

Constructing Corporate America: History, Politics, Culture. *Edited by Kenneth Lipartito and David B. Sicilia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. xii + 369 pp. £55.00. Index, notes, figures, tables. Cloth, £55.00. ISBN: 0-199-25189-4.

Reviewed by Howell J. Harris

Reviewing an edited essay collection is a difficult business, made no easier by the existence of the useful, because generally true, comment that the book in question is like the proverbial curate's egg: good in parts. This collection is very good, particularly as curates' eggs go; then again, so it should be, at a \$99.50 sticker-shocking hardback price and with two such fine editors as Kenneth Lipartito and David B. Sicilia presiding over a crew of top-drawer contributors. It even has two gold-plated dedicatees: Thomas Cochran *and* Alfred D. Chandler Jr., no less. The volume is a product of two major-league academic conferences, bankrolled by the Sloan Foundation and other generous institutional donors: one held at the Hagley Museum and Library, the other at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Even so, it is hard to be sure exactly what the collection is for. Do its good and interesting individual essays add up to more than the sum of their particular contributions, compensate for the presence of their weaker companions, and justify the editors' claims on their collective behalf? Lipartito and Sicilia certainly think so, unifying their contributors' essays with an introduction framing them in a short, but rather convoluted, discussion of recent scholarship in the fields of business history, evolutionary economics, and institutional sociology. Their aim is to move beyond the perspectives on the rise and role of the corporation best identified with Oliver Williamson and Alfred Chandler Jr., and to offer an alternative, or at least a more complex, narrative of the development of the corporation as America's predominant form of business organization. They question "the rationality of managerial decision-making; the exclusive focus on efficiency and profits; the supposedly impersonal, merit-based procedures governing employee conduct; the purported distance between the corporate world and the nitty-gritty of politics; and the assumed disinterest of corporate managers in such 'nonpractical' matters as ideology, values, and cultural conflict" (pp. 3–4). There is a certain amount of strawperson bashing

going on here, but there is also a revisionist desire to question received interpretations and categories, part of a larger movement to reconnect business history with other academic disciplines and to move the field beyond the Chandler paradigm.

Thankfully, once one has moved into the heart of the collection, it is possible to lose sight of the editors' prospectus and simply to enjoy the quality of most of the essays. Naomi Lamoreaux kicks off with a sparkling chapter exploring the emerging legal definition of the corporation as compared, and opposed, to other business forms—particularly partnerships—contributing to her editors' intentions by demonstrating the open, evolving, and historically contingent nature of the American corporate order. This piece will bear a lot of rereading, and is enough by itself to justify borrowing the collection from a library, if not buying it. Colleen Dunlavy builds on Lamoreaux's opener with a slighter, but still significant, exploration of the accompanying change in the internal "political" structure of the corporation, as the rule of "one share, one vote" (plutocratic democracy) replaces earlier governmental rules dictating either one shareholder, one vote, or a hybrid form, in which a larger ownership stake brought with it greater power, but only within state-determined limits. Lamoreaux and Dunlavy succeed admirably in rediscovering different pasts, paths not taken on the road to the recognizably modern corporate form. Lipartito himself contributes an interesting chapter, continuing the nineteenth-century focus, on utopian and communitarian reformers' use of versions of the corporate form and bureaucratic management within their own social experiments, emphasizing that the business corporation was embedded in a culture that saw many other virtues in organization than mere efficiency. Gerald Berk offers a foretaste of his next book, maintaining the theme of "paths not taken" by exploring and explaining Louis Brandeis's love affair with scientific management and modes of market regulation, which were barely understood at the time and have been rejected ever since. Louis Galambos is predictably innovative and bracing, shifting the collection's focus from the nineteenth toward the late twentieth century, recounting the Reagan administration's (and its successors') abandonment of a century of half-hearted worship at the altar of antitrust in favor of an embrace of corporate consolidation as a means to renew American global competitiveness. Galambos tells this interesting story with no hint of regret—for him, the road too long traveled was evidently a senseless dead end. David Hart adds a useful

chapter on the state's historical role within the U.S. national innovation system, attacking business history's supposed tendency to tell its own internalist stories without paying sufficient attention to the state's constitutive and active role. Finally, David Sicilia almost wraps up the collection with an excellent examination of interactions between business and the public through three linked case studies of industry's response to public-relations and regulatory crises in the last half-century. Given that his cases are the tobacco, chemical, and nuclear industries, he has plenty to write about, and he complements Galambos's contribution by paying attention to the new social regulation *and* the deregulatory movements of the 1960s through 1980s.

After Sicilia's there are still four chapters, and more than a hundred pages, of the book left. But three of them, in an ill-fitting section, entitled "The Business of Identity," which does little but detract from the preceding chapters' consistently institutional analysis, scarcely deserve a mention, given their lack of quality. Only one does—Eric Guthey's "New Economy Romanticism, Narratives of Corporate Personhood, and the Antimanual Impulse," a close examination of the mythic personas of Ted Turner and Netscape founder Jim Clark that reminds me of Sigmund Diamond's *The Reputation of the American Businessman* with its 1950s-era American Studies methodology usefully updated.

Overall, Lipartito and Sicilia have done much that one would wish for from the editors of a collection like this. Three lapses in eleven substantial chapters is not a bad batting average, and seven of the other eight cohere sufficiently, and speak to one another enough, that the reader will emerge with the feeling that most of his or her time has been well spent. Parts of the past do look subtly different after reading these essays, leading to the conclusion that the revisionist ambitions of this enterprise have been somewhat achieved.

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