

Pull: Networking and Success since Benjamin Franklin. *By Pamela Walker Laird.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. xiv + 439 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-674-01907-5.

Reviewed by Kathy Peiss

“Social capital” is now part of the zeitgeist of contemporary American life. Scholars study the impact of social assets and interpersonal connections, while terms like “networking” and “mentoring” pervade the business world and self-help literature. Now Pamela Walker Laird insightfully applies the concept to the history of American business, revealing how the mechanisms of social capital have operated to foster and limit success. If pull has always been the sine qua non for individual advancement in the workplace, it has also functioned as a powerful method of exclusion and inequity.

Laird argues that the workings of social capital went largely unseen in the United States until the mid-twentieth century. Recounting the success stories of Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Carnegie, and Bill Gates, among others, she shows how these celebrated self-made men were, in fact, made by others. While acknowledging their pluck and ingenuity, she documents the sponsors, role models, family help, and social connections that enabled them to triumph. Debunking the myth of the self-made man is not new: historical studies of social and economic mobility argued that point in the 1970s. Laird’s perceptive observation, however, is that this ideology masked the potent influence of social networks in business. With the rise of the corporation, notions of meritocracy played a similar ideological function: in a rationalized and efficient workplace, managers and professionals would be hired solely on the basis of objective criteria rather than because of personal connections.

So most Americans believed. Laird is at her best when discussing how social capital intensified racial and gender discrimination in the workplace. Pull benefited young white men who had family connections, went to the right schools, and knew which fork to use. Employers and mentors could easily identify these individuals as embryonic versions of themselves. Their race and gender were necessary, if not sufficient,

qualifications for the pull up the ladder, even as the ideology of self-making asserted that these social distinctions had nothing to do with their success.

Ideas of self-making and merit-based progress, which stress innate abilities and hard work, fit Americans' faith in individualism. Nevertheless, professional and voluntary associations for advancement flourished in the early twentieth century. Those already in the business world, and others wanting in, knew that pulling themselves up by their bootstraps would not be enough. Laird discusses the Advertising Women of New York, the Urban League, Rotary, and other organizations, but does not resolve the apparent contradiction between the ethos of the self-made man and the prevalence of groups that fostered social capital. Nor do trade unions receive much attention, perhaps because they offered a different pathway to achievement, indeed a different definition of success.

The importance of social capital became more evident as a consequence of the feminist and civil-rights revolution. African Americans, women, and other disadvantaged groups had long maintained that they were excluded from business, but their protests began to bear fruit in the 1960s. These protests were directed at the legal system and institutional structures that prevented white women and minorities from being hired and promoted into positions historically held by white men. In Laird's terminology, they opposed *push*—the formal means of denying opportunity. It was only as those barriers began to fall that these groups began to see *pull* as a determinant of opportunity. Thus, even as the "old boy's network" fell, new "synthetic" forms of social capital arose to help the disadvantaged. These included affirmative-action programs, institutionalized mentoring, and nonsegregated occasions for social contacts.

In recent years, Laird concludes, the mechanisms of social capital have been important ways for white women and people of color to gain opportunity and greater success in the business world, although she is quick to point out the glass ceiling. She worries that the new self-help approach to social capital is too divorced from the social movements that sought an end to discrimination at the workplace. Moreover, what Laird terms "natural" social capital remains more influential than the "synthetic" variety, which many Americans view as reverse discrimination or unfair advantage.

Laird's historical perspective yields fresh insights into the history of American business practices and offers an original perspective on the challenges made by feminism and civil rights in the last decades of the twentieth century. Despite its considerable strengths, *Pull* ultimately puts too much weight on the power of social capital to ensure success. "Natural" and "synthetic" forms of social capital offer different value precisely because they derive from different sources. Affirmative action and mentoring programs remain compensatory, and they do not offset ongoing inequities in American social and economic life. Class, race, and gender privilege still matter, not only interpersonally, but also institutionally, in ways that even the full enforcement of the law cannot change. We now have something of a cottage industry of personnel managers, human-resource consultants, and advice books to help the disadvantaged create social capital. We can even point to Oprah and Mary Kay—latter-day versions of Andrew Carnegie—whose achievements mark significant social change. Still, a 2006 Catalyst report found that women's rate of advancement into top corporate positions has slowed in recent years; indeed, there were no women among the highest-paid executives in fully three-quarters of the *Fortune* 500 companies. In retrospect, it was not pull but *push*—feminists and civil-rights activists pressuring American business to do better—that made the greatest difference in expanding opportunities for success.

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