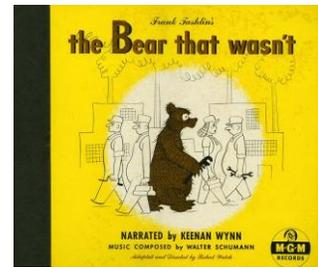


## Mitchell's Musings 11-12-12: Bear With Me

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I know the temptation after a major election is to write something about what it all means. But immediately after an election is probably not the best time to gain perspective. I am writing this musing – despite the official date above – on Election Day well before results are known. So all I know is that much is being made of the votes of white, male blue-collar factory workers, particularly in swing states. Explanations and interpretations are being offered by pundits as to why they vote the way they do. In short, nowadays such workers are viewed as exotics whose motivations need interpretation. But what about in the past? How have such workers been seen over time?

At the end of World War II, such workers would have accounted for one out of four employees in the nonfarm sector. Agriculture was a larger share of the workforce then than it is now so the proportion for all workers would have been closer to one out of six. Now, given the shrinkage of manufacturing as a proportion of the workforce and other demographic changes, the ratio is probably around one out of twenty.)

Although they were never a majority of overall employment, people paid more attention to such workers after World War II because manufacturing was considered a key sector around which much of the rest of the workforce revolved. Manufacturing was a sector in which high-profile labor disputes occurred, particularly in the aftermath of the War as wage-price controls were relaxed. Big union settlements in manufacturing were seen as pattern setters for other (lesser?) industries.

In an earlier musing, I noted that you can learn about public perceptions of the workforce at different points of time from children's stories.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, in that musing, I noted that government workers seemed to be held in much higher esteem in the period after World War II than they are now. So what about those factory workers? How were they perceived? In fact, such factories were seen as standard workplaces. Those workplaces could be parodied and critiqued, but they were not exotic.

When I taught a course in labor market policy, we would get into corporate structure and supervision and the evolution of thinking and practice in those areas. And I would use a video (actually an audio with pictures) with an excerpt from a children's story that became popular just after World War II, "*The Bear That Wasn't*." The story appeared immediately after the War (1946) as a phonograph recording and as an illustrated book. You can find the video excerpt I used at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opPrTrpHydU>. Some of the images from the book can be seen in that video.

The story itself involves a bear who finds a cave in which to hibernate at the beginning of winter. During the winter, a factory is built over the cave so that when he emerges in the spring, he is in a mid-1940s

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.employmentpolicy.org/sites/www.employmentpolicy.org/files/field-content-file/pdf/Daniel%20J.B.%20Mitchell/MitchellMusings%202-20-12\\_0.pdf](http://www.employmentpolicy.org/sites/www.employmentpolicy.org/files/field-content-file/pdf/Daniel%20J.B.%20Mitchell/MitchellMusings%202-20-12_0.pdf).

workplace. The idea of a factory in the story is blended with that of a corporation run by a hierarchy of managers with the lowest level being a factory foreman. In other words, the idea of a big corporation is identified with manufacturing. There are mainly men in the factory as production workers and they are white in all of the illustrations in the book. The original record album cover – progressive for its time – depicted one woman and three male production workers. However, women do work in the factory, but primarily as secretaries to the hierarchy of management.

The Foreman stopped laughing. He was very mad.  
 "Don't try to fool me," he said. "You're not a Bear. You're a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat. I'm going to take you to the General Manager."  
 The Bear said, "No, you're mistaken. I am a Bear."

The General Manager was very mad, too.  
 He said, "You're not a Bear. You're a silly man who needs a shave and wears a fur coat. I'm going to take you to the Third Vice President."  
 The Bear said, "I'm sorry to hear you say that ... You see, I am a Bear."



When the bear finds himself in the factory, he is confronted by the foreman who tells him to get to work. The bear protests that he isn't a factory worker; he is a bear. But he is gradually convinced by the hierarchy of management which he confronts that he is "a silly man with a fur coat who needs a shave." Thus convinced, he ends up working in the factory pushing buttons, turning wheels, and cranking cranks. In effect, he loses his identity and becomes a Tayloristic production worker. Note that the story assumes that any child of the 1940s would recognize an extended corporate hierarchy. (Or it at least assumes that their parents would recognize one and would explain the concept to the child.)

As the story continues, the factory suddenly shuts down - as many did after World War II production halted – and, of course, as they did during the Great Depression, a period which would have been fresh in a parent's memory. The other workers go away, leaving the question of whether the bear can regain his true identity before it's time to hibernate again. For those readers curious about the *denouement*, I have provided the entire recording – not just the YouTube video excerpt – in two parts at:

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10151318648476522> (Part 1) and

<http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=10151318663171522> (Part 2).

Had the story been written today, undoubtedly the bear would have emerged in an office park, not a factory, and the humor in the tale would probably have been closer to a *Dilbert* comic strip (which often includes talking animals in its fictional white-collar workplace). In these days of so-called management “delaying,” the satire would probably not have involved a tall corporate hierarchy. Rather it would have revolved around management-speak aimed at persuading the bear that he is in fact a silly “associate.” The supposed fur coat could be accommodated at work as long as the bear appeared on “dress-casual” day. In any event, the workforce would have been depicted as more diverse than the original. And when the company went out of business, the bear would have been left with his health insurance expiring and wondering why no one warned him about the danger of keeping too much company stock in his 401k.

But what about the workers represented in the original story - those white, mainly male factory workers? They were depicted in 1946 as subject to an identity-suppressing Tayloristic hierarchy. But they would not have been seen at the time the story was written as exotics whose electoral motivations needed deep explanations by pundits.