In *The Corporation as Family*, historian Nikki Mandell (Wisconsin-Whitewater) argues that welfare work was a more widespread and significant approach to wrestling with the “labor problem” beginning around 1890 than previously thought. Using a gendered analysis of the welfare workers themselves, Mandell focuses on the content and functioning of welfare programs. These workers promised that welfare work would ameliorate labor conflict and recast the employment relationship into a harmonious labor-management partnership.

Mandell contends that employers used the ideal Victorian family as the model for changing workers’ behaviors. Within this framework executives and owners would play the role of “corporate fathers,” welfare workers would serve as “corporate mothers,” and employees would be treated as “corporate children” in need of guidance and preparation for their roles in the new business partnership. Welfare workers tried unsuccessfully to reform both corporate children and, especially, their fathers. "Despite their willingness to experiment with welfare work, employers never fully committed themselves to (it).... They remained more interested in controlling their workers than in drawing them into a cooperative partnership. They supported welfare work because it promised a more disciplined workforce” (p. 101).

At its peak in the mid-1920s, roughly 80 percent of the nation’s largest companies practiced some form of welfare work. Welfare work impacted millions of workers—notably women and immigrants—in industries such as department stores, telephone and insurance companies, textile and machinery manufacturers, and iron and steel.

Companies carefully tailored welfare work to both men’s and women’s expected roles at home and at work. Good programs promoted health and safety in the workplace and in the home. They also included a variety of educational, recreational, and social activities, as well as financial programs. To tie male workers to their firms over the long run, employers experimented with profit sharing and stock and bonus plans. Women’s financial benefits were more short-term, such as Christmas and vacation savings plans. Employers also used financial plans to inculcate in workers middle-class habits of thrift. In all cases, employers determined eligibility and could terminate plans unilaterally.

This system of welfare work provided an alternative to repression and benevolent paternalism (e.g., company towns). These approaches seemed less effective in an environment where large corporations were under intense public scrutiny and where owners lost intimate contact with their employees. Moreover, paternalism created dependent workers who desired their independence from management. For employers, the move toward welfare work was guided by pragmatic business considerations.

Welfare workers, notably women such as NCR’s Lena Harvey and Elizabeth Briscoe of Bancroft & Sons, helped establish the model of the Victorian family. The real Victorian family performed a dual mission: to train children to take their place in industrial society, and to provide a home that would be a refuge from the harsh realities of industrialism. Men, women and children played distinct but interdependent roles. Victorian men were resolute, unsentimental, ambitious, aggressive, and highly competitive. For them, success meant leadership status and control over others, especially in the economic arena.

Women were self-effacing, compassionate, nurturing, and timid. Their job was to create a harmonious home
environment and instill moral values and habits of discipline and deference in their children. Skilled in domestic matters, Victorian women furnished a home that reflected the family’s sophistication and their husband’s status. Regarding the children, “(w)hile male employees were expected to become budding Horatio Algers, welfare work tried to groom female employees for the role of Mrs. Alger” (p. 53).

The desire to pattern labor relations after the Victorian family model was rooted in the turn-of-the-century debates over the “crisis” in the family as many families, especially working-class and immigrant ones, failed to live up to the idealized Victorian model. These families also seemed the most vulnerable to the changes wrought by urbanization and industrialization, and were targeted by welfare workers.

Men comprised a significant portion of welfare workers (the extent is not known), but Mandell highlights the contributions of the most significant women. Regardless of their heterogeneous backgrounds, welfare managers’ duties and responsibilities were similar to the Victorian mother’s. In this sense, then, Mandell contends that welfare work should not be considered paternalism, but rather “corporate paternalism” because executives were relieved of the more feminine aspects of the system and focused instead on employee discipline. As she notes, “If the corporation was indeed a family, there could be no systemic or permanent class conflict between labor and capital” (p. 46).

The largest task for welfare workers was to prepare employees for their role in the corporate Victorian family. Many of their efforts began in the home since harmony in the workplace depended upon workers exercising the same middle-class values and habits that built security and stability at home. In fact, home visits formed the earliest and most basic part of welfare programs. Proponents of welfare work believed that the root causes of the labor problem were the shortcomings of workers themselves. Workers and their advocates targeted big corporations.

Welfare managers faced two daunting obstacles: mediating the mutual antagonisms between labor and management, and creating a legitimate place for themselves in the masculine corporate hierarchy. To do this, they had to create a new definition of the professional business manager—the corporate staffer. The latter is given significant attention by the author and stands as one of her most important contributions to the study of welfare capitalism.

To succeed, welfare workers had to establish the appropriate qualities that would gain acceptance with executives. Male welfare managers borrowed from the Social Gospel movement, which offered a “new man” who, like Jesus, expressed his masculinity through service to others, self-sacrifice, and cooperation. He also preserved the masculine qualities such as rationality, initiative and strength. While men feminized their manhood, women welfare managers jettisoned their moorings to the social housekeeping movement’s female moral authority but kept necessary qualities such as compassion, nurturing, and self-sacrifice. They also had to demonstrate “executive ability,” logic, pragmatism, and a firm temperament. Male and female roles merged to create a more androgynous welfare manager eager to serve the needs of business.

Welfare managers used the methods and language of efficiency and system to reform labor relations, and demanded centralized control over all labor matters. Mandell points to an ironic situation that welfare workers created in their attempt to gain legitimacy: that systematization and efficiency were not really conducive to the intimacy and nurturing needed to humanize business. Despite making claims of having unique business skills required to mediate between labor and management, they had a difficult time convincing executives and production managers to heed their advice.

Employers were unwilling to extend welfare managers’ authority over anything but “maternal” corporate functions. Even though economic benefits were part of the reform equation, executives restricted the economic partnership by determining eligibility requirements, especially measures of loyalty. Employers used financial benefit plans because they believed they would build ambition and foster manly independence in their employees. They showed little interest in providing workers with short-term economic security, an important goal of both welfare managers and workers. In addition, employers and production managers were unwilling to cede total control over labor matters to welfare workers, with whom they fought on many occasions.

Welfare managers also experienced obstacles when dealing with workers who rejected the assumption that they were equal partners in the proposed cooperative business enterprise. Working-class men’s sense of masculinity derived from the immediacy of their job conditions. For them, skill, physical strength and stamina, and a cooperative ethos translated into higher wages, manly independence, and the ability to support a fam-
ily. Working-class women sought the freedom to interact freely with men on and off the job. They resented the strictures of welfare workers’ oversight. Working-class men and women were suspicious of both their corporate fathers’ and mothers’ motives and negotiated the terms under which they would participate in welfare activities. Strikes and other manifestations of labor discontent occurred in welfare firms offering evidence that workers’ needs sometimes went unmet. In general, business had failed to address the underlying causes of conflict: better wages, shorter hours, stable employment, the failure to curb supervisors’ autocratic control, and onerous labor policies.

But, argues Mandell, welfare work also was an internally flawed system because the familial roles prescribed to employers, welfare managers, and employees proved impossible to replicate in the corporation. By WW I, as employers’ interest declined, and as larger economic, social and political forces challenged the Victorian ideal itself, the system of welfare work passed out of favor. Swept away along with the system of welfare work was the central role that women played in it. By the early 1920s, only a few women held managerial positions. Why were women cast aside in favor of male personnel managers?

As part of the ongoing managerial reform movement, personnel management promised to assist employers in selecting prospective employees who had the requisite values and skills. Personnel management also attempted to keep employees satisfied and sell the virtues of the company. Employee representation plans (ERPs) also blossomed during the 1920s. Similar to personnel management but less widespread, ERPs also were likely to be found in large companies. By the early 1920s, the welfare system seemed archaic in the modern world of managerial capitalism, yet welfare work remained—and even expanded—a vital component of both personnel management and ERPs.

There was no inherent reason why women would become marginalized. However, Mandell locates the root of their exile in the federal government’s beginning during WW I to make labor relations a top priority. It required all federal contractors to employ personnel managers. Along with the Taylor Society, the government advocated training courses for personnel managers. The first one was set up in the spring of 1918 at the University of Rochester and soon followed at other major universities. The National Association of Employment Managers formed in May 1918 to promote the professionalism of personnel managers but it excluded women. In general, “Men seemed to better match the profile of the business manager, especially as the personnel movement redefined labor relations as a masculine occupation. Men also had access to the labor relations courses offered by university schools of business” (p. 151), where women were excluded for admission. Moreover, by the early 1920s, women’s roles in business narrowed to clerical and sales positions.

Despite valiant efforts by key women welfare managers, they lost their leadership positions in corporate labor relations by the mid-1920s. Yet welfare work left an ambiguous legacy: “Although women had pioneered the field and had called for the kind of systematization and centralization that was the hallmark of personnel management, their greatest experience lay in welfare work. As welfare work became a subdivision of personnel management, welfare workers became subordinate staff within those departments” (p. 153).

*The Corporation as Family* makes an important contribution to the literature on welfare capitalism. While it covers familiar terrain in its descriptions of welfare programs in well-known firms, it is novel in its focus on the welfare managers and their largely unsuccessful struggles to gain respect from employers and employees alike, and establish relevancy in the emergent corporate bureaucracies.

A few unanswered questions remain, however. First, how did welfare work and unionism interact apart from bouts of labor unrest? Were the experiences of union workers different from unorganized workers? Did unions negotiate the terms of welfare work? If so, were union workers more satisfied with the offerings than nonunion workers? Second, how did women later regain prominence in the field of personnel and human resources? At what point and why did this shift occur? These, of course, are very minor issues that do not detract from Mandell’s fine book.

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