

Gilbert, *Work Without Salvation* and Rogers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920*

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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 test by test, 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

been. In what seems to me a somewhat confused book — confused because its main theme is often lost in a series of essays which are in themselves quite interesting — Gilbert reviews various kinds of evidence of "alienation," and a variety of attempts to overcome it. He presents interesting examples of the way that neurasthenia was viewed as a mental illness resulting from the loss of the old work values. (This chapter unwittingly explains something that had always puzzled me: why so many advertisements for electric belts and other curious devices claiming energy restoring cures appeared in nineteenth century labour papers.) He has other chapters which comment perceptively on sports, the arts and crafts movement, manual training, vocational education and even some remarks on the mental asylum. Since his concern is chiefly with "big" thinkers, he has a good deal to say about the way that work, once viewed and judged by moral categories, gradually became the subject of social scientists. His analysis of Thorstein Veblen and especially of William James, who is perhaps the book's hero, are especially enlightening. James, he believes, was one of the few thinkers in the period examined, who realized the profound nature of industrial alienation and attempted to restate the problem of work as one of social ethics. The difficulty with James, however, was surely that his persistent liberalism and commitment to pluralism offered little of real relevance in an increasingly collectivist and monopolistic society.

Where Gilbert restricts his examination to the world of more-or-less serious intellectuals, Rodgers is more interested in attempting to assess the "work ethic" as a more general phenomenon. He also is interested in the question of what happened to the content of that ideology as the society changed from the agricultural-small town-independent businessman's republic of 1850 to the imperial capitalist democracy of 1920. His book is organized thematically and each chapter covers the

chosen period by concentrating on a particular topic: hired labour, mechanization, leisure, working class organizations, a marvellous chapter on women, radical politics and finally a brief look at President Eliot of Harvard. (This latter chapter should be of interest to readers of King's *Industry and Humanity*.) Rodgers not only writes well but since he avoids the turgidities of many of the thinkers who dominate Gilbert's work, his book is a pleasure to read.

What is most interesting about Rodgers' book is the demonstration that though the work ethic was, as he says, "a businessman's creed," it nevertheless permeated almost the whole of American culture. If I understand Gramsci, the work ethic in the United States was a good example of a hegemonic ideology. As the Knights of Labor pledge announced, "In the beginning God ordained that man should labor, not as a curse, but as a blessing; not as a punishment, but as a means of development, physically, mentally, morally. . . ." So, too, the labour theory of value, so beloved by labour reform theorists — a Henry George in the United States or a Phillips Thompson in Canada — was essentially an affirmation of the "work ethic" within the moral economy. Of course, as Rodgers notes, there were certainly workers who rejected this secularized puritanism: they turned to tramp-ing, moved from job to job, and sometimes they rebelled. But, in general, it was not the work ethic they rejected, but rather its corruption. So, too, Rodgers argues in a splendid chapter on women, the "work ethic" contributed to woman's discontent. If work was so ethical, why, asked a Charlotte Perkins Gilman or an Olive Schreiner, were women excluded from its most challenging aspects?

What both Gilbert and Rodgers are interested in, if only by implication, is the question of the relevance of work and the work ethic in contemporary society. If the original nineteenth-century idea of the ethical value of work was destroyed by the

numbing experience of modern mass-production, has not the consumer society become something of a parody on the original concept? The problem is, as Gilbert remarks, that we still believe that "ethics and culture flow from work." And if, as Daniel Bell argues in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, the work ethic has been seriously eroded in the United States and other advanced industrial societies, Deputy Prime Minister Teng Hsiao-ping will ensure that it still has a future.

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Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution In American Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977)

IN A HOST of essays and monographs published over the past generation, Alfred D. Chandler Jr. has emerged as the preeminent historian of the incorporation of America. *The Visible Hand*, winner of both the Bancroft and Pulitzer Prizes in 1978, could be likened to a brilliant retrospective exhibition of his scattered *oeuvre*. Here between two covers, as with a great artist in a gallery, we look back through the different periods and preoccupations of his work and see, perhaps for the first time, the underlying unity, the sweeping vision, the total mastery of technique. Chapters and footnotes mark his evolution from the debut article ("Patterns of Railroad Finance," 1954), to the promising monograph which signalled the end of his apprenticeship in the entrepreneurial school (Henry Varnum Poor, 1956), through his thoroughly original speculations on organizational change ("The Beginnings of Big Business in American Industry," 1959), to his masterpiece, a fully developed theory of structural transformation within four major corporations (*Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the Industrial Enterprise*, 1962). Armed with insight into the inner

organizational dynamics of the early twentieth century multi-unit enterprise, he next explored the roots of managerial technique in the railroad (*The Railroads: The Nation's First Big Business*, 1965; "Railroads: Pioneers in Modern Corporate Management," 1965) and manufacturing sectors (*Pierre S. DuPont and the Making of the Modern Corporation*, 1971, with Stephen Salisbury). Now, drawing upon a lifetime of research and the extraordinarily rich literature in American business history, Chandler extends his explanatory theory and empirical analysis to embrace the entire industrial system.

Until the 1840s, Chandler argues, a Venetian merchant would have been quite at home within most American businesses. The institutional landscape of production and distribution — accounting practices, credit instruments, mercantile functions, commodity exchanges, kinship networks, commercial law and management routine — had not altered appreciably for centuries. American economic growth had introduced greater specialization within the marketplace, but the volume of business transacted still had not overwhelmed inherited institutions. Technology, after all, imposed upper limits upon commercial activity. Nature and the seasons still governed the economy and traditional practices ruled trade. Traffic depended upon the irregular, low energy provided by wind, water, man and beast. The single unit family firm remained the predominant business form. Above all, markets regulated production. Markets, over which buyers and sellers had little control, established prices, allocated resources, and marshalled goods through many hands along the intricate production and distribution continuum to final consumption.

Virtually overnight all of this changed. By the beginning of World War I massive vertically integrated, highly diversified multi-division corporations operating in oligopolized national — even global — markets dominated the most dynamic sectors of the American economy. In this sud-