Book Review

Daniel A. Clark. *Creating the College Man: American Mass Magazines and Middle-Class Manhood, 1890–1915*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. 256 pp. Paper $26.95.

Today, the largest and newest building on many college and university campuses often houses a business school, usually paid for by an alumnus who became especially wealthy in the corporate world. But a little more than a century ago, attending college was not necessary—indeed, not even ideal—for a career in business. In *Creating the College Man*, Daniel Clark explores the role of popular magazines, primarily read by the middle class, in reshaping the image of higher education into one that provided proper training to men for success in America's burgeoning capitalist system. Expounding upon Andrew Carnegie's famous comment that "a college education unfits rather than fits men to affairs" (quoted in Clark, p. 3), Clark reminds readers that at the end of the nineteenth century, the college curriculum had a reputation for being irrelevant (and sometimes antithetical) to business success and that many Americans believed that campus life emasculated college men. By the 1920s, however, Americans considered college an ideal proving ground, preparing excellent employees for corporate leadership and producing cultured, yet rugged, young men.

Clark is well aware that historians have paid considerable attention to the growth of higher education during the years of his study. Historians have largely attributed this expansion to a changing economy that began to rely upon professionals and managers, the formalization of professional education in medicine and law that required a bachelor's degree as a prerequisite, and the value that middle-class Americans increasingly placed on college education as a form of cultural capital. Despite all this scholarship, Clark claims a significant oversight: how Americans' perceptions of and expectations for higher education changed. This is important because, according to Clark, "Before the average American man would invest in a college education literally, he would have to be invested in it *culturally*" (p. 7). To that end, Clark does not focus on the actual or lived college experience. Rather, he "examines the discourse on college to uncover how the concept of going to college became invested with new meaning" and "the cultural construction of the college experience" (p. 9). The best place to witness this transformation, Clark asserts, is in the pages of the four most popular mass magazines: *Munsey's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Collier's*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. The magazine editors considered most of their readers to be native-born, white, of western

European ancestry, and male who worked in business and belonged to "'the broad middle class' " (p. 16). Issues of business success, manliness, and education intertwined in the pages of these magazines, and Clark provides precise and often fascinating insights into how their contents helped change the role of higher education in the United States.

The book begins not with the college man but with the clerk. Writing about the "Crisis of the Clerks," Clark describes how traditional paths to business success were drying up in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Native-born, white American males often started working in an office around the time they reached adolescence, performing menial tasks and observing their superiors. After several satisfactory years, office boys were promoted to clerks, a catchall term to describe young businessmen before careers in commerce became subdivided into fields such as accounting, management, and advertising. Clerks typically aspired to take over a firm or start their own, exemplifying the idealized "self-made man" in Victorian America. A college education was not necessary for this path to success. In fact, many businessmen, and certainly the vast majority of clerks who had limited formal education, considered attending college antithetical to business success—four years of learning esoteric rather than practical subjects produced graduates inexperienced in business but who were uninterested in entry-level positions. But the traditional path to success was under attack from a variety of fronts. The influx of immigrant men, large numbers of women entering the work force, and technological advancements, such as typewriters and carbon paper, threatened or eliminated many of the clerks' responsibilities. In addition, the swelling size of the American corporation made the possibility of becoming "the boss" more difficult and the possibility of becoming "the owner" increasingly impossible.

The solution to this crisis—that is, how to reserve the riches and rewards of American life primarily for native-born, white men—was to transform attending college from superfluous to indispensable for success in business. In the following four chapters, Clark demonstrates the magazines' role in this transformation. The college curriculum had been expanding to include more scientific and professional courses, but the liberal arts still reigned supreme on most campuses. Critics of colleges had long claimed that the liberal arts were irrelevant to business, but by the 1900s, writers in popular magazines began to assert that the new curriculum produced the ideal combination of prepared professionals and cultured citizens. They also increasingly claimed that campus life, especially the rowdiness of fraternities and the roughness of football, provided ideal opportunities to foster masculinity. With the ideal training for a career and for manhood relocated to the college yard, the magazines fostered a new image of the idealized self-made man that

combined humble beginnings with a college education. Now, the self-made man put himself through college (even if his family could have paid his way), participated in intercollegiate athletics (even if he had little talent), and started his career on the factory floor instead of a manager's office (even if his father owned the company). Most of this reimagining of the college experience took place in the magazines' editorials, articles, and short stories, but such efforts had been so successful in making higher education seem accessible to and important for the middle-class man that advertisers began to "sell college"—associating their products with college men—as a way to move their merchandise by the early 1900s. In an interesting turn, Clark asserts that while the aim of the magazines was to expand the relevance of higher education from wealthy white men to middle-class white men, this reimagining had a broader democratizing effect. In the next decades, greater numbers of American men from more disadvantaged backgrounds and American women would demand access to college as a path to financial and cultural success.

In Clark's book, the sources do more than reveal the story; they *are* the story. Clark comes off as a critical, competent, and careful guide, and such a focused approach raises the possibilities for future fruitful scholarship, both for the years of the present study and beyond. First, while Clark claims early on to be primarily interested in perceptions, I often desired "reality checks" about ideas circulating in the book, including the extent to which early college men were unsuccessful or underrepresented in business, the likelihood of clerks rising to own a business, and the prevalence of self-supporting college students. Whether or not such perceptions were real or mythical is relevant not only for our knowledge of the era but also for Clark's history. Second, the focus on the magazines' content, as opposed to the people who created and consumed that content, obscures motivations even as it reveals changing perceptions. Specific groups of Americans had much to gain by improving (the perceptions of) the usefulness of college—employers who desired better workers, college alumni who did not want to be considered effeminate men who lacked business savvy, and college presidents and faculty who wanted to improve the reputation of their curriculum while holding on to their traditional disciplines—yet these motivations remain largely unexplored. But, as Daniel Clark has demonstrated, the continued exploration of perceptions of college among Americans and the depictions of higher education in popular culture, not to mention the extent to which these perceptions and depictions mirrored reality, is fascinating and important for both historical and contemporary scholarship.

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