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# *Fun and Facts about America: Postwar Corporate Liberalism and the Animated Economic Educational Film*

Business leaders were worried. Labor insurgency in the wake of World War II indicated a new militancy among American workers. Even more troubling, opinion polls revealed that many distrusted both their employers and the American economic system. For many in the business community, workers' growing demands and their antagonism toward management suggested unions had bested private industry in the fight for workers' ideological allegiance.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, conflict was brewing within the business community between corporate executives and small business owners. During the war, large-scale manufacturers signed wartime production contracts with the US government and secured federal funds to build new facilities, giving them an edge over smaller competitors. As big businesses grew, they forced small businesses out of both industrial and consumer markets.<sup>2</sup> When government

1 For a history of this effort, see Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

2 George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 57.

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measures had allowed large corporations to dominate markets in the past, both workers and small business owners had fought back.<sup>3</sup> If big business leaders hoped to preserve the gains they had made during World War II, they would need to persuade both American laborers and small business owners to accept the growing power of large corporations.

In this essay, I discuss an animated economic educational film series from the post–World War II era, *Fun and Facts about America* (John Sutherland Productions, 1948–1952).<sup>4</sup> During this period, economic education was one of several methods business leaders used to promote the American financial system. The purveyors of economic education claimed their goal was to advance the public’s understanding of how the US economy works. In fact, as Caroline Jack has shown, economic education was little more than a propaganda campaign on behalf of industrial capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Historian Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolfe has described how business leaders used various strategies, including economic education, to sell Americans on the merits of US capitalism after World War II.<sup>6</sup> While Fones-Wolfe’s work focuses on how the business community addressed workers and the public, corporate leaders also used economic education to speak specifically to small business owners’ concerns. Building on Jack’s work on the series, I argue that *Fun and Facts about America* aimed to persuade both small business owners and American laborers that big business was on their side.

*Fun and Facts about America* was a product of the National Education Program (NEP) of Harding College in Searcy, Arkansas. At the time, Harding was a small Christian college, but it later became one of the largest universities in the state.<sup>7</sup> Working through the NEP, John Sutherland Productions produced the series with funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The series included ten-minute animated Technicolor shorts such as *Make Mine Freedom* (1948), in which an industrialist, laborer, farmer, and politician encounter a huckster peddling a bottle of snake oil called “ISM,” and *Fresh Laid Plans* (George Gordon, 1950), which portrays the dire consequences of economic planning among a community of chickens.<sup>8</sup> All celebrate the virtues of the American economic system.<sup>9</sup> Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer exhibited several of the films in theaters. After the theatrical runs, the NEP provided

3 Lipsitz, 60.

4 The second film in the series, *Going Places* (1948), refers to the series title as *Fun and Facts about American Business*; however, later films, such as *Why Play Leap Frog?* (1949), identify it as *Fun and Facts about America*.

5 Caroline Jack discusses the economic education movement in “*Fun and Facts about American Business: Economic Education and Business Propaganda in an Early Cold War Cartoon Series*,” *Enterprise and Society* 16, no. 3 (September 2015): 491–520.

6 Fones-Wolfe, *Selling Free Enterprise*.

7 Harding College, “Financial Aid,” accessed July 22, 2021, <https://www.harding.edu/finaid>.

8 Copyright records and archival documents do not identify the directors of most of the *Fun and Facts* films, including *Make Mine Freedom*, *Going Places*, *Why Play Leap Frog?*, and *Meet King Joe*. However, some sources attribute *Make Mine Freedom* to directors William Hanna and Joseph Barbera. For example, see Evan R. Ash, “Forgotten Toons: Hanna-Barbera, Anticommunism, and ‘Make Mine Freedom’ (1948),” *The Vault of Culture*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.vaultofculture.com/vault/feature/ash/makeminefreedom>.

9 The title *Make Mine Freedom* is a play on Disney’s animated anthology *Make Mine Music* (Robert Cormack, 1946).

the films free of charge to schools, community groups, and industrial firms to screen for audiences of students and workers.<sup>10</sup>

*Fun and Facts about America* is informed by what George Lipsitz describes as monopoly capitalist corporate liberalism.<sup>11</sup> Here, monopoly refers not to the existence of legal monopolies but to the market dominance of a handful of firms, preventing genuine competition.<sup>12</sup> Lipsitz defines corporate liberalism as a “philosophy of using state power energetically to balance the power of major interest groups.”<sup>13</sup> More specifically, it refers to cooperation between big business, organized labor, and the state to ensure economic stability and growth. Corporate liberalism predates the 1940s. However, during and after World War II, it flourished.<sup>14</sup> During this era, big businesses were the beneficiaries of what Lipsitz describes as “one of the largest welfare projects in history—wartime industrial expansion.”<sup>15</sup> Large corporations, such as Alfred P. Sloan’s General Motors, signed lucrative wartime production contracts with the US government and received government subsidies that small businesses did not. Although these contracts helped the war effort, they devastated the small business sector. Unable to compete, more than half a million small retail, service, and construction companies went out of business.<sup>16</sup> Economic centralization—or the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few large firms—changed the calculus of big business owners. Rather than fight both unions and government intervention in the economy, many large corporations recognized the legitimacy of organized labor and supported limited economic interventionist policies.<sup>17</sup> In public relations missives, institutional advertisements, and economic educational films such as those in the *Fun and Facts about America* series, corporate liberals characterized their business practices as reflecting a new accord between business, labor, and the state.

Corporate liberalism defied many of the tenets of laissez-faire economics. But many monopoly capitalist corporate liberals, including Sloan, remained free market ideologues, praising free enterprise while their firms benefited from government subsidies. Similarly, the *Fun and Facts about America* series celebrates the principles of laissez-faire capitalism: open markets, individual autonomy, and limited government. But it also promotes a decidedly corporate liberal vision of cooperation between industry, workers, and the state. Hence, *Going Places* (1948), a film about the importance of the profit motive in American industry, acknowledges government’s role in preventing the abuses of power that can occur in an unregulated market. *Make Mine Freedom*, meanwhile, argues that conflict between American laborers,

10 For more details on the distribution and screening of *Fun and Facts about America* films, see Jack, “*Fun and Facts*,” 508–512.

11 Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 59–61.

12 Lipsitz, 67, f46.

13 Lipsitz, 59.

14 Most work on corporate liberalism identifies it as a reform effort that emerged during the Progressive Era. Lipsitz cites William Appleman Williams’s *The Contours of American History* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1961) as the basis of his and many other scholars’ understanding of corporate liberalism.

15 Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 57.

16 Lipsitz, 61.

17 Fones-Wolfe, *Selling Free Enterprise*, 3.

management, agricultural workers, and politicians plays into the hands of communist infiltrators. At the end of *Meet King Joe* (1949), Joe, an American laborer and “king of the workers of the world,” sits atop a throne flanked by representatives of management and capital. Together, they constitute “the greatest production team in the history of mankind.”

*Fun and Facts about America* is an amalgam of corporate liberal rhetoric and free market ideology. However, the series is not as contradictory as it may seem. For indeed, corporate liberalism was more than a set of policies and practices emerging from the newly cooperative relationship between business, labor, and government; it was also a strategy used by politicians and big business leaders to prevent those disenfranchised by monopoly capitalism from fighting back. The growth of monopoly capitalism decimated the small business sector.<sup>18</sup> Yet, Lipsitz argues, rather than resist economic centralization, small business owners aligned themselves with big business leaders, supporting legislation that advanced monopoly capitalists’ interests at the small business sector’s expense. They did so, Lipsitz contends, because small business owners blamed the growing power of unions for their downturn rather than the rise of monopoly capitalism. Feeling besieged by organized labor, small business conservatives struck a bargain with monopoly capitalists. They supported corporate liberal policies and legislation such as the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, a labor law that primarily served the interests of large corporations and the state. In return, they looked to big business leaders and corporate liberal legislators to put a check on labor militancy. Yet the Taft-Hartley Act not only contradicted conservatives’ economic principles but, by aiding the growth of the monopoly sector, also contributed to the small business sector’s decline.<sup>19</sup>

Monopoly capitalists primarily courted small business conservatives’ support by promising to restrain labor. However, they also appealed to them ideologically. One way they did so was by producing economic educational films like those in the *Fun and Facts about America* series. Hence, the series extols the virtues of free enterprise to appeal to small business conservatives’ economic principles while still advancing corporate liberal ideas. This ideological agenda is also why several films in the series feature independent entrepreneurs. For example, *Going Places* tells the story of a turn-of-the-century inventor who becomes a small business owner and, ultimately, a corporate executive through hard work and determination. Writing in 1951, C. Wright Mills observed that, although the heyday of the independent entrepreneur had passed, as an “ideological figment,” he persists “as the man through whom the ideology of utopian capitalism is still attractively present-

18 Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 61.

19 The Taft-Hartley Act curtailed the power of rank-and-file workers. However, it also consolidated into law the corporate liberal accord between big business, labor unions, and the state. Lipsitz argues this hurt small businesses, which could not afford to make the same concessions to organized labor as large companies. By increasing the state’s power to intervene in worker-employer relations, Lipsitz also argues that the law violated small business conservatives’ free market principles. Lipsitz, 176–177.

ed.”<sup>20</sup> In their persuasive appeals, corporate liberals worked hard to convince small business owners that the same rules that applied to small companies also governed big ones. Accordingly, *Going Places* deploys the ideological figure of the independent entrepreneur to suggest that large corporations are simply former small businesses that grew big by competing successfully in the free market. What gets lost in this bootstraps narrative is that, by the 1940s, big businesses were working closely with the US government, accruing benefits small businesses did not. Economic centralization had made the free market a thing of the past.

Corporate liberalism wasn’t a boon to workers, either—a fact that *Fun and Facts about America*’s ostensibly pro-labor messaging tries to obscure. The size and influence of the unionized workforce grew significantly during World War II.<sup>21</sup> After the war, a rash of wildcat and general strikes suggested the scope of American laborers’ ambitions. Many workers voiced support for government control of prices and corporate profits, and they demanded more autonomy and influence in industrial relations. The working class’s growing power threatened corporate executives’ authority and economic interests.<sup>22</sup> In response, corporate liberals brokered a compromise with organized labor leaders. To avoid disruptions to productivity, monopoly capitalists accepted collective bargaining as a fact of industrial life. They also conceded to organized labor’s demands for wage and benefit increases. But in return, through the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act, they charged union leaders with the responsibility of policing their ranks for radicals and communists and placed limits on workers’ right to strike.<sup>23</sup> This corporate liberal accord between business leaders, legislators, and union leaders hurt rank-and-file workers, cutting short their social-democratic ambitions.<sup>24</sup>

The *Fun and Facts about America* series is corporate liberal in its apparent championing of American laborers and recognition of their right to unionize. But just as corporate liberals offered concessions to organized labor only to undermine the collective power of the working class, *Fun and Facts about America*’s apparent celebration of American laborers is not what it appears to be. For instance, *Meet King Joe* hails the American worker as “king of the workers of the world” because he earns higher wages and enjoys more leisure time than workers in any other country. However, the film makes clear that Joe Worker didn’t ascend the throne because of his innate ability or by fighting for higher pay and more time off through collective organizing. Instead, *Meet King Joe* argues that American workers owe these benefits to the American capitalist system and the inventor-entrepreneurs whose labor-saving devices allow American workers to work less and earn more. *Meet King Joe*’s message, then, isn’t that the American worker is king; it’s that he is indebted

20 C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 34.

21 Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 62.

22 Lipsitz, 62.

23 Organized labor publicly opposed the Taft-Hartley Act; however, Lipsitz argues that it empowered union leaders at the expense of workers and that some leaders’ opposition to the bill was largely tokenistic. Lipsitz, 175.

24 Lipsitz, 158–181.

to entrepreneurial capitalists, the forerunners of the big business leaders of the 1940s.

In selling Americans on the merits of monopoly capitalism, the men behind *Fun and Facts about America* turned to animation—specifically, animation in the style of Walt Disney Productions—because they believed it had a unique power to persuade. Disney’s example loomed large over the project from the beginning. NEP director George Benson hired producer John Sutherland, a former Disney animator, after approaching Walt Disney himself with the idea of producing animated shorts on the topic of free enterprise. Although Disney declined, he recommended Sutherland for the job.<sup>25</sup> In a letter to Alfred P. Sloan, Benson cited Disney in describing Sutherland’s plan to use the same characters repeatedly in different films, “just as ‘Donald Duck’ has been used in so many pictures by Disney.”<sup>26</sup> Writing to Benson, Sloan referred to animation as the “Disney technique” and said he was glad Benson and Sutherland shared his belief in its power to impress “simple economic truths” upon the “mass mind.”<sup>27</sup> Although they don’t say so explicitly, Benson, Sutherland, and Sloan may have attributed persuasive force to the “Disney technique” because of animation’s prominence in American mass culture and successful use in military training films during World War II. In a letter to Benson, Sutherland said his experience producing films for the Armed Forces during the war had convinced him of animation’s superior propagandistic power, writing, “live action in propaganda is not particularly effective in the short film.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite *Fun and Facts about America*’s corporate liberalism, Benson, Sutherland, and Sloan identified as disciples of free enterprise. They championed free markets and individual autonomy and were wary of government overreach. But they occupied different places in the postwar economy. Only Sloan directly benefited from the expansion of monopoly capitalism after World War II. That Benson and Sutherland believed they shared the same economic interests as a monopoly capitalist like Sloan speaks to the persuasiveness of corporate liberalism’s appeal to small business conservatives. Of course, Sloan probably bought *Fun and Facts about America*’s sales pitch too. The series suggests that businesses grow big by competing successfully in the free market, not by securing anticompetitive advantages. This message likely appealed to an executive such as Sloan, who was a corporate liberal in practice but not in ideology.<sup>29</sup> Lipsitz describes corporate liberalism as “a kind of neopaternalism in which those in power seek popular legitimacy by making some concessions to potentially dissident groups in order to give them a stake

25 Jack, “*Fun and Facts*,” 499.

26 George Benson to Alfred P. Sloan, October 5, 1946, file B-057, folder Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Correspondence, 1946, George Benson Papers, Ann Cowan Dixon Archives and Special Collections, Harding University (hereafter cited as Benson Papers).

27 Alfred P. Sloan to George Benson, October 9, 1946, file B-057, folder Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Correspondence, 1946, Benson Papers.

28 John Sutherland to George Benson, October 2, 1947, file B-057, folder John Sutherland Correspondence, 1947, Benson Papers.

29 For Sloan’s political and economic views during the 1930s and 1940s, see David Farber, *Sloan Rules: Alfred P. Sloan and the Triumph of General Motors* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 154–219.

in preserving the system.”<sup>30</sup> Through corporate advertising, economic education, and animated films such as those in the *Fun and Facts about America* series, monopoly capitalists aimed to persuade both workers and small business owners to accept the terms of corporate liberalism’s compromises.

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30 Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 60.