Corporations, Cowboys, and Consumers[1]

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Blue jeans and Marlboro cigarettes, Ford automobiles, Boeing airplanes – these are examples of America's consumer culture the whole world can recognize, products of American business known around the globe. Blue jeans and Marlboros are directly connected to the cowboys – that: preeminent symbol of America to the rest of the world. All of them – jeans, cigarettes, automobiles, airplanes – are the mass-produced products of giant American corporations.

Cowboys and corporations are symbols of the crucial economic growth and modernization that underlie the consumer society of America today. They are also symbols and models of the independence and the organization, the freedom and the regimentation, the individual enterprise and the enormous aggregates of wealth and production, that are believed to be the foundations of American business. And not least, both cowboys and corporations have long histories in the realities of American business as well as in the growth of today's consumer society in America.

Since the beginnings of the British colonies in North America, out of which the United States of America came, American culture has had an important relationship with business. Most of the early colonies were established by merchant trading companies. They became self-governing

1 Based in part on lectures given to the Economics Institute of the University of Sarajevo, the Chamber of the Economy of Sarajevo, and the Institute for Economic Research, Ljublijana, Yugoslavia, in 1989, and to the Associazione Itali-Inghilterra and the Chamber of Commerce, Cagliari, Italy, in 1995.

because the free men of each colony were members, stoclholders, of the colonial company. The stockholder's meetings of early English merchant companies were called Great and General Courts, and the legislature of Massachusetts today – a state that grew out of one of the earliest colonial companies, the Massachusetts Bay Company – is still called the Great and General Court.

From the beginning, many more Americans were involved in business – indeed business was an important part of their daily lives – than was true of most other people in the world. All of the colonists, like all Americans except the Native American "Indians," were immigrants. And immigration had to be paid for. So nearly every person – as well as every colony – started to produce goods and engage in trade in order to reimburse those who provided the capital and paid the transport costs to America. Thus it was that from the earliest colonies, every American farmer engaged in business. Every property owner engaged in business – how else could property in a New World be made valuable? And of course every merchant and artisan engaged in business.[2]

The United States of America as a single independent nation was created when those British colonies fought a War for Independence (1775-1783), which was the American Revolution. In the nineteenth century, as Americans after their Revolution began deliberately to create a nation devoted to democracy, human equality, and individual liberty, they had to devise ways to maximize their scanty capital resources in order to develop the rich lands of North America so abundantly available to them.

One of the techniques that became characteristic was to encourage individual people to migrate to the resources and use their own labor, as well as any other labor they could organize, to exploit what the land

2 See James Oliver Robertson, *America's Business* (New York, 1985), where I have argued this more fully. Some of the more important worlts on the early development of the American economy and the peculiar American relationship to business are : T. H. Breen, *Imagining the Past: East Hampton Histories* (Reading, Mass., 1989); Richard D. Brown, *Modernization: The Transformation of American Life, 1600-1865* (New York, 1976); Stuart Brochey, *The Roots of Anzerican Economic Growth, 1607-1861: An Essay in Social Causation* (New York, 1965); J. E. Crowley, *This Sheba Self: Tlze Conceptualization of Economic Life in Eighteenth Century America* (Baltimore, 1974); J. R. T. Hughes, *Social Control in the Colonial Economy* (Charlottesville, Va., 1976); Neil McKendrick et.al., *Birth of a Consumer Society* (Bloomington, Ind., 1982); Edmnnd S. Morgan, *Anzerican Slavery, American Freedom* (New York, 1975).

offered. This was the "technique" that became visibly characteristic of the American frontier: the frontiersman or backwoodsman explored and exploited whatever country he could get to, and led hordes of pioneers to settle on and work, improve, and develop the land. They were encouraged in this by all American governments – Federal, state, local – which made land available, provided legal and military protection, and made every effort to provide financial and physical infrastructures to support such resource exploitation.

The other technique of maximizing available capital to exploit natural resources, also characteristic of all of American modernization and development, was to encourage individuals who possessed capital to pool it and directly manage its use for the maximum exploitation of available resources. This "technique" grew out of the early American eagerness – born of the Revolution's invention of democracy and popular sovereignty – to get together, to join and become part of voluntary associations of free people who worked together for their common good. (Early nineteenth-century Americans called it working for the common wealth or the common welfare.)[3]

This technique brought the invention and rapid development of the American corporation. All American governments freely created corporations – to provide financial and physical infrastructures for economic development. Governments gave powers, resources, legal support, and often considerable capital to the new corporations.

Corporations

The American corporation took on some of its characteristic forms in that early effort to exploit American resources in a democratic society. In the English legal tradition that the new American nation used, a corporation

3 See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New Yorlc, 1992), especially the three final chapters; also Joyce Oldham Appleby, »Commerical Farming and the 'Agrarian Myth' in the Early Republic,« *Journal of American History* 68 (1982); Paul W. Gates, *The Farmer's Age: Agriculture 1815-1860* (New Yorlc, 1960);

was created when a government granted a specific group of men the right to govern, manage, and exploit a particular economic or social or political set of privileges, activities, or resources. The government wanted a particular task accomplished and instead of doing it itself, it created a corporation to which it granted all the rights necessary to perform that task. The members of the corporation were expected to provide the capital necessary to the task, manage the operation, and share whatever profit or benefit might result.

English governments typically created corporations to govern cities and towns, to provide education in colleges, universities, and schools, to develop mines, particular kinds of trade, and to establish and govern colonies. After the American Revolution, American state governments created hundreds, then thousands of corporations for a multitude of purposes including those in the English tradition, but also to establish banks, to build roads and canals and bridges, to create new machine-driven manufacturing, and develop fire, casualty, and life insurance. The first business corporation in the United States was the Bank of North America. An early, and successful, road-building corporation was the Lancaster Turnpike in the state of Pennsylvania. The largest, and financially most successful, of all American canal corporations was the Erie Canal, opened in 1825, a nearly 600 kilometer-long canal in New York state. And later in the nineteenth century, the Pennsylvania Railroad was a huge corporation with more than 50,000 employees. Often the sponsoring government would itself invest in the corporation, and it might well grant the corporation powers that belonged to government – road, bridge, canal, and railroad corporations, for example, were almost always granted the government's power to take land to use for "right of way."

Early corporations always had limits. They were often established only for certain fixed periods of time. Corporate "combinations" of people with wealth and power were never altogether trusted in the traditions of American democracy. The first Bank of the United States, for example, was chartered for a twenty year term. It was rechartered for another such period, but when its second term expired in 1836, so did the Bank of the United States. The United States has never created another central banking corporation, because it has never willingly trusted the management of such great power to a small group of capitalists. The present

Federal Reserve system, created in the twentieth century, is carefully structured to decentralize control and spread management widely across the whole nation.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, American corporations had become self-governing, usually immortal, limited-liability joint-stock companies, whose shares were widely traded on established exchanges in all major cities. Whereas when corporations began, tbey were individually chartered by specific acts of state legislatures, by mid-century general incorporation laws made the corporate device available to all who wanted to use it. Corporate investors supervised their investments and directed the affairs of the corporation by membership on the corporate Board of Directors – which normally included the major investors. Early corporate share-holding was done in relatively large individual blocks of capital, and overall direction of corporations remained in the hands of large investors well into the twentieth century. Corporations were typically engaged in commercial banking, insurance, the rapidly developing manufacturing industries, and in wide varieties of land development. All of the railroads built in the United States were corporations.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, American corporations controlled American railroads, mining, and all large-scale manufacturing and mass-producing industries. Some corporations were huge national conglomerates of centralized manufacture, marketing their products from one end of America to the other – and beyond. John D. Rockefeller, whose Standard Oil Corporations – of Ohio and New Jersey – controlled most of the world's petroleum production at the beginning of the 20th century, boasted (and it was true) that he supplied the "oil for the lamps of China." Because they were legally immortal, the big business corporations created at the very beginning of the twentieth century came to control enormous aggregations of wealth, property, and resources. When the J. P. Morgan bank helped create the United States Steel Corporation in 1901, its capital was 1.2 billion dollars, and it included all of the major steel *producing* and steel *using* companies in the country. Andrew Carnegie was paid $400 million – there were no taxes – for his company to become a part of U. S. Steel. Almost all of the great corporations created at the beginning of the twentieth century are still major players in the American, and the world, economy a century later.

The creators, owners, and principal stockholders of these corporate giants were known all over America as "robber barons" – men who unscrupulously manipulated marltets, banks, railroads, stock-markets, and governments, and made fortunes – like John D. Rocltefeller in oil – or Andrew Carnegie in steel – or the Swift brothers in beef. Corporations had become legal "persons" in American law, with all the Constitutional rights and privileges of individual citizens. And these great corporations devoted a significant chunk of their considerable wealth as well as the services of their well-paid lawyers, and an increasing command of the media to a sustained and successful campaign to destroy the power of State governments (that had created them) to regulate and control them.[4]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, too, much of what corporations did, particularly their exploitation of their workers and their destruction of smaller businesses and less-than-national marltets, had earned them the hatred and fear of many Americans. Terms like "robber barons" and "Wall Street tycoons" were widely popular expressions of a general American dislike of corporate giants. Popular literature – for example, Frank Norris's widely read novels *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903) – reflected a deeply rooted hatred for the havoc wreaked on individual Americans and American community life by corporations. Journalist Ida Tarbell's large and serious *History of Standard Oil* (1902-04) contributed to popular political campaigns and legal antitrust action against Standard Oil, while Upton Sinclair's 1908 novel *The Jungle*

4 Some of the more important works on the history of the American corporation are: Sigmund Diamond, *The Reputation of tlze American Businessman* (New York, 1966); Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., »The Beginnings of 'Big Business' in American Industry,« *Business History Review* 33 (1959), and »The Railroads: Pioneers in Modern Corporate Management,« *Business History Review* 39 (1965); Sidney Fine, *Laissez Faire and the General-Welfare State: A Study of Conflict in American Thought, 1865-1901* (Ann Arbor, 1956); Oscar and Mary Handlin, *Commonwealth, a Study of tlze Role of Government in tlze American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861* (New Yorlc, 1947), and »Origins of the American Business Corporation,« *Journal of Economic History 5* (1945); David A. Houshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Teclznology in tlze United States* (Baltimore, 1984); James Willard Hnrst, *Tlze Legitimacy of tlze Business Corporation in tlze Law of the United States, 1870-1970* (Charlottesville, Va., 1970); John F. Kasson, *Civilizing tlze Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York, 1976); Edward C. Kirkland, *Dream and Thought in the Business Community, 1860-1900* (Ithaca, 1956); Ronald E. Seavoy, »The Public Service Origins of the American Business Corporation,« *Business History Review* 52 (1978); Martin J. Sklar, *Tlze Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916* (New Yorlc, 1988); Alan Trachentenberg, *Tlze Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982).

exposed the vile practices of corporate meat packers and led the way to the federal Pure' Food and Drug Act. And the initially ineffective Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, with amendments and additons in the twentieth century, bcame the popular basis for the long-term "containmegt" of corporations by the federal government.[5]

Corporations in twentieth-century American life have had periods of public favor. For nearly a decade after the end of World War I in 1918, Americans seemed to feel that corporations and their managers and owners might really know how best to run the industrial economy and bring general affluence to Americans. The Depression of the 1930s, however, disabused a whole mid-twentieth-century generation of middle- and working-class Americans of any particular fondness for corporations or corporate leaders. Widely popular Congressional investigations in the 1930s accused corporate "merchants of death" and "munitions makers" of having tricked the United States into participation in World War I.

Corporate business was generally acknowledged to have contributed in important ways to the American victory in World War II. Nevertheless, a former General from that war, Dwight D. Eisenhower, warned Americans, when he left the Presidency in 1961, against the serious dangers to American democracy posed by the "industrial-military complex" of giant corporations engaged in the so-called "defense" businesses. It was not until the mid-1970s, after the end of the war in Vietnam, that Americans

5 Some of the more important works in the early battles against corporations are: Mary H. Blewelt, *Work: Men, Women, and Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry 1780-1910* (Urbana, Ill., 1988); David Brody, *Steelworkers in Anzerica: The Nonunion Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in Anzerica* (London, 1987); William E. Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991); Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing Anzerica: Essays in Working-Class and Social History* (New Yorlc, 1976); James Willard Hurst, *Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth Century United States* (Madison, Wisc., 1967); Thomas K. McCraw, *Prophets of Regulation: Charles Francis Adams, Louis D. Brandeis, James M. Landis, Alfred E. Kahn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); David Montgomery, »The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844,« *Journal of Social History 5* (1972), and *The Fall of the House of Labor: Tlze Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activisnz, 1865-1925* (New York, 1987); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New Yorlc, 1983); Stephen Sltowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (Cambridge, 1982); Lynn Weiner, *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980* (Chapel Hill, 1985); Robert H. Wiebe, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

again generally began to feel some confidence in "corporate America." And the 1980s brought a public assumption of the general intelligence and benefit of corporate leadership to the American economy that had not been visible in American life for at least half a century.[6]

The twentieth century has also seen the nearly complete separation of corporate management from ownership and the professionalization of business management and corporate leadership. The general assumption has grown, among Americans, that the most efficient and productive kind of government or management in modern America is the American corporation. We have been encouraged by corporate public relations, marketing, and advertising – as well as by corporate sponsorship of news features, publications, sports events, and education – to believe that corporations epitomize both free enterprise and, surprisingly, democracy.[7]

Twentieth-century corporate leadership has been successful in seizing and reserving to itself the rhetoric of democracy, with but little of its substance. American individualism has been incorporated, and all its virtues have become corporate virtues. Corporations, according to arguments that are so familiar they are considered trite in America today, do important work for the whole society (in fact do most of the work of the society), they are industrious, frugal, hardworking. Therefore, by the logic of American individualism, they are good and moral. By these same

6 Some works on public perceptions of corporate business in the twentieth century are: James Trnslow Adams, *Our Business Civilization* (New York, 1929); Richard J. Barnet and Ronald E. Müller, *Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational Corporations* (New York, 1974); David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York, 1980); James Fallows, *National Defense* (New York, 1982); John K. Galbraith, *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power* (Boston, 1952), and *The Great Crash* (Boston, 1955); Jonathan Hughes, *The Vital Few: Tlze Entrepreneur and American Economic Progress* (New York, 1986); Paul A. C. Koistinen, "The 'Industrial-Military Complex' in Historical Perspective: World War I," *Business History Review* 41 (1967); C. Wright Mills, *Tlze Power Elite* (New York, 1956).

7 On corporate management, see: Daniel Bell, *Work and Its Discontents: The Cult of Efficienty in America* (Boston, 1956); Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New York, 1967); Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in tlze History of tlze Industrial Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), and *The Visible Hand: Tlze Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambrdige, Mass., 1977); Peter F. Drucker, *Tlze New Society: The Anatomy of the Industrial Order* (New Yorlc, 1950); Frederick W. Taylor, *Scientific Management* (New York, 1947); Thorstein Veblen, *Tlze Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York, 1915), and *The Theory of tlze Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York, 1934).

arguments, they are fiercely competitive, and deserve the independence, autonomy, and freedom from governmental supervision that every American claims by right. They create wealth, they produce goods, they provide jobs for millions. They make America wealthy and powerful. While much of this rhetoric has been increasingly familiar to Americans since the beginning of the century, the virtually total equation of capitalism and democracy that has characterized American political debate and American governmental rhetoric since Ronald Reagan entered the White House in 1981 is another sign of the successful subvention of popular rhetoric by corporations.[8]

Giant American corporations have, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, become both "units" that are bought and sold in an increasingly mythologized global market, and operators in economies that ignore national boundaries. They have mounted campaigns – that continue today and to which they devote enormous resources – to lessen the power of national governments to control or regulate their behavior, including most particularly the government of the American democracy they are supposed to symbolize.[9]

One of the twentieth-century problems that confronted giant mass-producing corporations was how to create markets for the seemingly limitless products they could produce. Bruce Barton, a leading American advertising executive in the 1920s, pointed out that the people who talk about demand creating supply have got it all wrong. With modern mass-

8 On corporate public relations, see: Stewart Ewen, *Captains* of *Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New Yorlc, 1976); Louis Galainbos, *The Public Image of Big Business in America, 1880-1940: A Quantitative Study in Social Change* (Baltimore, 1975); Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, *The Confidence Gap: Business, Labor, and Government in tlze Public Mind* (New York, 1983); Richard S. Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900-1950* (Greenwich, Conn., 1979).

9 On the power of modern corporations, see: Richard Eells, *Global Corporations: Tlze Emerging System of World Economic Power* (New York, 1972); Neil Fligsteiu, *Tlze Transformation of Corporate Control* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Louis Galainbos and Joseph Pratt, *Tlze Rise of tlze Corpomte Commonwealth: United States Business and Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (New Yorlc, 1988); William Lazonick, *Business Organization and tlze Myth of the Market Economy*(New York, 1991; Alpheus T. Mason, >>Business Organized as Power: The New Imperium in Imperio,« *American Political Science Review 44* (1950); Hugh Stephenson, *Tlze Coming Clash: Tlze Impact of the Multinational Corporation on the Nation State* (London, 1972); Raymond Vernon, *Sovereignty at Bay: The Multinational Spread of U. S. Enterprises* (New York, 1971); Richard H. K. Vietor, *Contrived Competition: Regulation and Deregulation in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

producers, supply always precedes, always exceeds, demand. The problem of mass production is not creating supply, it is creating demand for all the goods that can be produced.

Marketing, selling, creating demand for goods that already exist or will inevitably exist if factories go on producing is what twentieth-century corporations do. The markets must be ever-renewing, since the ability to produce goods is not in any way lessened by actually producing them. Big businesses created the modern consumer society to solve that problem.[10]

Furthermore, renewable markets were created for manufactured goods that were not traditionally consumable and for goods that were long-lasting with ordinary use. Customers had to be educated, manipulated, and transformed into consumers by getting them to use up useful goods, getting them to want another of something they already had. The high American value on economic "democracy" was emphasized, but the traditional equation of hard work and *saving* was gradually transformed into hard work and *spending.*

The earliest American industry based on the renewed consumption of durable goods was the mass-produced automobile industry, a twentieth-century American creation. Henry Ford created mass-produced automobiles. And he devised some of the best techniques for mass-producing them and mass-marketing them. His Model-T provided cheap easy-to-run wheels for Americans who deeply believed that independent movement, the ability to go where you wanted when you wanted, and get there fast, was the essence of being a proper free independent individual. The result was one million automobiles on the roads and streets of America four years after Ford established unlimited mass production. And every year since then (it was 1916), more, many more, than one million automobiles have been sold in America. Today there are at least 125 million automobiles on the roads in America, one for every other man, woman, and child in the country.

10 On advertising's role in the consumer, corporate society, see: Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Indianapolis, 1924); T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New Yorlc, 1994); Ronald Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, Calif., 1985); Micahel Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York, 1984).

While Ford early realized – in this he was far ahead of the corporate world in general – that it was necessary to pay workers well if they were to be consumers, he quickly became more a symbol in American life than he was a continuing creator of the consumer society. He became the symbol for the first half of the twentieth-century (he died in 1947) of the productivity and efficiency of the modern corporation. And a symbol of the corporation as individual-entrepreneur-epitome of American values.

It was the General Motors Corporation, another mass-producer of automobiles, led by professional corporate managers, that devised two key elements in the consumer society. General Motors began the practice, in 1921, through a wholly-owned subsidiary corporation (General Motors Acceptance Corporation), of providing credit to customers so they could buy automobiles. This depended, in turn, on encouraging the development of the secondary, used-car market that was potentially a slowing force in the new-car market. To prevent that, General Morotrs created the first "planned obsolescence" as a vital part of the consumer market. GM introduced yearly model changes, mostly cosmetic, that moved ideas of "fashion" from retailing and clothing into the market for durable goods. Sell a person a car, change the model at the end of the year so the car becomes visibly identifiably old or, as it was always put, "out of date," "old-fashioned," and you can sell that person a new car long before the old one is worn out or used up.[11]

Encouraged by corporate advertising, Americans have gradually come to believe that widespread consumption is a fulfillment of the promises of democracy and equality. If every adult American owns a car, then "we must be doing something right." It is a sign that American wealth is equitably distributed, that affluence is shared by all. Just as the democratic nature of large corporations is manifest by their millions of stockholders who have a vote for every share. If every stockholder has a vote, then every stockholder participates, equitably, democratically, in the wealth possessed by those corporations. Such is the logic of corporate business in the consumer society.

11 James J. Flink, *America Adopts the Automobile, 1895-1910* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein, eds., *The Automobile and American Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1983); Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford*, 3 vols. (New York, 1954, 1957, 1963); Jobn B. Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971); Alfred P. Sloan, *My Years with General Mortors* (Garden City, 1964).

The corporate elements of the consumer society – mass-production, mass-credit, and mass-marketing – were established early in the twentieth century and have grown increasingly important throughout it. The corporation, legally an individual, is the preeminent symbol of the effective, productive individual, and the model of productivity, efficiency, and profitable work in modern American society. "Logically" the leader of the consumer society.

Cowboys

Blue-jeans wearing cowboys on horseback in ten-gallon Stetson hats wearing high-heeled, pointy-toed boots were also parts of the historic development of American culture and American business.

From the 1860s in Texas, gradually spreading northward across the Great Plains, America's great natural grasslands, ranching – the production of large herds of cattle and of sheep – became one of America's big agribusinesses. For the first twenty years, it was based on the open range, unfenced publicly-owned grasslands, where the only competition to cattle-raising were the great buffalo herds and the Native Americans who lived off those herds. Settlers, hunters, and the army killed all the buffalo and drove the Native Americans off the range by the 1890s. Longer-lasting competition to open-range ranching developed from farmers of the range land. And from corporations, companies, and wealthy families who bought the rangeland, fenced it, and kept it exclusively for their own herds. Open-range ranching and its competitors – Native Americans, buffalo, farmers, settlers, corporations, and the rich – have become the constant theme of the mythology of the cowboys, in stories, in movies, on television, in children's "cowboy and Indian" games. But by the beginning of the twentieth-century, ranching had become large-scale corporate business, highly capitalized, based on the management of large, well-fenced spreads, and the scientific breeding and feeding of very large herds.

Controlling herds of cattle over the great distances and sparse grass of the Great Plains required men on horseback. Hundreds and then

thousands of young men learned the slulls it took to be cowboys, and began to "ride the range" or "ride herd" on ever-increasing numbers of cattle over the entire expanse of the Great Plains. They were employed by ranchers and by the growing numbers of land companies, cattle corporations, and stock companies that owned millions of acres of land, and millions of head of cattle. The traditions and techniques of cattle raising on the Plains were developed by the Spanish, who introduced both cattle and horses to the New World. When Americans in great numbers in Texas first began to raise cattle on the Plains, they borrowed all the equipment – boots, saddles, lariats, big hats, branding irons – as well as the techniques of breaking and training horses, riding, herding, branding, and rounding-up – from the Mexicans. The Colt revolver and Levi's jeans made by Levi Strauss & Company of San Francisco were the only "gringo" contributions to the American cowboy's outfit.

After the open range was closed, the cattle business – and the trade of being a cowboy – developed, prospered, and became a permanent, large twentieth-century industry, because urban-industrial populations grew ever larger, and those tens of millions of city-dwelling people needed the protein meat could provide in concentrated form. Hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in an extensive transcontinental railroad network to supply those cities and to carry manufactured goods from them to markets all over the country. Cattle rode those rails! The cattle business would not have grown large, nor would cowboys have become American heroes, had it not been for railroads, industries, and the cities. The cowboy, like the modern corporation, is the product of industrial America.[12]

Cowboys became the only American-style industrial working-class heroes. They fit into an older American heroic tradition of frontiersmen, backwoodsmen, pioneer heroes like Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's fictional "Leatherstocking." These highly individualistic, asocial loners who lived off the land, in the wild, avoided real work,

12 On cowboy myths and realities, see: Edward E. Dale, *The Range Cattle Industry* (Norman, Olcla., 1930); J. Frank Dobie, *Tlze Longhorns* (Boston, 1941); Robert R. Dykstra, *Tlze Cattle Towns: A Social History of tlze Kansas Cattle Trading Centers, Abilene, Ellsworth, Wiclzita, Dodge City and Caldwell, 1867-1885* (New York, 1976); Joe B. Frantz and Julian E. Choate, Jr., *The American Cowboy: Tlze Myth and the Reality* (Norman, Okla., 1955); Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *Tlze Negro Cowboys* (New York, 1965); James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New Yorlc, 1980), 158-170; William W. Savage, Jr., *Cowboy Life: Reconstructing a Myth* (Norman, Okla., 1975).

civilization, and employment whenever possible were transformed in the popular literature of the second half of the nineteenth-century into horse-riding, gun-toting, skilled cowboys of the Wild West. But one of the peculiarities of the cowboy hero was, that in whatever transformations he appeared – cowpoke, lawman, "Buffalo Bill", range-rider, scout, even outlaw – he was always working for someone else, always an employee, always in the hire of someone, and usually working on a crew, with a boss. As is the case for real cowboys.

The mythic cowboy hero lived a life of adventure. And he always rode off into the sunset alone, alienated, and unintegrated into any community. But almost always, he sought further employment on some other ranch, for some town or railroad or corporation, or, if he had "gone bad," adventure with an outlaw gang. And in the heroic stories the cowboy typically acts out the alienation of the modern industrial worker by "walking away" or "walking out" on his employer and employment, riding off into the sunset, refusing to integrate himself into community or long-term employment.

In one of the ballads real cowboys composed to sing to their cattle, the cowboy-singer tells the cows he is herding to market and slaughter "it's your misfortune, and none of my own," affirming his alienation. This perennial employee, in myth as in reality, epitomizes for modern Americans the independence, the freedom, and the free enterprise of a democratic American.

The popular literature of the cowboy, along with the Indians and the Wild West, grew by the end of the nineteenth century – when the frontier in America was pronounced "closed" by the Census bureau and announced a part of "history" by Frederick Jackson Turner, a young historian. The "western" in which the cowboy hero lives is a widely popular novel genre in the twentieth century that continues to find millions of readers. And "western" movies, radio shows, and television programs keep the cowboy hero alive and thriving. The effect of the cowboy-hero on generations of urban Americans tied to industrial work is that being an employee, being a bred-hand for a big outfit that represents big capital, big land-holding, and often the modern industrial world, is individualistic, quintessentially American, and heroic.

William F. Cody, always known simply as "Buffalo Bill," created a huge traveling Wild West Show in the 1870s, filled with cowboys and

Indians, soldiers and horses, that "recreated" famous battles of the "Indian Wars." Cowboys, Indians, and the Wild West became consumer entertainment. Because of the wide travels and huge popularity of his Wild West Show, Buffalo Bill became (he died in 1917), the living epitome of the cowboy hero. And Buffalo Bill had earned his name as the employee of the Union Pacific Railroad – one of America's early giant corporations. He shot buffalo to feed the thousands of laborers building the first transcontinental railroad.

Buffalo Bill – as was also true of great dead western cowboy-military hero General Custer (who "died with his boots on" 1876 – high-heeled, pointed-toe boots no doubt) – wore clothes that all Americans identified with those earlier frontiersmen, the Daniel Boones, the Kit Carsons (who was the first of the mythical frontier heroes to make his reputation on horseback), and Cooper's Leatherstoclting – fringed buckskin or deerskin jackets and leggings. These were not the clothes real cowboys wore, of course, but they made it visibly, physically true that the cowboys were the direct descendants of those earlier frontiersmen, the clear inheritors of their independence and freedom.

Yet without ever saying it or making it conscious to Americans, the cowboy was a "worlter-hero" not an asocial, isolated, backwoodsman. And in the course of the twentieth century – long after the West ceased to be wild, and as Americans became typically urban consumers – every item of the cowboy's characteristic work clothes – his boots, his hat, his belt, his jacket, his poncho, and his jeans – have been taken up by Americans who wear them to identify with their worker-hero. And who buy them to show they are, indeed, American consumers. The rest of the world has taken to American cowboy jeans because they represent the affluence, the modernity, and the individual freedom that seem characteristic of the consumer society America first created.[13]

13 On the cowboy and the West in American belief, see: Robert G. Athearn, *Tlze Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence, Kans., 1986); Richard Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism* (New York, 1975); Robert V. Hine, *Community of the Western Frontier: Separate but Not Alone* (Norman, Okla.m, 1980); Roger D. MacGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen, and Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984); John R. Milton, *Tlze Novel of tlze American West* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1980); Paul Rodman, *Tlze Far West and tlze Great Plains in Transition, 1859-1900* (New Yorlc, 1988); William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman, Okla., 1979); Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950); L. Steckmesser, *Tlze Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman, Okla., 1965).

Consumers

Only in the twentieth century has America consciously transformed itself from a rural and agricultural nation, whose great wealth visibly came from the rapidly increasing produce of the land, into a nation of city-dwelling consumers of mass-produced industrial goods. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the United States was a nation where the majority believed the key to national economic progress was the individual pursuit of happiness – on the farm. It has become, in one century, an urban industrial nation whose increasingly great wealth is visibly produced by large corporate bureaucracies controlling huge aggregates of capital. The majority of the working population are industiral workers, purveyors of urban services, urban-industrial managers and professionals, corporate and government bureaucrats.

The move lo an industrial capitalism devoted to the endless increase of the ever-more mechanized production of goods, the greater and greater concentration of capital, the control of production, and the increasing migration of population to ever-growing cities was not accomplished with ease. Americans at all levels – from top to bottom – of the new industrial urban society wanted to continue to believe that equality, democracy, and the individual pursuit of happiness were the essential characteristics of their society. So they have devoted the same century in which they created their present urban-industrial corporate-capitalistic world to subtle, powerful, and far-reaching transformations of the meanings and content of their fundamental ideals into the characteristic ideals of the consumer society.

When Henry Ford said he wanted to make a "family horse" that every working person could afford, he was catering in a new way to the peculiarly American dream of being independently mobile. It had always been a dream in America before Ford, where most Americans walked, or rode on trains. Few could afford to own a horse or a buggy. So Ford made a new kind of mobility available, a new American dream. And he tsansformed the powerful American democratic ideal of equality into consumer terms. But one of the things he created as he did all this, was a giant American corporation, The Ford Motor Company.

Corporate businesses created the consumer marketplace, convincing

the masses that they ought to buy ever more manufactured goods, and ultimately making it possible – through wages and credit – for them to pay)for the goods being produced. The desire for goods, even for necessary food to consume and clothes to wear, is never, in any society, simply the desire for necessary material things. Food, clothes, houses, possessions of all kinds, along with their use and consumption, have always carried symbolic, social, ritualistic meanings that appear to be at least as powerful in motivating human behavior as material necessity. The popularity of fast-food chains in America in the 1980s, for example, seems to depend as much upon the sense of independence and freedom they give their millions of patrons as on the fact that they purvey inexpensive prepared food. And certainly the way Americans took to the automobile has more to do with American ideals of individual mobility and freedom, and the egalitarian pursuit of happiness, than it does with any need for transportation. ,

Consuming is considered the most important social, as well as economic, act. Americans have learned that the health of the economy and of the nation depend not on working, producing, and saving – which is what American leaders and philosophers since Benjamin Franklin and Adam Smith had been saying – but rather on buying and consuming products, using them up, and buying some more – on spending rather than saving. In the consumer society a penny saved may be a ,penny earned, but a penny spent gets you consumable goods and keeps the economy running. Good, in a consumer society, is using up the goods. And, to paraphrase a California bumper-sticker, the one with the most goods wins.

The techniques of mass-retailing, of advertising and marketing goods to a large-scale, consuming public required many technical developments and structural changes in corporations and their managements. And they also required the creation of a society of human beings which was devoted not to production – *that* could be left in the hands of large-scale corporate machine-driven enterprises – but rather a human society devoted to consumption. For a consumer society to exist, the values of the whole society must center on consumption. Consumption must come, as it has in popular American culture, to signify virtue, social standing, reward for work, and usefulness to the society – for individuals and for all businesses. The consumer society has become a most effective social

support for business and corporate growth and power, in America and in the world.[14]

Americans have become willing members of a consumer society in part because they are convinced that consumption is an indication of national progress, of a high standard of living, and of social good. The individual pushing a cart through the supermarket is visibly pursuing his or her own individual happiness. Picking from a wide variety of goods, finding bargains, making decisions, and driving away with the goods – in the automotive symbol of freedom and mobility – is *the actual achievement* of freedom, independence, and mobility in an egalitarian marketplace. It is, as most Americans have come to believe, "democracy in action."

Most Americans today do not find liberty, mobility, and independence by engaging in business directly. We find them instead in automobiles, in the supermarkets, in malls. Individual control, power, choice are all there, physically and symbolically. In mass-produced, consumer-marketed, credit-purchased cars all can go places, be mobile, display prowess and success, choose companions, be safe and entertained in a hostile world, serve families, car pools, and communites, and even transport goods to and from the market. We can still be cowboys – wherever we are, without horses or cows, without six-shooters or the open range, simply by putting on our mass-produced mass-marketed new Levi's, or by lighting up a mass-produced mass-marketed Malboro cigarette, or by driving our pickup trucks, our high-powered "Mustangs" and "Broncos" and "Explorers" – and feel free and independent.

14 On the consumer society and its morality, see: Jean-Christophe Agnew, »Coming Up for Air: Consumer Culture in Historical Perspective,« in John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London, 1993); Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* (New York, 1989); Richard Butsch, ed., *For Fun and Profit; The Transformation of Leisure into Consumption* (Philadelphia, 1990); Lendol G. Calder, »From 'Consumptive' Credit to 'Consuiner' Credit: E. R. A. Seligman and the Moral Justification of Consumer Debt,« *Essays in Economic & Business History* 14 (1996); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: Anzerican Families in the Cold War Era* (New York, 1988); David E. Nye and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Consumption and American Culture* (Amsterdam, 1991); James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, Anzerican Reality* (New York, 1980), especially Parts II and IV.