

Point of View By Michael McGerr

THE 20TH CENTURY hasn't been cooperating with historians who study the United States. Many present the rise of massive organizations as one of the main dramas of modern American history. But the century has not followed the script: Corporations and other bureaucracies, despite their role in structuring the economy, have had a surprisingly limited impact on individual Americans' attitudes and behavior. As a result, the 20th century is different, unexpected—and harder for us to explain.

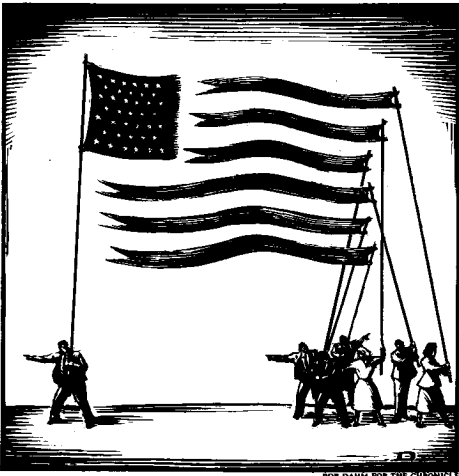
Historians disagree about the relative importance of business corporations, big government, and organized interest groups. But they have shared assumptions with other social scientists about the power of organizations to change individuals and society. According to some scholars, corporations and other bureaucracies have produced new Americans with new values and motivations: self-denying managers, efficiency-minded professionals, statesmanlike top executives, and insatiable consumers. More broadly, historians believe that large-scale organizations have promoted a centralized, impersonal, homogeneous social system, with little room for individuals and individualism. But scholars have not effectively demonstrated such transformations.

For all their scope, corporations and other bureaucracies have failed to remake their own workers, let alone American culture. The United States remains notably heterogeneous and unsettled. Instead of the smooth unfolding of organizational hegemony, a struggle continues over the character of life in the United States. If, 100 years ago, the nation was distinctive for the rapid emergence of large-scale organizations, today America stands out among advanced industrial societies for the cultural resistance to organization. Scholars can account for this development only by reconsidering the history of the 20th century.

The orthodox interpretation of modern American history, encouraged by the writings of some prominent social scientists, stems from the heyday of the American corporation and the liberal state during the two decades after World War II. These were the years of the anti-individualist, other-directed Americans portrayed by David Riesman in the *Lonely Crowd* (Yale University Press, 1950), the loyal, group-oriented manager described by William Whyte in *The Organization Man* (Simon & Schuster, 1956), and the brokered, welfare government invoked by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The New Industrial State* (Houghton Mifflin, 1967).

Still deeply influenced by this image, historians have tried to track down the origins of "organized America" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Alfred Chandler, Samuel P. Hays, Robert Wiebe, William Appleman Williams, and others have argued that white-collar workers in corporations and bureaucracies formed a "new middle class" in the 20th century that was different from the old, 19th-century middle class of independent farmers and small businessmen. Together with top corporate executives of the upper class, these new middle-class workers were thought to have abandoned individualistic identities for a commitment to efficiency, rationality, and social stability. According to scholars, the new Americans renounced individual greed and autonomy to serve the long-term interests of corporations, trade associations, and professions—and so shaped a new, organizational society.

Unfortunately, not very many of these new people have turned up. Historians have had trouble locating the progenitors of the "organization man" and the "lonely crowd." No one has come up with persuasive evidence that the white-collar, middle-class bureaucrats of recent decades differed significantly in politics, family life, birth rates, religiosity, and consumer choices from the "old" middle class of petty proprietors and professionals. Moreover, numerous histori-



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ans in recent years have demonstrated that upper-class employers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not always share in a new commitment to social stability, but rather undertook a divisive assault on unions.

More recent America does not offer many "organization people" either. In the 1970's and the 1980's, top corporate executives, unable to renounce short-term gain, risked social stability again by undermining working-class wages, jobs, and unions while paying themselves ever-more-munificent salaries. They have loaded their companies with debt and neglected vital long-term investments in research and equipment.

And middle managers no longer resemble Whyte's group-oriented bureaucrat—if they ever did. Amanda Bennett, in *The Death of the Organization Man* (William Morrow & Co., Inc, 1989), and Paul Leinberger and Bruce Tucker, in *The New Individualists* (Harper-Collins, 1991), have demonstrated how the economic instability of the 70's and 80's weakened managers' identification with the interests of their corporate employers. These books suggest that middle-class people, within and without corporations, now define their lives in more individualistic, independent terms.

MORE BROADLY, numerous commentators have noted that a strong sense of self, of individual agency and importance, still pervades American culture. Instead of venerating corporations, bureaucracy, and big government, conservative politicians such as Ronald Reagan have reaffirmed the primacy of individual freedom and autonomy in national life. A sense of personal worth and a yearning for individual autonomy have powered one crusade for liberation after another: the civil-rights movement, the women's movement, the New Left, the gay-rights movement.

For all that, many historians and social scientists, unwilling to accept the persistence of individualistic values and self-conceptions, insist that individualism is impossible in a bureaucratic world. Other scholars acknowledge the existence of modern individualism, but oversimplify it in an effort to condemn it. For example, the historians Christopher Lasch and Elizabeth Fox-

Genovese have labeled individualism as narcissistic self-absorption, a spiritual sickness. The historians Richard Fox and Jackson Lears argue that corporations, in seeking power and sales, have fostered a selfish ethos promoting adjustment and gratification through consumption.

But modern individualism is far more diverse than that. Historians have wrongly tended to look for a single economic root of individualist thought and feeling. They have traced individualism to early capitalism, to the 18th- and 19th-century market society that encouraged independent merchants, artisans, and farmers. With the demise of that economy and the rise of organization, they have assumed that individualism must have been either destroyed or warped. But modern capitalism still rests on the individualist notion that one owns one's self and one's labor. By continually replacing old economic arrangements with new ones, capitalism sets people free—to move, to succeed, to fail, to feel independent. It is this capitalist individualism, in fact, that drives much of President Clinton's economic and social program, especially his faith in personal responsibility, entrepreneurship, risk taking, and small business.

INDIVIDUALISTIC VALUES also persist because 20th-century Americans have been able to draw on a variety of cultural resources to reinforce personal autonomy and decision making, including religion, social mobility, and democratic politics and government. Religious faith or participation in voting may have declined from levels in the past, but many Americans still derive a sense of self-worth from their identity as believers and citizens. Because Americans have been able to draw on a diverse cultural heritage, individualistic values have been able to survive in the putatively hostile environment of organizational society.

The survival of individualism underscores how much 20th-century American culture still draws on earlier beliefs and practices. A variety of older values, including an 18th-century republican fear of centralized power, has constrained the growth of 20th-century government. Even ostensibly modern organizational values seem to have older roots. Efficiency, renunciation of short-term gain, and other bureaucratic ideals do not seem so very different from the 19th-century Victorian ideal of self-discipline and postponed gratification—nor even from the earlier Protestant ethic described by Max Weber.

The persistence of older values and beliefs also complicates the idea that the rise of organization has made for a more homogeneous nation. Organizations, in fact, have promoted cultural heterogeneity. Managers, engineers, and advertisers have not spoken the same language, and they have not drowned out other voices. Twentieth-century America is a land of Presbyterians and fundamentalists as well as psychotherapists; of Southerners and Westerners as well as rootless corporate executives; of unorganized workers as well as bureaucrats; of family-oriented immigrants as well as self-centered consumers.

To understand the 20th-century United States, we need to go beyond our faith in the power of organizations to transform people and culture. The limited impact of corporations has left a heterogeneous society—less organized, less modern, less susceptible to change than we have assumed. Our nation may well be exceptional not for the power of organization, but for the persisting sense of human agency. We need to explain why.

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