



Constructing Business, Constructing Utopia: Historical Perspectives

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In 1924, King C. Gillette, millionaire president of the Gillette Safety Razor Company, published *The People's Corporation*, a final volume in the utopian vision that had consumed him for thirty years. How should historians reconcile the Gillette who was a savvy entrepreneur, shrewd marketer, and successful capitalist with the visionary who indulged in quixotic plans for monolithic cities and singular “world corporations”? I argue that the reconciliation is not difficult. Business activity is a crucial form of social action, and, like all social action, is framed by a vision of the future. By comparing business and utopian writings, I demonstrate that the corporation’s attempt to create a unified institutional voice mirrors the utopian attempt to bridge the gap between subjective/symbolic and objective/instrumental communication. Business writing successfully unifies the two extremes, showing that the mundane world of business and the quixotic world of utopia are integral parts of the same experience.

Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually, it is . . . a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things.

—Richard Rorty¹

The dreams of utopians and the pursuits of business people share similar ends. In their most innovative forms, both seek wide change, employing innovative organizational forms, technology, and persuasion to reshape lives. A vision of the future shapes both utopian and business ventures; each must justify its means and ends and legitimize its actions to a public. In this essay, I explore from a historical perspective how that justification takes place. Like utopian planners, firms express their goals and influence through many

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York, 1989), 9.

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mechanisms—architecture and design, visual fine arts, music, landscaping, even the construction of new terms—to normalize their daily activities. All deserve study and direct comparison with their utopian counterparts, but here I focus on the legitimizing impact of formal written documents. Historically, firms have utilized company-sponsored histories, pamphlets, printed speeches, and even posted rules to legitimize their means and ends to the society they serve. In the last thirty years, the ubiquity of mission statements proves how necessary the written justification remains. By purposely eroding the categorical difference between the utopian treatise and the firm's written self-description and explanation, I bring the historian's perspective to bear on what constitutes a utopia, what constitutes business, and what each has to teach the other.

When one sets out to compare such seemingly disparate concepts as business and utopia, inevitably objections will arise. For some, there can be no comparison; the central feature of a utopia is its impossibility, whereas business is nothing if not self-apparent. Once a utopia leaves the dreamy realm of "perfection" or, as is common in American history, "millennialism," and enters the world of production and profits, it ceases being a "utopia" and at some inexact point makes the etymological (and the corresponding epistemological) shift to "business."² I can only suggest suspending the rigid categorical boundary between the two and exploring the rich hybridity arising when utopia shades into business and vice versa.

Others may grant a vague affinity between the two concepts, but contend that the elements linking the two such as architecture, art, songs, stories, or written statements of purpose are essential to the radical utopia, but are mere public relations ploys for the firm. From this perspective, public relations amounts to a thin veneer laid over the inexorable, frequently unpopular, mechanics of business dealings in order to make them palatable to the public. However, business historians have shown that we should proceed carefully with such assumptions. The early investors in the Waltham and Lowell mills embraced paternalistic language and institutions as a necessary condition for constructing their factories, not as an afterthought. Over a century later, in the face of depression and rising government encroachment, powerful corporate executives reiterated a "confession" that they had "unwisely ignored the need to explain and defend the greater mission of . . . [the] company and of the capitalist system."³ As with the first objection, this one derives from a

² For a fascinating account connecting antebellum reform movements to later corporate endeavors, see Kenneth Lipartito, "The Utopian Corporation," in *Constructing Corporate America: History, Politics, Culture*, ed. Kenneth Lipartito and David B. Sicilia (New York, 2004), 94-119—although here, too, Lipartito distinguishes "utopian societies" from a larger "business world" and is chiefly interested in charting the transition of the former to the latter.

³ Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made* (New York, 1987); Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The*

language problem. Rather than employ “public relations,” with its modern connotation of “spin” and “damage control,” I discuss the firm’s “legitimacy.” Any institution must articulate itself to its constituency, and for firms that hope to dominate a market—capturing a constituency that may amount to a huge swath of society—that need is paramount. In shifting the terms, I privilege a historical perspective and frame social actions and institutions in their contemporary cultural, social, and physical environment. Image is not a response to production, but in important respects, a prerequisite.

The Puzzle

Though historians rarely uncover the dreamy utopian and driven entrepreneur in the same person, occasionally the two overlap, as they did in the spring of 1895, when King C. Gillette had a vision: a disposable razor to replace the difficult work of strapping a dull blade. Despite naysayers who thought his razor impossible to produce or doubted its public appeal, Gillette tenaciously marshaled the talent and resources to create a company and bring his product to market. In the process, he became both a millionaire and, with his image on every package of razors sold, a celebrity.⁴ Gillette’s success is all the more impressive when we note that he earned a respectable income, but not enough to indulge in idle invention and product development.

At the time of his invention Gillette was a jobber, a traveling salesman, riding steamers across the Atlantic and Pullmans across America in search of his next sale. In classic entrepreneurial fashion, Gillette grabbed a risky idea, struggled to see it to fruition, and justly reaped his reward. Before razors, however, other issues weighed on this entrepreneur’s mind. In the summer of 1894, just before his quintessential success story began, Gillette pondered contemporary social ills, criticized theories of individualism and competition, explained the need to organize massive cities, proposed that people should be free to enter or leave their occupations, and concluded that one enormous, universal joint-stock company could make all this possible. Less than a year before razors occupied him, Gillette put these economic and sociological thoughts on paper and published *The Human Drift*, explaining how “extravagance, poverty, and crime, must give way before the more just and powerful system of equality, virtue, and happiness.”⁵ Gillette, the “shrewd and decisive” businessman who could marshal investors, sway customers, and engineer boardroom coups, was also a certifiable utopian.⁶

Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business (Berkeley, Calif., 1998), 204-7.

⁴ Russell Adams, *King C. Gillette, The Man and His Wonderful Shaving Device* (Boston, 1978), 22-27, 54-82.

⁵ King C. Gillette, *The Human Drift* (1894; rpt., Delmar, N.Y., 1976), 6. We cannot attribute Gillette’s utopian proclivities to frustrated ambition. He published his last utopian tome in 1924, after retiring with a sizable fortune in Los Angeles, California; see Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 81-88.

⁶ Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 57.

How could this be? Perhaps utopians and inventors both share inspired, enthusiastic (even fanatic) personalities, but even if this could be proved, the assertion remains unacceptably broad. Maybe Gillette had two separate personalities, each in a “water-tight compartment”? His chief biographer thinks so, arguing that, though Gillette was a political and economic crackpot, “no evidence [exists] . . . that he ever let this curious condition interfere with his business career.”⁷ Independently, but simultaneously, Howard Segal and Kenneth Roemer explained Gillette differently. In his study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century utopian writers, Segal claims Gillette’s faith that technology could solve social ills “reflected and distorted” the sentiments of mainstream America. Likewise, in an attempt to “regain” Gillette’s “unity,” Roemer argues that Gillette sought to employ new technologies and mammoth institutions in an effort to buttress the power of the individual and increase social unity in a time when concentrated economic power appeared to threaten both.⁸ Roemer suggests that Gillette’s dreamy utopian writings and shrewd business dealings were far from watertight. Not only were they “leaky”; they were “the same room viewed from different angles.”⁹

Despite both scholars’ success in “unifying” Gillette, Segal and Roemer still treat him as an exception—an oddity who conjoins the separate worlds of business and utopian ventures. By definition, business consists of “the intellectual constructs and activities by which men seek to manipulate the factors of production for pecuniary return,” whereas utopia is “a world that cannot be but where one fervently wishes to be.”¹⁰ Gillette is exceptional, however, not because he followed inimical pursuits, but because he can help illuminate the importance and ubiquity of “utopian” thinking in ordinary life. He demonstrates how much utopia can learn from business and business from utopia.

First, we need to clarify our terms. What made Gillette’s writing utopian? In modern terms, there are two ways to describe a utopia. The more flattering perspective defines utopia as a vision “transcend[ing] . . . circumstances, creating an image of a different world by presenting . . . a contrasting counter-concept of what actually is the case.” In this formulation, utopia is a

⁷ Both speculations come from Adams, *King C. Gillette*, 25, 28. The phrase “water-tight compartment” comes from the introduction in Kenneth M. Roemer’s edition of King C. Gillette, *The Human Drift* (New York, 1976), xiii.

⁸ Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Chicago, 1985), 53; Kenneth M. Roemer, “Technology, Corporation, and Utopia: Gillette’s Unity Regained,” *Technology and Culture* 26 (July 1985): 560-70.

⁹ Roemer, ed., *The Human Drift*, xiii-xiv.

¹⁰ My definition of business comes from Thomas C. Cochran, “The History of a Business Society,” *Journal of American History* 54 (June 1967): 5-18, quotation at p. 6. My definition of utopia comes Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Buckingham, U.K., 1991), 1.

benevolent call to search for new, different possibilities for the future.¹¹ A second interpretation—less articulated, but arguably more common—is that a utopia is anything that could not come into being, “something impractical and impossible, even if desirable.”¹² The two are not exclusive, though the second definition has a unique implication: even people who understand that no force guides historical change to a final purpose still make implicitly teleological arguments when they label a school of thought or historical event “utopian.” In this line of thought, though society was not destined to arrive at the present set of social institutions and cultural mores, all other possibilities were utopian and destined to fail. As one astute scholar observed, “Calling the more radical resolutions ‘utopian’ is simply one of the means for finding the dominant resolutions normal and ‘real.’”¹³ There resides an unacknowledged tension between the two definitions: utopia is a call to rally for a future that cannot come into being. This tension arises from the unique qualities of utopia and not necessarily from a defense of the status quo. As Thomas More’s brilliant pun makes clear, utopia is the good place (eutopia) that exists in no place (outopia).

Rather than assume that utopia is a plan or vision for radical social change—leaving open to debate what is radical or to what degree change can be planned—I argue that a utopia is any effort to bridge the individual, subjectively informative experiences of art, and the objective, pragmatic applications of theory. The two are poles on a spectrum of communication, each reflecting a unique aspect of life. On the one extreme lies art: the immediate and subjective response to experience. In its varied forms, art captures and gives precedence to the immediate emotional reactions that events provoke, showing that while our experiences have no inherent logic, we are capable of constructing meaning through contemplation and reflection. In her discussion of Robert Musil’s art, Patrizia McBride describes how the writer cherishes the uniqueness of individual lives and “respect[s] the constitutive singularity of human experience.”¹⁴ People live in a succession of singular moments, and each experience constitutes a piece in a mosaic of knowledge. Through representations of “constitutively singular” experiences, the artist speaks through her work to the audience personally, eliciting and even directing responses.

¹¹ Jorn Rusen, “History and Utopia,” *Historiein* 7 (2007), viewed March 2008. URL: <http://www.nnet.gr/historiein.htm>. For a similar approach, see Kumar, *Utopianism*, 3, 20-42. By contrast, dystopia is a malevolent change. For a discussion on force and the desirability of conscious efforts at change, see Lyman Tower Sargent, “Authority and Utopia: Utopianism in Political Thought,” *Polity* 14 (Summer 1982): 565-84.

¹² Robert Sayre, “American Myths of Utopia,” *College English* 31 (March 1970): 613-23, quotation at p. 613.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 619.

¹⁴ Patrizia McBride, “On the Utility of Art for Politics: Musil’s ‘Armed Truce of Ideas,’” *The German Quarterly* 73 (Autumn 2000): 370-71.

Embedded in art resides a model for shaping morality, instructions for interpretation, and, depending on the artist's unique perspective, an urging to reconsider previous interpretations.¹⁵ Art communicates the emotional, actual result of people's experiences, and for that reason, McBride detects a paradox in art: "The very fact that aesthetic production itself remains within the situated, transient horizon of human experience means that aesthetic models can never provide a 'total solution.'" The artist's ability to communicate remains contingent, relevant for the particular circumstances she devises but lacking universal force. Her power to capture an audience's imagination through the "particularity of experience" comes at the expense of systemization, generalization, and universal applicability.¹⁶

If politics constitutes the "steering sector of society . . . the power of any society *over its own fate*," then it follows that art is an ineffective model for politics.¹⁷ Art speaks to individuals and the same work can communicate different meanings to different people. If we respect the constitutive singularity of art and admit that it is the basis of all experience and thence knowledge, then McBride is correct to assert all political action requires a "leap of faith," because there can be no "direct connection between aesthetic reflection and political action."¹⁸ In short, art communicates sentiments and values well to individuals, even to groups of like-minded individuals, but loses coherence the wider it is broadcast.

While art in the absence of theory is relatively directionless, the other extreme fares no better. Inverting art's strengths, theory directs action and, to a lesser extent, mirrors art's personal, reflective cognition. The requirement that theory must be shared and communicable limits its individual, subjective aspects. For example, Karl Deutsch claims that theory "must be stateable, retraceable, and reproducible by operations which can be preformed by any one with requisite training," and, unlike art, "[theory] must be fully rational."¹⁹ Unlike the "constitutive singularity" of art, theory offers explicit orientation and prediction. It orbits around empirical, verifiable knowledge that helps master reality, not reflect on an existence within it. Where art

¹⁵ For an account of the different approaches artists take to elicit interpretations from their audiences, see Timothy J. Lukes, "Prepositional Phases: The Political Effect of Art on Audience," *International Political Science Review* 12 (Jan. 1991): 67-86.

¹⁶ McBride, "On the Utility of Art for Politics," 370-73.

¹⁷ Karl W. Deutsch, "On Political Theory and Political Action," *American Political Science Review* 65 (March 1971): 11-27, quotation at p. 18; emphasis in original.

¹⁸ McBride, "On the Utility of Art for Politics," 382. McBride's employment of "political action" is synonymous with my use of the terms social action or social change.

¹⁹ Deutsch, "On Political Theory and Political Action," 12. Of the nine qualities constituting a theory, Deutsch describes one that applies to art as well: recognition and awareness of values and goals. However, his idea of values has little to do with the immediate, personal experience of art. He presumes values and preferences to be like utility mapping in a rational agent model: a given that must be maximized subject to constraints. He does not explore specific, historically contingent values.

reveals complexity and contingency, theory seeks strategic simplifications from which to organize, and, like most models, any effort to make it increasingly relevant to a particular set of circumstances undermines its ability to communicate and create broad, predictive expectations. Art is true in the singular case, but as one extrapolates, becomes increasingly unusable, whereas theory is true in the general case, but may not be true in any particular case.

In their pure forms, art and theory are incompatible polarizations, but despite their opposition, art and theory are not doomed to categorical isolation. Quite the opposite: successful communication usually includes both, but utopian writing strives tirelessly to bridge the two, linking art's unique, personal response to experience with theory's impersonal, practical, and universally communicated response. In its most successful forms utopia is neither art nor theory, but both. Placing utopia on the spectrum of communication, utopia either translates abstract, predictive theory into the perceptual and emotive experience best defined by art, or else stretches art into a universally comprehensible social theory.²⁰ As theories become increasingly specific in their predictions, articulating details of how people's lives will be changed and rendering moral judgments, they become utopian. By constructing expectations, a utopian writer such as Gillette makes an abstract and complicated theoretical principle tractable; individuals can construct an internal image of what their immediate life will look like should they follow a specific theory.

In forming these expectations, the utopian writer provides a great service. No matter how convincing the theory, people must translate abstract predictions into terms defined by previous experiences or perceptions in order to evaluate it. In the first proper utopia, Thomas More demonstrated how this is done.²¹ Unlike many later utopian writers, More deftly balanced his ideas and criticism of social organization inside a richly detailed fictional world. After the dialogue in the first book on the problems confronting European countries, in the second book More's protagonist, Raphael, describes a fantastic journey to a happy society ruled by egalitarian sentiments and a desire for knowledge. More populates his fictional island of Utopia with inhabitants who dress simply, consume few items, and consequently have little incentive to hoard. Both men and women vote indirectly for the office of mayor and directly for priestly offices. The famously absurdist touches More adds to his fictional creation most likely represent a sophisticated appreciation that altering the fundamental organizing principles of a society will create unintentional changes.

²⁰ Gillette and his contemporary Edward Bellamy are exemplars. Whereas Gillette translated a theory into immediate experience, in *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888; New York, 2007), Bellamy wrote a piece of fictional art that, for Bellamy's numerous devotees, pointed to a recognizable, applicable theory.

²¹ On More as the first Utopian see Kumar, *Utopianism*, 33-42.

In a society that encourages honesty, simplicity, and equality of the sexes in work and voting, there follows an odd but reasonable logic that prospective brides and grooms should inspect each other naked before marriage. More subscribes to a theory of simplicity, equality, toleration, and moderation that he translates into an artistic vision of a society that uses gold for chamber pots, grants universal suffrage, encourages freedom of religion, and staffs armies with priests to keep victories from turning into massacres.²² By extending beyond simple expositions of the principles of equality, toleration, and freedom into an artistic, imaginary world, More guides his audience through possible futures. Immersed in representations of a social theory's concrete, quotidian implications, his utopia allows its audience to render a personal, moral judgment on theory.

Utopia and Business

In my conceptualization, communicative forms extend across a spectrum, with symbolic art (the individually subjective) at one end and functionalist theory (the universally objective) at the other. Utopia attempts to span this spectrum, but as it does, it loses the ability to articulate either art or theory. In his writing, Gillette began with a theory of labor-saving technology, concentrated capital, economies of scale, and mass production leading to monopolies— ideas Americans in 1894 may have celebrated or lamented, but would recognize as already apparent, if not unavoidable.²³ He carried his theory to its logical conclusion of a single monopoly producing for society, and he crafted a description of what life in that society promised. Though Gillette undoubtedly intended to see his “World Corporation” come to life, his utopian effort to bridge his theory of concentrated production and the “particularity of experience” in a world dominated by a single manufacturer paradoxically was too successful and, consequently, remained a fiction—an idea existing only on the pages of *The Human Drift*.

Gillette was not the only entrepreneur to try his hand at utopia in the nineteenth century. Two earlier examples, one successful and one not, illustrate the connection between business pursuits and the paradox of utopia and social action. On July 4, 1826, Robert Owen announced to the communal participants at New Harmony, Indiana, a “Declaration of Mental Independence.” He declared an end to “a trinity of the most monstrous evils that could be combined to inflict mental and physical evil . . . private, or individual property—absurd and irrational systems of religion—and marriage, founded on individual property combined with some one of these irrational systems of religion.” With the demise of these influences, “soon would rational intelligence, real virtue, and substantial happiness, be permanently established among men: ignorance, poverty, dependence, and vice, would be

²² Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516; Baltimore, Md., 1970), 37-132.

²³ Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*, 74-97, 106-10.

forever banished from the earth.”²⁴ For Owen, this speech culminated years of constructing utopia.

Benefiting from British textile expansion in the late eighteenth century, Owen, like Gillette, had risen from modest origins to become a wealthy and influential manufacturer. He expanded upon his experiences in owning and operating the factory village of New Lanark, Scotland, and in voluminous writings, he proposed uniting accumulated capital with vertically integrated production in “Villages of Unity and Mutual Co-operation.”²⁵ His ideas became utopian when he then translated this theory of organization into anticipated experience: happiness, unity, and material comfort. Owen’s bold pronouncements in New Harmony furthered his earlier attempts to bridge his theory of economic development and social organization with a description of how these would change lives. His efforts failed; the communal experiment in New Harmony ended within a year.²⁶

As Owen attempted to conjure enthusiasm for his vision of the future, making his theories ever more appealing and rooted in individual experience, he both created a more vivid utopia and demonstrated how a utopia cannot exist. He increasingly specified the morals and norms of life within his “rational” world, in order to inspire his fellow participants, but as he specified, he unavoidably excluded other visions and interpretations of his theory, undercutting his support. Paradoxically, New Harmony’s demise served to highlight the success of Owen’s utopian effort.

In contrast, at nearly the same time that New Harmony began dissolving, an unsuccessful utopia solidified its existence. Four months before Owen’s pontifications to New Harmony, the state of Massachusetts incorporated the company town of Lowell. Though Frances Trollope christened Lowell a “commercial Utopia,” in actuality it was a weak effort to articulate a bridge between the theoretical and the personal.²⁷

In constructing their town on the Merrimack River’s Pawtucket Falls, the small group of original investors embraced a theory that vertical integration combined with massive capital investment would result in economies of scale, and via these gains, they could produce a product they could sell cheaply but

²⁴ Arthur Bestor, *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America, 1663-1829* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1957), 222; the entire speech is available, viewed 8 Feb. 2008. URL: <http://www.atheists.org/Atheism/roots/robertowen/declaration.html>.

²⁵ Robert Owen, “A Further Development of the Plan for the Relief of the Poor, and the Emancipation of Mankind,” in *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, ed. with an introduction by Gregory Claeys (London, 1991), 204-31.

²⁶ For a discussion of how individual interpretations of Owen’s pronouncements led to the venture’s demise, see Peter Hohn, “‘Dark Error’s Night Will Soon Be Gone!’: Dynamics of Participation at New Harmony, 1824-1827,” *Communal Studies* (forthcoming).

²⁷ Frances Trollope as quoted in Allen Macdonald, “Lowell: A Commercial Utopia,” *New England Quarterly* 10 (March 1937): 37-62, quotation at p. 37.

in such massive quantities that unprecedented profits would result. They had already pioneered and proven this strategy at Waltham, Massachusetts, and though the Lowell investors intended to expand the scale of their operations, they found it difficult to recruit labor to work in the mills at the wages they offered. Instead, they turned to the seemingly underemployed young women in New England's farms. In responding to the same images of degraded European manufacturing that had bothered Owen, the Lowell investors took unusual steps to guard their employees' "moral character."

Years later, in a company pamphlet designed to articulate and defend their initial goals, one key investor recalled, "The operatives in the manufacturing cities of Europe were notoriously of the lowest character, for intelligence and morals. . . . Here was in New England a fund of labor, well educated and virtuous."²⁸ Via boardinghouses, subsidized churches, employee publications, lecture series, and, most important, careful supervision within the factories, the owners and operators sought to protect their "virtuous" female work force from poverty, moral decline, and social stigma.²⁹

This was a unique vision of both manufacturing and employer-employee relations in America, but it was not a utopia. The investors did not attempt to bridge their course of action with an expression of the experience of life in Lowell, to persuade potential participants and employees, or to make a moral and ethical argument for Lowell. Instead, they relied primarily on simple self-interest and wages higher than available elsewhere to entice participation. While this was a powerful enticement, as the mills' profits showed, lacking a utopian description of the life and morals within the community left it to the owners and "operators" to resolve whose interests would be privileged in Lowell. Fewer than eight years after the town's incorporation, the first of multiple strikes erupted, representing the employees' efforts to ensure that their community expectations would be privileged over profit. The owners disagreed, and after 1836, boardinghouse construction fell relative to overall employment, and private tenements expanded. Finally, a flood of poor immigrants snuffed the last flickers of company paternalism.³⁰ The Lowell investors never doubted the theory behind the town—what they called "the experiment"—but the lack of a utopian plan for Lowell meant that the definition of individual expectations in the mills was left to participants to contest.

²⁸ Nathan Appleton, *Introduction of the Power Loom and the Origin of Lowell* (Lowell, Mass., 1858), 15-16.

²⁹ Many authors recount the paternalistic efforts in the Lowell mills; see Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York, 1979), and Dalzell, *Enterprising Elite*.

³⁰ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 130-40. Dublin notes that the labor movement arising out of these first strikes "was no single-minded, narrow lobbying effort. It was a broad reform movement that repeatedly overflowed its banks and stimulated interest in wide-ranging issues": 131. A utopian would have already attempted to address these issues.

If Lowell was not a utopia, then what do business pursuits tell us about utopia and the possibility for social change? I suspect a great deal, for rather than try to span the two extremes of art and theory, business offers a model of the unsuccessful utopia, but of realizable change. In the written form, utopia is the attempt to bridge both the subjective/symbolic and the objective/functionalist, but paradoxically loses its ability to communicate effectively either universal (theoretical) or individual (artistic) insights. Business writing, particularly the modern mission statement, may offer a path out of this paradox. Like utopian writing, mission statements prove difficult to pin down, though at their simplest level a mission statement unifies a company's identity and goals. Scholarship on mission statements is not extensive, but what does exist mirrors my discussion of utopias. Like the utopian unification of the universal and individual, a mission statement combines a business's objective strategy with a subjective philosophy and ethics for itself, its employees, and, frequently, the public.³¹

Through mission statements, companies "make a connection between their personal values and [their] beliefs. . . . Purpose and strategy are empty intellectual thoughts unless they can be converted into action, into the policy and behavior guidelines that help people to decide what to do on a day-to-day basis."³² Warren Bennis goes even further, presenting a strong parallel between mission statements and utopia: "To choose a direction, a [company] leader must first have developed a mental image of a possible and desirable future state of the organization . . . a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization, a condition that is better in some important way than what now exists."³³

It is not enough for a company to rely upon the abstraction of competition among multiple producers to adequately allocate scarce resources. It must also envision how it will act within those theories, how consumers will tangibly benefit, and do so in a more convincing fashion than competitors:

[A mission statement] projects sense of worth, an intent that can be identified and assimilated by organizational outsiders, i.e. customers, clients, suppliers, competitors, local committees and the general public. . . . It affirms the organization's commitment to responsible action, which is symbiotic with its need to preserve and protect the . . . sustained survival and financial viability of the organization.³⁴

An organization must bridge individuals' moral and ethical needs and the corporate pursuit of profit. In this sense, a mission statement should not be a document trapped within the corporation, but should articulate to the public

³¹ John A. Pearce, in "Introduction," John Graham and Wendy Havlick, *Mission Statements: A Guide to the Corporate and Nonprofit Sectors* (New York, 1994).

³² Andrew Campbell, Marion Devine, and David Young, *Sense of Mission* (London, 1990), 15, 30.

³³ Ibid., Warren Bemis quoted on pp. 38-39.

³⁴ Pearce, "Introduction," Graham and Havlick, *Mission Statements*, x.

how the mundane pursuit of profit fits within larger social, political, and cultural goals.

Some companies see the legitimization process as self-evident. The agricultural credit union CENEX has a clear mission “to enhance the economic well-being of our member-owners” and “[t]o be a financially strong cooperative system.” Likewise, Equifax, a credit reporting service, sees its mission as (the vaguely tautological) “helping business and consumers do business together.” H. J. Heinz, a food processor, sums up its vision in one sentence: “Dissemination of pure products and nutritional services.” For these companies, creating a mission statement is an exercise in the obvious. These simple statements contain no objective, theoretical discussion of private property, competition, and innovation. They equally ignore the individual experience and ethical demands of business.³⁵

Simplicity may not always be a virtue. Experts in constructing mission statements encourage companies to push themselves further and ask why they undertook a particular business:

When you truly answer why, you go beyond the superficiality of believing you “exist to make a profit” or the detached and subservient purpose of “my company exists to increase shareholder wealth.” You find yourself . . . propelled to a bountiful region where business as usual is the death knell. This is a territory abundant with real meaning, inspiration, and the opportunity for success.³⁶

Some companies follow this advice with abandon. United Airlines is “dedicated to being the world’s best airline . . . uniting a broad mosaic of cultures and traditions, we hope to foster economic prosperity and inspire human understanding. That’s why we fly.” Kmart promises that the company “will be a symbol to Americans—the place which helps them to attain the quality of life guaranteed in the American dream—sooner, better and more conveniently than anyone else.” These statements lean toward the subjective and individual. They elicit no discussion of the pursuit of profits or the theory of why this pursuit is the socially efficient means of meeting people’s consumptive needs. Instead, they focus on how people will experience their business efforts.

Other companies are more deliberate in their statements and attempt to bridge the two poles of communication. The Dana Corporation, an automotive parts manufacturer, includes in its mission statement the desire to “earn money for its shareholders and to increase the value of their investment,” even going so far as to testify, “We believe in steady growth to protect our assets against inflation.” Yet the Dana Corporation also promises to “be a good citizen worldwide . . . to do business in an . . . ethical manner with integrity,” to “encourage active participation . . . in community action,” and to “support worthwhile community causes.” Johnson & Johnson

³⁵ All mission statements cited come from Graham and Havlick, *Mission Statements*.

³⁶ Jim Armstrong, *Beyond the Mission Statement: Why Cause-Based Communications Lead to True Success* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006), 2.

maintains that its first responsibility is to “the doctors, nurses and patients, to mothers and fathers and all others who use our products. . . . We must constantly strive to reduce costs in order to maintain reasonable prices.” Yet their suppliers and distributors “must have an opportunity to make a fair profit.” This is a reasonable articulation of capitalist principles; the company goes on to say, “We are responsible to the communities in which we live. . . . We must be good citizens. . . . We must maintain . . . the property we are privileged to use, protecting the environment and natural resources.”

The Borg-Warner Corporation, an automotive parts manufacturer, goes even further in its mission statement, arguing

Any business is a member of a social system, entitled to the rights and bound by the responsibilities of that membership. . . . But these demands are minimal, requiring only that a business provide wanted goods and services, compete fairly, and cause no obvious harm. For some companies that is enough. It is not enough for Borg-Warner.

The company sees itself as an “economic and social force” with “responsibilities to the public at large.” Yet beyond this unique articulation of the universal organizing principles driving the company, the mission statement also promises its employees a “climate of openness and trust” fostering “respect, cooperation, and decency” and the public it serves “a natural concern” that would “honor and enhance human life. . . . preserve freedom each of us needs,” all while sharing unifying “values,” “ideals,” and “loyalty.”

This is no exercise in empty promises. When John Pearce and Fred David compared mission statements and financial performance for 218 companies, they concluded that articulate, well-crafted mission statements translate into higher profits. “Higher performing firms,” they assert, “have comparatively more comprehensive mission statements.” In their analysis, three components of a mission statement loom large in the pursuit of profits: a company’s self-image, its public image, and its “philosophy.” By their definition, “philosophy” includes “basic beliefs, values, aspirations, and philosophical priorities.” It pays real rewards to a company to link the objective pursuit of profit with the goals and values those profits are put toward. Far from engaging in a blind pursuit of profit, businesses succeed when fueled by a vision of the future.³⁷

As a written statement inciting social action on behalf of the writer and the audience, the mission statement parallels the function of utopia. Yet an unavoidable question remains; does the parallel between the two serve any practical purpose? The short answer is yes; there should be more business in utopia and more utopia in business. In my analysis, utopia is an attempt to bridge the poles of a communication spectrum. Unlike utopian writing, the mission statement does not try to span the communication spectrum, drawing out nuances of theory and tying them into concrete, “constitutively

³⁷ John A. Pearce and Fred David, “Corporate Mission Statements: The Bottom Line,” *Academy of Management Executive* 1, no. 2 (May 1987): 109-15.

singular” details. Rather, in its most articulated form, the mission statement immediately connects expectations and a course of action. The successful mission statement relies on broad ethical statements, but it does not attempt to describe personal experience. It uses personal values to spur action and ensure commitment, but avoids defining expectations. Importantly, companies construct these statements to appeal to as broad an audience as is compatible with their vision.

In much the same fashion, companies also hint at, rather than spell out, the theoretical underpinnings of the corporation—its structure, place, and usefulness to society—with phrases such as “free enterprise system,” “shareholder value,” “revenue,” and “gain.” Companies have no need to spell out the theories readily available in a microeconomic textbook. The strength of the mission statement lies in denying specificity and allowing for change. It creates a useful ambiguity that allows for variation within an inevitably unknowable future. It is utopian in its combination of the universal and the subjective, but it is a weak, atrophied utopia. It has just enough of the universal and the individual to push people into action, but not so much that it becomes ineffectively bogged down in details. Additionally, a well-crafted mission statement seeks participation, contributions, and inspiration from a broad base, creating an inclusion that ideally translates into active support. Finally, businesses must return to, redraft, and even rewrite mission statements in response to changing circumstances.³⁸

At first glance, it appears that only the impractical utopia has much to learn from business writing: first, find general ethical and moral statements that command popular support, and second, avoid locking oneself into an uncompromising, comprehensive theory. Best yet: avoid articulating a theory that strays too far from popular opinion. However, the same aspects that make business writing effective may act to insulate it from change. In his study of mission statements, Carmelo Mazza argues that corporate narratives legitimize business activity by translating it into the norms and values of a “social context.” As Mazza writes, “[T]he social or organizational world exists only as a pattern of symbolic relationships and meanings sustained through . . . human interaction. Social action is considered possible because of consensually determined meanings for that experience that . . . may have the appearance of an independent rule-like existence.”³⁹

Mazza goes on to argue that mission statements are “made of words of legitimization” and that the company’s fundamental goal is to develop the “appearance of an independent rule-like existence.” This legitimacy may not consist only of “conformity to rules,” but also of even broader “symbolic conformity to social norms and values.” As Mazza admits, the attempt of mission statements to garner legitimacy “becomes a cultural issue” dependent

³⁸ Although outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the strength of the mission statement mirrors successful political writing of constitutions.

³⁹ Carmelo Mazza, *Claim, Intent and Persuasion: Organizational Legitimacy and the Rhetoric of Corporate Mission Statements* (Boston, 1999), 35, 81.

on how much “taken for grantedness” and “coherence with the socially shared worldview” the company can marshal.⁴⁰ Hardly a dynamo of social change, by this account companies are likely to ossify existing ideals and norms; but mission statements may bear fruitful change for the firm with the propitious grafting of utopian ambition. A company can take from utopias the propensity to “achieve harmonies and resolutions” beyond the current consensus.⁴¹ It may even become a source for achievable images of the future, a vehicle to promote human dignity, and an encouragement to the belief that people can improve their lives.⁴²

King C. Gillette did not have two sides to his personality. The entrepreneur and the utopian share the same desire to make the universal comprehensible to the individual and the individual experience comprehensible to all. Gillette’s promise that a clean shave might land the perfect job or ideal spouse, and thus ensure a happy future, was sparse compared to his sweeping vision and universal claims in *The Human Drift*, but both served similar social ends. Once we acknowledge the shared vision of change and the desire to see that change come to fruition of the entrepreneur or the company and the utopian (that the radical and the mundane are not so distant cousins), we can better understand Arthur Cole’s exhortation to his fellow business historians that

business history is, or should be, essentially a part of intellectual history, concerned with the origin and flow of information with the consequences thereof. . . . Business history is, and should be, close to sociological history—concerned with the interaction of men and institutions, and with cultural themes.⁴³

While staying true to Cole’s spirit, we can further claim that much of what we see labeled “utopian” is not at all utopian. In the first (and in many respects, finest) example of utopian writing, More did not flinch from articulating the absurdities arising from transforming objective theory into subjective experience, even though it meant that his “good place” (eutopia) would be “nowhere” (outopia). However, Gillette, Owen, and the Lowell investors fully intended to see their plans put into action and convinced others to join their attempts. As with firms today, each wrote and articulated an explanation and justification for the goals they sought. Some successfully brought about the change they intended, while others initiated only indirect or unintended change.

By comparing these examples, the historian brings insights not obvious to others, not even to business people. In the same sense that the miner and the geologist work with the same materials, but from different perspectives, the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12-46.

⁴¹ Sayre, “American Myths of Utopia,” 619.

⁴² For positive views of utopia’s influence, see Sargent, “Authority and Utopia,” 574-79.

⁴³ Arthur H. Cole, “A History of Business in the United States,” *Business History Review* 32 (Winter 1958): 451-55, quotation at p. 452.

business person and the business historian will differ. The business person understandably sees profit as the firm's final goal. The historian, however, recognizes profit as a necessary but not sufficient condition for achieving the firm's goals. For the firm is part of the larger system of business, and the business of business—like the business of utopians—is change.