Corporate Progressives

from Why Corporate Leaders Became Progressive Activists by Kevin Williamson:

> *If you have not read it, spare a moment for William H. Whyte's Cold War classic. In the 1950s, Whyte, a writer for Fortune, interviewed dozens of important CEOs and found that they mostly rejected the ethos of rugged individualism in favor of a more collectivist view of the world. The capitalists were not much interested in defending the culture of capitalism. What he found was that the psychological and operational mechanics of large corporations were much like those of other large organizations, including government agencies, and that American CEOs believed, as they had believed since at least the time of Frederick Winslow Taylor and his 19th-century cult of "scientific management," that expertise deployed through bureaucracy could impose rationality on such unruly social entities as free markets, culture, family, and sexuality. The supplanting of spontaneous order with political discipline is the essence of progressivism, then and now.*
>
> *It is hardly a new idea. The old robber barons were far from being free-enterprise men: J. P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie, like many businessmen of their generation, believed strongly in state-directed collusion among firms (they'd have said "coordination") to avoid "destructive competition." You can draw a straight intellectual line from their thinking to Barack Obama's views about state-directed "investments" in alternative energy or medical research.*
>
> *It is not difficult to see the temptations of that approach from the point of view of a Bill Gates or a Warren Buffett: The decisions they have made for themselves have turned out well, so why not empower them, or men like them, to make decisions for other people, too? They may even be naïve or*

> *arrogant enough to believe that their elevated stations in life have liberated them from self-interest.*
>
> *Populists of the Trump variety and the Sanders variety (who are not in fact as different as they seem) are not wrong to see these corporate cosmopolitans as members of a separate, distinct, and thriving class with economic and social interests of its own. Those interests overlap only incidentally and occasionally with those of movement conservatives — and overlap even less as the new nationalist-populist strain in the Republican party comes to dominate the debate on questions such as trade and immigration. Under attack from both the right and the left, free enterprise and free trade increasingly are ideas without a party. As William H. Whyte discovered back in 1956, the capitalists are not prepared to offer an intellectual defense of capitalism or of classical liberalism. They believe in something else: the managers' dream of command and control.*

HKO

This is an interesting development in American corporatism and progressivism. Many of the large companies sought monopolies in the first progressive era (1890-1920) to bring order to the chaos of the competitive market.. Because many of the monopolies and trusts had balance sheets that dwarfed the budgets of the states then regulating them, the federal government stepped in, often with the complicity of the states, to exercise greater control. As progressivism evolved the courts ruled to allow more central regulations. This concern with monopoly power and corporate influence on state government was one rationale for the 17th Amendment requiring the popular election of senators.

As elements of the large corporations were quasi nationalized during World War I and II, these large corporations not only learned to adjust to the regulations and working with the

federal government, but learned to do so to their advantage, using government regulation instead of monopoly power to bring order to the chaos of competitive markets. Witness the scene in the movie biography of Howard Hughes in The Aviator when Senator Brewster (played by Alan Alda) pushes an aviation bill giving exclusive rights to Pan Am for transatlantic flights eliminating the inefficient competition from upstart Howard Hughes.

The monopolists of the Gilded Age and the new Progressive government shared a distrust of competitive markets and spontaneous order. The contest was not one of ideology, but one of power. The unregulated influence of the era was merely replaced by the regulated influence of lobbyists. After a century of progressivism the controversy of inequality and corporate power remain.