invited government intrusion. It seemed necessary not only to reach out to educate the populace through all available channels but also to occupy and defend any arena which government might mobilize to occupy, further exciting its propensity for dangerous subsequent expansion. If government was intent upon planning, big business would have to plan better and keep a step ahead [McQuaid, 1982, p. 30; Brown, 1943; Kettering, November 7, 1944; Du Pont, June 1943, August 26, 1943, December 15, 1944]. If, in plant communities, other institutions promised to foster greater public and worker loyalty – whether through sports and recreation programs, charitable contributions, or sponsorship of public entertainments – a corporation should move quickly to fill such dangerous vacuums.

Initially fearing the lapse of hard-headed business principles in any embrace of additional social commitments, big business spokesmen of the 1930s wrapped themselves in the mantle of the production ethic as they provided each other with alibis for inaction in the face of Roosevelt's successful outreach to the public. Executive after executive *confessed* that he and his peers had unwisely ignored the necessity of explaining and defending the wider mission of their own companies and of the capitalist system. Business leaders, in the words of General Motors' President Alfred p. Sloan, Jr., had been "preoccupied in exploring the secrets of nature and creating a continuous flow of new products." They had viewed the public simply as consumers and had concentrated all their efforts on producing cheaper products of high quality to improve consumers' standard of living. In the process of such righteous service, however, they had allowed the public to become uniformed about the workings of the system and thus to misunderstand the motives of business leaders [*New York Times*, Dec. 5, 1935, p. 15].

To regain public confidence and understanding in the face of Roosevelt's powerful performance as an "advertiser," business leaders recognized a need to acquire a massive measure of new knowledge about public opinion and to develop an unprecedented ability to speak the vernacular of the common man. Mushrooming labor union membership and worker militancy, plus devastating evidence of their failure in public persuasion delivered by the voters' verdict in 1936, convinced many corporate executives, even as they continued to search for a simplicity and folksiness of approach to the citizenry at large, that they also needed to draw back and consolidate some stable constituent base – among their own investors, dealers, and employees and among their geographical "neighbors" in their plant cities. As pollsters made them cognizant of the role of opinion leaders on certain issues, they also recognized the usefulness of a high profile as sponsors of cultural enrichment.

Never before had big business reached out so ardently to the common man and invited him into its confidence. The magnitude of this effort, both in the volume of total communications and in overcoming an ingrained penchant to denigrate the tastes and idioms of the masses, was immense. Get rid of that "dignity complex," advisors warned the spokesmen for the corporations. Big business should "take its hair down" and stop using "big words or abstract concepts." It should adopt the language of the waitress and the truck driver; it should attain "human interest" by paying less attention to the corporation's interests and more to the hopes, fears, and illusions of "the great masses of plain common folks." Could those entrusted with the shaping of corporate images make such a leap? An advertising man taunted his peers in 1937 in *Advertising and Selling* with the model most likely to provoke them: "If Mr. Roosevelt learned to talk their language, starting as *he* did, you and I can, too" [*Advertising Age*, Sept. 21, 1936, p. 45; Nov. 23, 1936, p. 20; June 21, 1937, p. 49; Jan. 31, 1938, p. 33; Mar. 14, 1938, p. 38; *Advertising and Selling*, Sept. 9, 1937, p. 36].

With some of the old programs of welfare capitalism in disarray and company unions increasingly ineffective in forestalling inroads by the CIO and AFL, some corporate leaders now deemed internal company propaganda to be as essential as was the education of the voting public. Here, the need for a new language, as well as solicitous attention, seemed inescapable. After suffering decimation during the stringent times of the early 1930s, employee magazines again proliferated in the late 1930s. The first nine months of 1937 witnessed the launching or revival of more than 400 company magazines, an increase of 45 percent over the previous year [*Advertising Age*, Oct. 11, 1937, p. 28. Marchand, 1998]. In a more remarkable transformation, a bevy of major corporations suddenly recast their staid annual reports in 1937 and 1938 as vernacular "reports to employees." Foreswearing the austere tradition of the pictureless financial statement with long columns of figures and impenetrable prose, a number of corporations burst forth with drastically simplified statements, often replete with photographs, pictographs, and charts. In an astonishing metamorphosis such corporations as Bethlehem Steel, Kimberly-Clark, Caterpillar Tractor Company, and General Mills now directed their annual reports to employees as well as stockholders. The Johns-Manville Corporation, Monsanto Chemical, Eastman Kodak, and Du Pont issued special employee editions of the annual report or published excerpts from it in their employee magazines. By the beginning of 1939, according to *Nation's Business*, some 42 corporations had adopted this practice and more were "joining the procession." The executives that we earlier glimpsed as they gave careful scrutiny to the language (simplified) and imagery (folksy) of corporate publications thus reflected a widespread and painstaking augmentation of corporate publicity [*Nation's Business*, 27 (April, 1939), p. 38; *Advertising Age*, April 25, 1938, p. 17; *Forbes*, April 1, 1938, p. 22; JWT, March 25, 1938, n.p.].

The notion that a company's annual report should be addressed to constituencies other than simply the stockholders represented one outgrowth of a rising consciousness of the isolation of stockholders from management. Since the late 1920s, in seeking to legitimate their increasingly autonomous position and power as professional managers, corporate executives had begun speaking of their role as that of "trustees" – and had described their accountability as extending to their workers, their dealers, and the public as well as to the stockholders. Some defined their role essentially as that of mediator among these various groups. With a relative freedom from the pressures of stockholders for short-run profits, professional managers could more easily maneuver to create room for the exercise of a "corporate conscience." In the words of a later observer, they could "push out the frontiers of managerial discretionary authority into unexplored terrain" [GE, 1930, p. 260; Berle & Means, 1932, pp. 8-9, 119-25; 362-57; Newcomer, 1955, pp. 62-63; Eells, 1967, 160].

The boundaries that the corporation crossed in expanding the constituencies for their annual reports and in their massive augmentation of internal publications were essentially those of mode and caste rather than of distinctively new terrain. But new ventures in the direction of another constituency, the influentials who valued "Culture," represented a greater departure. In a transformation that paralleled the shift from individual, noblesse oblige philanthropy to the activities of organized groups, what had previously represented the personal passions of wealthy entrepreneurs now became the commitments of corporations [McCarthy, p. 170; Heald, 1970, p. 19]. At IBM, for instance, Thomas B. Watson made the collection and display of high art not only a private hobby but also a highly-visible corporate project. A conversion experience at the machine tool exhibition in Cleveland in 1935 set Watson and IBM on the road to the acquisition, over the ensuing decade, of more than 30,000 pieces of art. No museum or gallery in the nation came close to matching this corporate venture in art collection. Sponsorship of high culture aimed not only at public relations dividends among a grateful cultural elite but also at the stimulation of creativity among company executives and a workforce of engineers. IBM's promotion of art in every region of the nation, spurred by a collecting criteria based partly upon representation of geographical/political units (each county in which IBM operated to be represented by a painting; then, later, each of the 48 states to be so recognized) also cultivated the conception of IBM as broadly national in its operations and service [Gibbs, 1947, pp. 107-112; Bogart, 1995, pp. 273-74].

Many other large corporations played the role of sponsors of high culture during the 1930s and 1940s, their inclinations quickened by the Federal Revenue Act of 1935 which provided tax breaks for such contributions [Eells, p. 199]. They also invested abundantly in the subsidization of symphonic music and opera over the airwaves. More than a dozen large companies, including Ford, Firestone, Texaco, United States Rubber, and General Motors participated in this form of corporate outreach. Wealthy businessmen had frequently played such a role in previous eras, but primarily as private individuals. Radio made the difference, as it did subsequently in the sponsorship by corporations such as United States Steel, Du Pont and Kraft of radio adaptations of theater masterpieces. Meanwhile, companies such as Container Corporation under Walter Paepcke were making a splash in high-culture circles by contracting with prestigious artists to provide original paintings and drawings for modernistic ads. By the early 1940s, even Standard Oil of New Jersey, for more pressing needs in public relations damage control than had existed at IBM, was hiring the most prestigious of American photographers and commissioning some of the nation's most prominent artists to document the war service of Standard Oil and the culture of the nation's hometown communities, of which Standard's employees were an integral part [*The Lamp*, 25 (December, 1943), pp. 13-15; 27 (December, 1945), pp. 8-19; Plattner, 1983; Bogart, 1995, pp. 268-69; Harris, 1990, pp. 367-72; Allen, 1983, pp. 31-32; Lears, 1987, pp. 149-51].

The dramatic intensification of what Richard Tedlow has termed a "public relations-mindedness" vaulted beyond the sponsorship of high culture and the rudimentary economic education of the common man to magnify and transform corporate ventures previously aimed at other objectives [Tedlow, 1979, p. xviii]. At General Motors, for instance, a fledgling venture in customer research of the late 1920s and early 1930s suddenly acquired status as a new independent unit within the corporation – the GM Customer Research Staff – with a standing "on a par...with the famous Research Laboratories and Proving Ground" [GM, 1934; December 31, 1933, p.24]. GM President Alfred Sloan directed Henry ("Buck") Weaver, the head of this operation, to develop "a comprehensive proposal on customer research" [Bernays, 1965, p. 552] and announced to GM stockholders that this undertaking was now an "*operating philosophy*" within General Motors that "must extend through all phases" of the business [Stettinius, May 18, 1933, pp. 1, 4, 6; GM, August 11, 1932; GM, Oct. 14, 1933; Sloan, 1933, pp. 92-93; Sloan, September 21, 1933, pp. 92-03; GM, 1932].

This new corporate activity, inaugurated in the 1920s to garner marketing data through mail surveys to owners of automobiles, now acquired a major public relations mission. Weaver, with a penchant for broad dramatization of his role in the corporation, envisioned customer research as the crucial feedback component within a chain that linked the company's engineering department with production and then with sales, the dealer, the consumer and – via customer research – back with engineering again. Envisioning something like what has recently come to be labelled "mass customization," yet assuming that consumer desires were sufficiently similar that they could be satisfied with a few models and designs, the industrialist, with his staff of industrial designers (another new ancillary department of the corporation – or specialized service retained on contract) would respond sensitively to the needs and desires of the mass of customers. Customer research, Weaver concluded, "establishes GM as a democratic institution by playing up the importance of the consumer instead of playing up the importance of the producer" [Kettering, October 8, 1932; GM, 1933, p. 2; Pine, 1993].

General Motors could claim by 1939 to be carrying out the largest customer research operation in the world, with a staff of 37 and expenditures of $300,000 a year [*Fortune* 19 (March, 1939), p. 138]. President Sloan, observing that the operations of General Motors were "too big...too far flung" for the company to rely any longer on "casual contacts and personal impressions" of public attitudes, had recognized the need to cross orthodox corporation boundaries to establish a new corporate entity with a new function – that of closing the "gulf between the customer and those responsible for guiding the destiny of the institution" [Bernays, 1965, p. 552; Weaver, 1934, p. 118; Weaver, n.d., p. 5; Sloan, 1933, pp. 92-93; Stettinius, 1933, pp. 15, 43]. Customer Research thus emerged as one answer to converging corporate concerns about internal morale, the political environment, customer dissatisfaction, and the development of a long-range strategy.

More fraught with dangers, yet of almost obsessive attraction to big business men in the 1930s, was the more manifest crossing of implicit borders between business and politics. "Never before," declared an internal General Motors' document, "has modern business found itself so vitally concerned in political events." [Young, n.d.]. Of course, major business corporations had long been "in politics," but – at least in their own minds – this had meant occasional forays in reaction to very specific legislative acts or administrative policies. In the mid-1930s, some business leaders began to expand their conceptions of what politics might entail for big business. Direct involvement in electoral campaigns, as Du Pont executives and others discovered in their fervent opposition to the New Deal through the American Liberty League in 1936, might not be the business executive's metier. But frustration at the polls, in some instances, brought more sophisticated socio-political initiatives rather than disengagement. Some businessmen now recognized a need to organize their companies, not simply for lobbying on specific legislation, but for the economic education of the citizenry and long-range political involvement in a more "statesmanlike" mode.

At General Motors, for instance, Donaldson Brown proposed in 1938 that the corporation come to terms organizationally with the broader, more complex terrain of business operations. Through the work of a new internal group, a Research Organization in Political, Social, and Economic Trends, it should draw upon the best current knowledge in "economic and public psychology." That might enable the company to be "a lot smarter in dealing with...destructive political action" than it had been in the past and to demonstrate to the public that it was better prepared to deal with broad social and economic issues than were either labor leaders or politicians. Such a new expertise was required, Brown observed, because the selection of "industrial operating executives" had never been based on qualities such as "political astuteness." Such executives had "neither the experience nor justifiably the time to appraise the new forces of mob psychology and political pressures." The conventional economics of business, which corporate leaders had understood so well, Brown added, had now reverted back to something better described by that antique term, "political economy." Corporate policy could "no longer be formulated independently of political considerations" [Du Pont, May 9, 1938; Brown, 1977, pp. 101-02. See also, Wood, 1942, pp. 69-70].

Another mark of such a rising consciousness can be found in William Benton's promotion, beginning in 1936 with his approaches to Lewis Brown of Johns-Manville and Colby Chester of General Foods, of the forum for systematic exchanges between academicians and big business leaders that ultimately became the Council for Economic Democracy. Attentive to the "new environments in which top managers must function" and accepting of the notion that "participation in the give-and-take of national politics was an essential element of their future careers," this group drew upon what had, by the end of the 1930s, become their considerable experience in the political arena. More inclined than many other business executives to accept some of the structural changes of the 1930s (including social security and independent labor unions) as "givens," these men emerged during World War II as major advocates of business-government cooperation in large-scale planning for the country's future. The head of the group by that time, Paul Hoffman of Studebaker, would ultimately become the chief administrator of the Marshall Plan [Hyman, 1969, p. 205; McQuaid, 1982, pp. 60, 67, 119, 123].

While most corporate leaders desired to retain a clear distinction between politics and business, they could hardly refrain, under the circumstances, from describing the "responsibilities" of the corporation in broad political terms. Publicist Samuel Crowther, acting as an advisor to the leaders of United States Steel, observed that the company's affairs "rise and fall with those of the nation and hence, if it is to direct its own destinies, it must share in directing the destinies of the country." To accomplish this, other executives concluded, and to do so without the massive development of their own expertise in assessing social trends, they would at least need to make use of the rising science of opinion polling [Stettinius, August 12, 1936].

Colby Chester at General Foods embraced polling of the public as his company's contribution to the needs of the wider business community. Maestros of major new polling organizations such as Elmo Roper, Claude Robinson, and Henry C. Link rushed to obtain large commissions from major corporations. Even Du Pont, under the leadership of the narrow, conservative Lamont Du Pont, joined a group of other major corporations in subscribing to the "Link Audit," a regular survey of public attitudes toward large corporations that commenced in 1937 [Du Pont, April 18, 1938]. Although few major corporations shared

Donaldson Brown's vision of the corporation as developing omnicompetence in all fields of political economy, social policy, and public psychology, almost all of them made polling services an adjunct to traditional corporate activities, providing one tangible response to GM president Alfred Sloan's call upon American businessmen to recognize that industry's responsibilities had broadened and to prepare themselves to exercise "an enlightened and militant statesmanship" in determining "the direction America shall take" [Sloan, 1936, pp. 362, 370].

Even before business leaders recognized their need for some form of "political preparedness" to respond to the incursions of the New Deal, many had fretted over their incapacities to meet the needs for local charity in the early 1930s. Some major companies had taken pride in the sacrifices they had made to keep their employees off the dole – only to be forced eventually to recognize their inability to keep on meeting the level of need. Although many business executives desperately wanted to maintain private responsibility for welfare, they staggered under the burden of requests for contributions from a myriad of agencies and organizations. Anxious to bolster corporate philanthropy as a way of "mitigating the impact of recently organized unions," and as a possible "counterweight to the expanding role of government," some business leaders looked for ways to make highly visible, yet measured, contributions to the communities in which they operated. The growing Community Chest movement appealed to their craving for efficiency in such outreach [Heald, 1970, pp. 145, 150, 155, 166; Stettinius, September 20, 1933].

Although miscellaneous small contributions to local projects had long characterized corporate behavior, standard notions of the legal responsibilities of corporate officials to stockholders stood in the way of major or durable programs of corporate philanthropy. And even managers sensitive to the corporation's stake in local goodwill resented being whipsawed by competing appeals that, in total, could add up to costly commitments. Donaldson Brown of General Motors took the lead in seeking big business' adoption of a formula for giving. Although Brown's quest for an agreed-upon formula (a kind of collusion in restraint of open competition in charity) gained only partial success, corporate leaders did manage to enter a wedge into the otherwise offensive Revenue Act of 1935 that embodied their desire to continue to occupy certain extra-corporate territory. The legislation incorporated a tax exemption of up to 5% for corporations that donated funds to philanthropy. This law ultimately promoted corporate sponsorship of the arts and lessened the tendency of shareholders to see corporate philanthropy as a levy upon their earnings [Heald, 1970, pp. 166, 172-73, 178-79, 182; Eells, 1967, pp. 199, 205, 228].

Charity donations to such consolidating organizations as local community chests were valued by large corporations primarily as one element in an expanding public relations focus upon local plant cities. Frustrated in their efforts quickly to educate the public at large and win its confidence, corporate leaders strove to envision some staunch base of support from which they might build outward toward greater legitimacy. Their increasing number of stockholders, small as well as large, seemed one obvious substratum. Their workers *should* constitute another, although their loyalty seemed increasingly uncertain. Their dealers and suppliers might well recognize a community of interests with the big company on which they so heavily relied. So significant had become "the relation of an individual to the corporation for which he works," observed GM executive Charles Wilson, that the overarching concept of a "Fourth Relation" needed to be envisioned. In ancient days, the only really significant "social relation" for the individual had been the family. Then the tribe or clan had emerged as a second significant relation and next, in modern times, the nation. Now, as men made their "contribution to society" through corporations, this fourth relation and its implications for the scope of the firm's activities had to be recognized [Kettering, October 16, 1937].

Corporations developed new programs and communications to reach each of their constituent groups, but particularly to establish more "human" relations with their workers. If not always the most crucial constituency, this was clearly the most uncertain. Since, at every major plant they also bulked large among the citizens of the community outside the factory walls, they became the focus of many a corporate "plant city campaign." Having warned his fellow executives at General Motors that the company's "vast...army of wage earners...will involve us in untold mutual grief, with the public drawn in, if we do not take them, so to speak, to our firesides," Paul Garrett enunciated the strategy: "Begin in the plant if you want to be well thought of in the plant community. Begin in the plant community if you want to be well thought of over the nation" [Garrett, 1934, p. 6; Garrett, March 13, 1938, n.p; Garrett, April 22, 1938, p. 19].

If we look back to the level of community involvement, even of feudal responsibility, that had prevailed among many nineteenth-century businesses, we will hardly view the plant city initiatives of the late 1930s as corporate ventures into new terrain. But the civic consciousness of many a business had atrophied as it became national in scope and the old company town phenomena had dwindled considerably except among extractive industries in more remote areas and certain mill towns of the South. Moreover, many businessmen, as Philip Scranton observes, had recognized the liabilities of "visible control" and "naked domination" [Scranton, 1983, p. 30]. Those companies which now reached out to bind themselves more closely with local communities and their own workers were often immense multi-unit corporations with plants in many localities. Some, like General Motors, had recently embarked on deliberate strategies of manufacturing decentralization, partly as a reaction to labor unionization [Sloan, May 22, 1936, p. 3; Walker & Sklar, March, 1935, pp. 432-33]. In 1938, as General Motors accelerated the expansion of its plant city programs, it counted 38 such cities scattered over 14 different states. Even in cities of significant size, such as Dayton, Ohio, GM contributed some 45 percent of the total payroll of city residents [Garrett, June 27, 1936; *Fortune*, 19 (March, 1939), p. 150; Kettering, November 27, 1935].

Public relations campaigns in such cities encompassed greater civic involvement by local company managers, the funding of local improvements, like a beach pavilion or boy scout cabin, and cooperation in local festivities and celebrations. Incorporating some elements of the older experiments in welfare capitalism, the plant city programs particularly reflected the new "human relations" mode of industrial relations, a concept that had gained momentum from the famed Hawthorne studies at Western Electric between 1925 and 1933 [Gillespie, 1991, pp. 3, 237-38]. One of the central notions that had emerged from those studies was the idea that workers derived, or could be convinced to expect, most of their job satisfactions from more "human" elements in their work conditions, including their social relations at the factory, rather than from higher wages. Another finding of the Hawthorne studies, that workers worked more productively with higher morale when they were made aware of the company's particular interest and attention and when they were given a sense of participation through the expression of their feelings, spurred several large corporations to invest in the personnel needed to carry out intermittent attitude studies among their employees [Jacoby, 1988, pp. 75, 77; Baritz, 1960, pp. 125].

In the spirit of employee participation and morale, factory open houses aimed to cultivate employees' pride in their work and provide their families a greater sense of involvement in the company. Recreation programs and sports teams promoted employees' social interaction, even a certain bonding with the company, and displayed the corporation's interest in well-rounded lives for its employees. A plethora of local plant papers celebrated employees' activities and hobbies in word and picture. United States Steel concluded that, since everyone liked to be recognized as newsworthy and as important in the local community, it could well afford to subsidize the printing of extra pages in the regular local paper which were devoted entirely to coverage of the comings and goings of U.S. Steel employees [Lewis, 1935, n.p.; Stettinius, April 20, 1937, June 11, 1937; June 9, 1937; June 15, 1937]. Open houses brought local residents into such noted factories and distribution centers as Western Electric's Hawthorne plant, Sears, Roebuck's wholesale center in Chicago, and U.S. Steel's Homestead plant outside Pittsburgh [*Advertising Age*, May 9, 1938, p. 29; *Sears' News Graphic*, May 16, 1940, p. 6; Stettinius, June 19, 1937].

As a "homely American community custom," the open house epitomized the broad goals of humanizing the company, bringing people "closer together," and transforming the corporation from something alien, like an absentee landlord, to the more intimate persona of a "good neighbor." The company's "whole plant city philosophy," observed a GM executive, aimed to identify the company "as a local industry in the cities in which we operate." And as the corporation recognized that "there is no real difference between the folks that live in the community and the folks that work in the plant," some large companies became emboldened to conceive of themselves as identical with the nation as a whole. As *Fortune* magazine observed in 1939, it was the conviction of GM's president, Alfred P. Sloan, Jr., that "the interests of GM and of the society in which it lives are really the same" [*GM Folks*, (Jan., 1941), 4th cover; Garrett, 1938, p. 3; GM, March 16, 1938; *Fortune*, 19 (March, 1939), p.150]. If that was the case, any demarcation of boundaries – between the corporation and the community or between it and the nation – seemed irrelevant, even impertinent.

No breach of customary corporate borders so subverted traditional business attitudes as did the seeming drift of business into show business. By the end of the 1930s, the largest American corporations maintained a high profile on both the airwaves and the exhibit stage. Although the movies had evaded commercial sponsorship, nearly every major corporation was producing its own films by the early 1940s, some of these in avowedly "Hollywood" style. *Sales Management* observed shrewdly in 1937 that, while the nation's greatest "showmen" a decade earlier had been figures such as the Ringling Brothers (of circus fame) or the Schuberts (of the extensive theater chain), it was companies like General Foods, sponsors of a host of radio productions, who "have the largest audience today" [*Sales Management*, Nov. 1, 1937, p. 32].

What unsettled some observers of the surging corporate involvement in show business was the apparent exhilaration with which many businessmen sallied across this perilous boundary. The highest executives seemed to revel in pondering the aesthetics of fair exhibits, reviewing and editing the scripts for company films, choosing radio programs for the masses, and hob-nobbing with the stars. Executives in the advertising agencies watched, with sometimes deprecating amazement, as their clients, like moths attracted to a flame, fluttered to involve themselves in radio production. The broadcasting companies built lavish audition rooms, each with a "sponsor's balcony" or booth. Here the corporate sponsors, attired in evening dress, seemed to disclose their "fatal fascination" with the world of show business. An "ordinarily sane" business executive, the N.W. Ayer & Son advertising agency muttered in 1938, although "shrewd in the conduct of his every-day affairs," would often "go completely astray under the influence of the radio virus" [Dygert, 1939, pp. 2, 65; Cantril & Allport, 1935, pp. 67-68; JWT, Feb. 2, 1932, p. 3; N.W. Ayer & Son, 1938, pp. 11-12].

Corporate film-making could also engross the attention of top executives. The making of industrial films was not new, but several large corporations in the late 1930s and early 1940s moved beyond the more conventional – and often highly technical and didactic – films of the previous era to create more dramatic and spectacular movies, with far larger production budgets. The authors of "Business Finds its Voice," a 1938 article in *Harpers Magazine* that congratulated big business on its massive new public relations initiatives, counted a score of recent corporate films, many with "emotion-stirring" elements. In 1936-37, United States Steel invested $250,000 in a four-reel technicolor extravaganza entitled "Men Make Steel." The company's magazine gave extensive coverage to its on-site camera work under the headline, "Hollywood Comes to the Mills." There was "no sense here of mechanized industry," one critic observed. Pare Lorentz, the prominent documentary filmmaker, hailed "Men Make Steel" as "the most beautiful film ever made" [Walker & Sklar, February, 1938, pp. 322-23; BBDO, June 18, 1937, p. 10; *U.S. Steel News*, 2 (Nov. 1937), p. 25; Stettinius, October 4, 1937; n.d. ("The Steelmakers"); *Fortune* 19 (Mar., 1939), 110; *Esquire*, 8 (Nov., 1937), pp. 122, 130, 132; *McCalls*, 65 (July, 1938), p. 4].

Meanwhile, General Motors was exhibiting "From Dawn to Sunset," a carefully crafted promotion of its plant city campaigns, Weyerhauser was countering its critics with "Trees and Men," and Westinghouse was publicizing its 1939 World's Fair Exhibit with a widely-distributed family romance entitled "The Middletons at the Fair." Through a dramatic story of the triumph of hope over counsels of radical alienation, the Westinghouse film romance celebrated the triumph of the "doers" of industry over the "talkers" – the New Dealish prophets of an end to opportunity and economic expansion. By the 1940s, Ford was simultaneously launching several movies, including cartoons, while Alcoa was beginning work on a major feature film, "Unfinished Rainbows," that dramatized its history and its contributions to war preparedness. When Du Pont, in 1944, devoted significant funds and effort to earn farmers' gratitude through the movie "Soldiers of the Soil," (a sympathetic drama about the guilt-feelings of one brother who "fought" at home as a farmer while his brothers risked their lives overseas), president Walter Carpenter accepted a new executive obligation, that of detailed editing and critique of the draft script [Chevrolet, 1937; *Advertising Age*, Jan. 31, 1938, p. 25; *Printers' Ink Monthly*, 36 (Feb. 1938), 14-15; Alcoa, 1942; Du Pont, July 22, 1943; August 30, 1943, January 29, 1943].

Lavish and imposing fair exhibits could also capture the attention and lure the involvement of top executives. Between 1933 and 1939, a host of world, national and regional fairs (at Chicago, Dallas, Cleveland, San Diego, Miami, San Francisco, and New York) stimulated increasing financial investments and elaborate exhibits by major corporations. Such productions could spur the recruitment and assignment, within the corporation's organizational structure or on contract, of an array of new experts with their own staffs and access to top executives. At Ford Motor Company, Fred Black became virtually a full-time exhibits manager after 1933. Allen Orth and James Jerpe, working under the chief of the Research Laboratories, Charles Kettering, gave virtually full attention to building exhibits or managing traveling technological stage shows for General Motors. General Electric had its own "magician" for fair performances; at Du Pont, engineer Tyler Chaplin transformed himself into exhibit specialist and public relations advisor in 1935 [Marchand, 1998].

Corporate ventures into "show business" were not new, of course. AT&T, Ford, International Harvester, and General Electric had already produced industrial films by 1915. And many manufacturers and public utilities had long produced impressive displays for fair and exhibitions. The automobile manufacturers could claim several decades of experience in mounting annual "shows" and giant retailers had been showmen almost from the outset. Even so, the entertainment quotient in big business's media productions seemed to escalate from the late 1920s onward. The didactic purposes so prominent in technological exhibits by corporations near the turn of the century had now given way to a competition in creating what Walter Dorwin Teague, designer for the 1939 New York World's Fair of exhibits for Ford, Du Pont, Kodak, United States Steel, National Cash Register, Texaco, and Consolidated Edison, forecast as "hit shows" and that commentators evaluated as "smash hits" [Marchand, 1991, pp. 4-8, 12-17; Teague, November 3, 1919; Eustis, 1939, p. 568]. In *Showmanship in Business* (1936), business journalist Kenneth Goode had admonished businessmen that fierce competition now required "everybody from president down to office boy...to cooperate in putting on a good show." He also counselled them that showmanship required "an accurate appreciation of the *other* man's interest...and...a skillfully colored adaptation to, or portrayal of, the other fellow's sense of values" [Goode, 1936, pp. 4-5, 10].

In the corporation's transgression across this boundary, I see one promising future for business history. For several decades, the various elements of American popular culture have attracted the attention of historians. Much of the resulting scholarship, however, has failed to capitalize upon the rich, pertinent materials available from a business history perspective. The corporations (and I do not mean simply, or primarily, the movie studios, radio and TV networks, publishers, and other direct "producers" of popular culture artifacts) have played a central role in the 20th century in both shaping and acquiring direction from that culture. It was the corporations, through market research, polling, and a variety of new techniques in surveying public attitudes that launched an immense undertaking in audience surveillance and the study of people as consumers and citizens. In the interstices between culture and business, figuratively situated in the alcoves of what we would consider business archives and business periodicals and ephemera, many valuable insights remain to be discerned.

One way to survey the incursions across traditional corporate boundaries that we have noted for the 1930s is simply to inventory the new, or substantially new, functions (and associated staffs) that at least a vanguard of major corporations had added during this era. This list might look like this:

Public Relations director (department)
Public Relations officer for each local plant
Industrial designer
Graphics artist for annual report, employee newsletter
House organ editor
Customer research specialist
Public Opinion pollster
Pollster on employee attitudes
Pollster on media audiences
Employee counselor
Radio announcer
Radio performers
Filmmaker
Exhibits specialist
Artists and photographers
Advisor on media techniques and social/economic trends

And this list would not include those company committees for new purposes made up of current executives with other major assignments.

Once again, I must acknowledge that virtually none of these corporate roles/functions was entirely *new*. Almost all had significant precedents. But they burgeoned during this era, even in some companies generally recognized as resistant to the new trends. At Du Pont for instance, in the face of severe antagonism to the whole idea of investments in public relations and to what Charles Cheape terms a "sense of power, obligation, and vulnerability in the larger society," the PR budget expanded from roughly $86,000 per year in 1934 to $243,000 in 1938 and $488,000 in 1943, an increase of more than 500% in less than a decade [Cheape, 1995, pp. 127, 172; Du Pont, January 27, 1944].

It was one of the great ironies of the 1930s that America's corporate executives, in defense of their autonomy and that of their enterprises, actually extended the reach of corporate involvement and responsibility. Confronted, as they assumed, by the insatiable thirst of government activists and reformers to acquire greater and greater control in every realm of the society and economy, they rushed to occupy every area that they came to recognize as a "no man's land" outside the present boundaries of the corporation and the government. Only in that way, they concluded, could they stem the tide of government expansion and "regimentation." If we were to take John Gaddis' prototypes for strategies of containment in the cold war as our paradigm, then big business in the 1930s adopted a "perimeter defense," a "symmetrical," hold-the-line-everywhere form of containment [Gaddis, 1982, pp. 57-61, 213-14, 353]. And, just as in foreign policy, such a strategy led to a multitude of commitments and its own expansionist logic.

Having fallen back on its base constituencies, moreover, the giant corporation sometimes discovered in the geographical spread of its plants, dealerships, and suppliers, and in the seeming representativeness of its expanding contingents of employees, stockholders, and dealers, reasons to identify itself with the nation at large, to conceive of itself as representative of the American people – initially in the plant community and then, by extension, in all American communities. True, many executives who were more inclined to skeptical or pragmatic considerations still arose within corporate councils to warn against overreaching, overcommitments, and the loss of a clear sense of the corporation's core interests. But the heady sense of exercising leadership in institutions virtually without boundaries would characterize much of big business during World War II and set the stage for expectations in the postwar era.

Only a half-century before, popular acceptance of the legitimacy of huge business corporations had been doubtful. Now, only a decade after a subsequent interval of distrust and disparagement, major business corporations had vastly widened their sphere of activities, embarking on ancillary activities and accepting social and cultural responsibilities in many regions beyond their accustomed boundaries. Many, in subsequent decades, would question whether they should have undertaken so broad a mission. And citizens might come to wonder where, if anywhere determinable, the borders of the corporate sphere left off and the rest of American society began.

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