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Griffen and Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers*

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son himself, can be grateful.

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Clyde Griffen and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers; The ordering of Opportunity in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1978).

THE IMMEDIATE impact of the "new" social history on the study of social mobility was to debunk the myth of equal opportunity which had dominated American society throughout the nineteenth century. However, with the destruction of this strawman (and in the absence of any other social theory), the intellectual basis of the subject degenerated into a debate over what was a "just" rate of social mobility. Should a given rate of upward mobility be praised for demonstrating the incredible flexibility of American society, or should it be condemned for reflecting its rigidity? On these terms, the debate became sterile, totally removed from the historical context in which it should have taken place.

To remedy this situation, historians moved in two directions. One group took a step backward and placed mobility in the context of other social processes and institutions. Another group took a step forward, studying individual patterns of mobility. We might say that the former group wished to discover the meaning of social mobility for society, while the latter group attempted to discover its meaning for the individual. Until recently, the first path appeared to be the most promising, but with the publication of *Natives and Newcomers* by Clyde and Sally Griffen, the promise of the microscopic study of mobility has been demonstrated.

In their study of social mobility or what they call "paths of opportunity" in Poughkeepsie, New York between 1850 and 1900, the Griffens summarize over a decade of research on that city. As a result, the book shows a certain unevenness, ranging from a treatment of aggregate rates of mobility that seems dated in 1978 to the most interesting and imaginative discussion of individual routes of mobility in the nineteenth century yet published.

In their selection of sources, the Griffens exhibit the same unevenness. Of course, they use the standard source for mobility studies — the federal census manuscripts for 1850-1880. Unfortunately, they ignored the New York state censuses for 1855, 1865, and 1875. The 1855 census, in particular, is one of the outstanding quantitative sources for the century, including data on the subject's length of residence in his town or city and the value of his dwelling.

To balance this omission, the Griffens make excellent use of city directories and the credit records of R.G. Dunn and Company. They benefitted from having an incredibly complete county directory for 1879 — which even listed the place of employment of factory operatives. Of more general interest, the Griffens are among the first investigators to use business directories to distinguish artisan/proprietors from journeymen. Not only is this important for the study of mobility, but it has immense implications for the study of class structure in North America.

From a methodological perspective, *Natives and Newcomers* clearly points in a nonaggregate, nonquantitative direction. As the Griffens write, their goal is "to identify the paths of mobility more precisely through microscopic examination of the opportunities of workers in specific occupations." Indeed there is something distinctly "old" in the method of these "new" social historians. Their triumph rests in an old historical tradition — contextual history. Through the inclusion of dozens of thumbnail sketches, they communicate an understanding of the texture and character of life in Poughkeepsie which renders any question of the city's "representativeness" irrelevant. Although the book includes the requisite number of tables, *Natives and Newcomers* makes few

innovations in quantitative analysis. This deficiency is most evident in two respects: their failure to use multivariate techniques to "control" variables in their analysis, and their failure to correct their persistent estimates for mortality. This second problem leads them to conclude that middle-aged residents of Poughkeepsie were more stable than either younger or older groups, while in fact the disappearance of the older citizens was due more to death than to migration.

In substantive terms, the Griffens present an ambiguous portrait of social mobility in mid-nineteenth century America. Although the city was clearly stratified by ethnicity — ranging from Natives at the top to the Germans, Irish, and (far at the bottom) Blacks, Poughkeepsie also provides examples of impressive achievements of self-employment among immigrants (particularly the Germans) and clear advances in status between first-generation Americans and their children. However, the advent of industrialization, by dooming the small artisan/proprietor began cutting off the main avenues of upward mobility during the 1870s. In the white-collar world, the most significant trend was the shift in the recruitment of proprietors from skilled to clerical workers. Since these clerical workers, in turn, were more often the sons of white-collar fathers, this change increased the barrier between mental and manual labour. Yet, the Griffens conclude that by 1880 the elite of Poughkeepsie still "did not form a self-perpetuating or closed class."

The Griffens argue that industrialization closed the gap between skilled and unskilled labour. The authors exhibit great sensitivity to the contradictions involved in the process of skill dilution and changing work environments. In their case studies of "contracting" trades (particularly cabinetmaking and shoe-making) they note that as these trades declined, their work forces became older and more stable, an impression that was at odds with the process underway. Their most striking insight is that one should not conclude that workers in expanding trades were experiencing a happier situation than those in declining trades. To the contrary, skill dilution and the detailed division of labour are processes that cut across the distinction between "healthy" and "sick" industries.

Finally, in a short chapter, the authors examine a subject often neglected by mobility studies, the mobility patterns of women. Unfortunately, the Griffens fail to shed much new light on this topic. Part of this is methodological — the census (as the authors note) is not a very good source for examining the occupational experience of women. A more important reason, however, lies in the authors' failure to conceptualize women's work within the context of the family and its economy. Although this weakness is most evident in the discussion of women (whose work was more closely related to household work), it is a failure throughout the study.

Unlike class formation, which takes place "behind the backs" of individuals, considerations of the family economy and the life-cycle were conscious to the historical subjects and had an impact on their choices. Access to capital, type of work force entry, and woman and child labour were all determined within a family economy that mediated external and internal economic demands. By focusing more on the family, the Griffens might have given their study a conceptual centre that it sorely needs.

In conclusion we come to the subject of social analysis and the issue of class. The Griffens conscientiously avoid this topic (at one point noting that they use the term "social origin" because it is more "ambiguous"). Given their goal — the investigation of the experience of individuals — this choice makes sense. But from the standpoint of social history in general, this goal must always be provisional. It is only within a total social environment that specific behaviour, like social mobility, derive their meaning. Unless it is put within a class context, social mobility must

always be judged by some ambiguous standard of "justice." When viewed in their historical context, mobility and its social psychologies can be linked in concrete ways to particular patterns of stability/conflict and personal satisfaction/frustration that they foster. Although the Griffens avoid the worst offenses of the "justice" debate, their failure to address the issue of class denies them insights into nineteenth-century America that are within their reach.

But in the final analysis, their work must be judged a success. By their own modest and traditional standards, the authors succeed in giving us a more detailed description of aspects of the life-experience of nineteenth-century Americans. In doing so they add an important dimension to our understanding of that experience. Perhaps they set too low a goal for themselves, but we are fortunate that they, unlike too many authors, realize that theirs is not the last word on the subject.

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James B. Gilbert, *Work Without Salvation: America's Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 1978) and Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978)

Intellectuals and Work

THERE has always been a well developed mystique about the value of "work" in industrial societies. No discussion of unemployment, at any time since the modern state began to concern itself with the problem, is complete without lengthy homilies on the degrading and spiritually debilitating condition that results from not being able to punch a time clock regularly. And much of what is said is likely true, though one has to wonder, some times, if the authors of these laments have ever boed sugar beets, stood on an assembly line, or pumped out septic tanks. Still, the conviction that unemployment, even when cushioned by the welfare state, is a matter of deep moral as well as economic concern is clear evidence of how deeply ingrained the so-called work ethic is in industrial society.

As a minor demonstration that the work ethic is still alive and well in the United States not one, but two quite good books have recently appeared which examine the work ethic and its transformation in the years when the United States underwent its industrial revolution. (While it may not be true that the Wisconsin dairy industry has been studied teat by teat, it is nevertheless one of the strengths of United States' historiography that one can usually find at least a couple of books on any subject. In Canada, even with two languages, we are lucky if we have one.) Though *Work without Salvation* by James B. Gilbert and *The Work Ethic in Industrial America* by Daniel T. Rodgers focus on the same subject and fairly often discuss common material, the two books do not really overlap. Each is worthy of the attention of Canadian readers interested in the intellectual history of industrialization, though most will probably find that Rodgers has written the more useful study.

Gilbert's book, which bears the subtitle, "America's Intellectuals and Industrial Alienation, 1880-1910," is concerned with the question of how work was viewed by leading US publicists and thinkers. He, like Rodgers, notes that traditionally work, as the term "work ethic" implies, was viewed as a moral activity, one which produced its own virtuous rewards. But industrialization undermined that belief. Even though the rhetoric of the work ethic lived on — a point made especially clear by Rodgers — it was obvious to many intelligent observers that in the conditions of factory life, mass production and Taylorized time-and-motion studies, work was something quite different to what it had once been, or was supposed to have