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Manchester's Workers

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Gregory S. Kealey

Tamara K. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time. The Relationship Between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1982).

James P. Hanlan, *The Working Population of Manchester, New Hampshire, 1840-1886* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press 1981).

ALTHOUGH ONE TITLE DISGUISES the fact, both these books are about Manchester. Hanlan's study, a revision of his 1979 Clark Ph.D. thesis written under Hareven's supervision, is a community study, conceived "in the spirit of the developing tradition of a new social history." (xv) Hareven's volume is a continuation of her ambitious project which has previously resulted in a number of articles and the justifiably highly-praised *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York: Pantheon 1978), co-authored by Randolph Langenbach. As Hareven's title suggests, her book stands firmly on the terrain of family history, but it transcends many of the familiar problems of that field by its constant effort to relate family to work. A study of the Amoskeag Mills in Manchester, New Hampshire, in the first three decades of the twentieth century, this volume demands careful reading as the most thorough attempt yet in the North American literature to bring together the insights of family history and working-class history. It manages to disappoint as well as to stimulate.

Hareven's project, which commenced in 1971, set out to study the mill workers through a combination of traditional historical research (newspapers, company records, labour sources), kinship reconstitution (based on a sample of the extensive employment records of the company), and oral history. This mix of historical methods results in a study that can actually begin to address many of the questions about which other quantitative social historians, because of their limited sources, can only speculate wildly. The book, however, shares some similar problems with that work. First, the single background chapter, "The Historical Context," drawn largely from *Amoskeag*, does not provide

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sufficient information on the industry, its workforce (especially detail on their origins), or Manchester. These problems of context create considerable difficulty for our understanding of the significant changes over time which Hareven generally reduces to three periods — pre-1922, 1922-33, and 1933 to the final shutdown in 1936. The breakpoints in this periodization are significant events in the mill's labour history, namely the mass strike of 1922, the return of the United Textile Workers in 1933, and the industrial unrest that ensued. These breakpoints are chosen because for Hareven they represent transitions in workers' consciousness, which she sums up as reflecting the experiences of three distinct "generations" of workers. She is aware of the underlying economic realities that influenced these traumatic struggles, both in terms of the larger economy and in terms of the specificity of the textile industry, but these factors are not given the attention they deserve.

Hareven is without doubt attempting to utilize the more profound insights developed in recent American labour and working-class history. She draws usefully on Herbert Gutman's work in describing her first-generation immigrant workers, especially the French Canadians and Greeks, and also derives her definition of culture from him. Yet here we have far more assertion than study. She knows relatively little of her French Canadians' backgrounds. She draws equally on David Montgomery's work to clarify the contribution of experienced industrial workers to the development of working-class resistance, and especially gains insight into shopfloor struggles from his work. Yet, she fails to develop this work further. Indeed she has difficulty integrating much of this evidence into her overarching organizational theme of the breakdown of "paternalism." For example, the shopfloor struggles against various efficiency schemes so prevalent in the pre-World War I experience, which she graphically describes in her excellent, if misnamed, chapter on "Adaptation to Industrial Work," undercut her own argument. Militant resistance, which she tends to relegate to the arrival of the United Textile Workers in 1918, was already in plentiful supply before the war with shortcuts and collective slowdowns. Moreover, the supposed "paternalism" of management surely ceased to be a factor with the 1911 arrival of H.L. Gantt and his "task and bonus system" of pay. Gantt, a disciple of F.W. Taylor, actually enjoyed considerable success in transforming American industry, unlike his mentor, and certainly made his presence felt at Amoskeag.

Paternalism has become a popular historical tool of late. Since Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York 1978) a number of historians have tried to apply the concept to working-class history. The major attempt has undoubtedly been Patrick Joyce's *Work, Society, and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (Brighton 1980). This work shares some arguments with Hareven, although she seems unaware of it. The utility of the concept has been much debated, even in the context of Genovese's careful use of it. Leaving its utility in the study of slavery aside, we might remind ourselves of Genovese's cautionary note:

> The paternalism of the master-slave relationship had, in fact, little of importance in common with the systems of group subordination of the industrializing societies of the nineteenth century.... Bourgeoisies have sometimes gone far toward encouraging paternalism, and some bourgeois regimes have gone much further in trying themselves to play the collective *padrone*. Some of the early industrialists of England and New England — one thinks of Wedgewood and the early cotton manufacturers of Lowell — made valiant (or infamous) attempts to regulate the lives of their labourers in accordance with their own understanding of patriarchal duty. But the exigencies of marketplace competition, not to mention the

subsequent rise of trade-union opposition, reduced these efforts to impediments of the central tendency toward depersonalization. (*Roll Jordan Roll*, 662)

Now following from that, James P. Hanlan's discussion of early Amoskeag paternalism makes considerable sense, and, indeed, what he demonstates especially well is the breakdown of the initial paternalist schemes by the 1850s, and the first major incidence of class conflict in the mass strike of 1855, which resulted in a workers' victory. Hareven seems vaguely aware of this problem and does distinguish between an old and a new paternalism. This new paternalism, however, is simply her name for the quite common welfare-capitalist devices of the Progressive period and little is gained by appropriating the phrase paternalism. Indeed, given the combination of welfare capitalism and the speed-up and stretch-out innovations of Gantt and his successors, the phrase actually confuses matters. Moreover, when Hareven finally asks directly about the utility of the company's various practices, actually quite limited when compared to other welfare capitalist schemes, her argument collapses: the schemes affected few workers and probably had extremely limited direct impact. All she salvages is the claim that they contributed to a positive corporate image in which the workers believed. Perhaps.

The labour history material is also flawed by a few unfortunate errors. The famous, if mythical, "*International*" Workers of the World again make an appearance. More serious, however, is Hareven's failure to consider the possible implications of the previous mass strikes in the mill's experience. These struggles are discussed in Hanlan's book. His study provides a longer range view of labour relations at Amoskeag that raises doubts about the core of Hareven's argument. Amoskeag workers did not strike against "paternalism" for the first time in 1919. They had engaged in massive and militant strikes in 1855 for shorter hours and again in 1886 for higher wages. The first conflict involved a traditional turnout unaided by union organizational forms, but the second was led by the Knights of Labor and coincided with America's Great Upheaval. Neither Hanlan or Hareven attribute sufficient significance to these events. Perhaps to avoid too obviously undercutting Hareven, Hanlan simply argues that a new paternalism was restored after each incident. Neither author is able to demonstrate that. Moreover, Hanlan's decision to end his study in the very year in which the plant had been organized by the Knights of Labor seems peculiar at best.[1] Hareven's failure to consider this conflict and to fill in the intervening years of labour relations (1886-1900) leaves a large question mark in the reader's mind, especially when combined with her brief, passing mention of wildcat strikes in 1911, 1913, and 1914.

If the paternalism of the Amoskeag management remains doubtful, we are then left with the large question of worker resistance and class consciousness. Hareven and Hanlan make very clear that workers were never simply victims, although, as I have suggested, they do not analyze the emergence of working-class resistance and labour organization in sufficient detail, at least partially owing to their over-enthusiasm for a "history from the bottom up" which here mistakenly treats unions as institutions of only an elite of the workers. It is worth noting that Hareven's analysis of militants in the

[1] A cursory review of readily available Knights of Labor material shows fourteen Local Assemblies in Manchester in 1885-6 with at least five of them consisting entirely of cotton workers. This is a significant breakthrough which is missed by Hanlan's failure to use labour materials. Data drawn from Jonathan Garlock, *Knights of Labor Data Bank* (Ann Arbor 1973), now published as *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the Knights of Labor* (Westport 1982).

1922 strike supports the argument that the eventual emergence of industrial unionism owed most to the skilled workers, and to relatively stable, skilled workers at that. To make sense of such evidence, which Hareven's volume fails to do, it is necessary to study the working class's mental universe. She has tried to do this to some extent from her oral interviews but not very systematically and she has not pursued other sources for this material. This particular lacuna is true of too much of the so-called "new" history. Distrustful of "literary" evidence, it has often eschewed materials too easily associated with "traditional" history. Interestingly, the renewed interest in *mentalité* may well help restore a balance that will be especially useful as we move into the twentieth century. If extraordinary efforts can be extended to "read" or to "decode" what appears to modern minds as mysterious behaviour in the medieval and early modern period, then surely it follows that we should spend equivalent intellectual energy on the writings and ideas that inspired, or failed to inspire, literate workers. In Manchester, for example, we know that IWW organizers tried to penetrate the mill before the war; later we are told that there were at least accusations of a significant communist presence in the strike of 1933. Less ambiguously we know that the United Textile Workers were present and that there was both support and opposition to the union within the mill workforce. What did UTW organizers say? For that matter, what did Sam Gompers say to the Amoskeag workers when urging them to fight on during the Great Strike of 1922? Workers' ideas and their interactions with their leaders must be studied in detail. Consciousness, after all, underlies behaviour.

Hareven's book contributes much that my criticisms tend to obscure. She begins to accomplish what many social historians have called for, but which few have attempted — namely the process of bringing home and work together in one analysis. That she does this with a considerable degree of success is no mean achievement and these remarks are not intended to detract from this. Indeed many of her findings will provide much fruitful material for family historians and her demonstration of the role of kin, widely extended in space as well as relationship, does much to question easy assumptions about the increasing significance of the nuclear family. Moreover, her brilliant reconstrucion of the strategic nature of migration raises many questions about the far too easy association of transiency with some vaguely defined notion of breakdown — present, for example, in the work of Michael Katz. In this particular area she is confirming earlier critiques by Sam Hays, Gordon Darroch, and Charles Stephenson,[2] but the evidence she brings to bear confirms their logical and theoretical queries. Mobility may not have been the graveyard of class consciousness that so much quantitative history from Thernstrom on has tried to make it. Home ownership in Manchester also cut simultaneously in two directions. The most militant workers came from the stable elements of the working class most likely to have gained property. Yet some strikers returned to work after the strike had dragged on for months rather than face the loss of their homes. As for limited mobility ladders, workers had so few rungs to climb in this textile community that they seem unlikely to have played a significant role, although Hareven does argue that

[2] Samuel P. Hays, "Review of Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians*," *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1976), 409-14; A. Gordon Darroch, "Migrants in the Nineteenth Century: Fugitives or Families in Motion?," *Journal of Family History*, 6 (1981), 257-77; Charles Stephenson, "A Gathering of Strangers? Mobility, Social Structure, and Political Participation in the Formation of Nineteenth-Century American Working-Class Culture," 31-60, in Milton Cantor, ed., *American Workingclass Culture* (Westport 1979).

long-term, multi-generational prospects of this kind were part of workers' dreams. This only seems natural. Who does not want something better for their children? Surely that aspiration is precisely what mobilizes workers to fight when the situation merits it.

One additional strength of Hareven's work is her combination of analytic and narrative devices. The economic history of the mill and its eventual failure provide the plot, while labour relations, and especially the strikes of 1922 and 1933-4, supply her with "paradigmatic episodes" upon which she hinges her syntheses of starkly analytic chapters. There can be little doubt that the latter strategy makes her work eminently more readable than most "new" social history, and thus, one assumes, more accessible. Analytically she also combines structure with a considerable dash of subjectivity, acquired through her oral history interviews which provide not only additional interest for the reader but also significant insight into the workers' lives.

Yet, Hareven and Hanlan both fail in one significant regard. While writing about class, they ultimately present a history without class conflict. Hareven's troublesome focus on "adaptation," and her refusal to pursue work-place conflict further into the workers' visions of their alternatives over time, seriously mars her study. In addition, if social history is not simply to be history with the politics left out, and I'm certain neither of these authors would countenance such a limitation, then it is high time that the public realm receive the scrutiny of social historians and of social history techniques. Hareven does note the anti-working-class behaviour of the Manchester police and the municipal government, and even details the use of the state militia to suppress the 1933 strike, but she fails to subject this important political presence to any careful scrutiny.

The question of power provides a convenient place to close this discussion. Recently this subject has been extensively debated by social historians on the left. One side in the debate, typified by the Genoveses' "The Political Crisis of Social History," has argued: "History, when it transcends chronicle, romance, and ideology — including 'leftwing' versions — is primarily the story of who rides whom and how."[3] A partial response, from one of the targets of this attack, is Herbert Gutman's assertion that "Historians of slaves and other dependent and exploited social classes too frequently focus their research on the most extreme forms of resistance — what is called 'revolutionary' behaviour." "Such behaviour," he continues, "occurs infrequently among all populations, and its absence often causes historians to find 'explanations' for nonevents."[4] Although these purport to be opposite positions, the possibility of embracing both is apparent. One can easily accept the Genoveses' argument, while adding, as they do in their own historical work, that "the story of who rides whom and how" does not reduce itself to simple propositions. Indeed Genovese's own work on slavery provides ample evidence of this. Equally, while endorsing Gutman's warning it remains necessary to place the resistance of subaltern classes within their broader societal framework.

Hareven sits on the fence in this particular historiographical debate. While demonstrating with considerable acuity the spaces that workers created for themselves and the ways they thus influenced their own environs, she still warns us against "neoromantic" exaggerations of "the strength of the immigrant and

[3] *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1976), 205-20, quotation at 219. This article has been republished in their *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York 1983), 179-212, quotation at 211-12.

[4] Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York 1976), 603-4, n. 58.

working-class family in American society." (4) Clearly aware of the Genovese school of criticism, her formulation fails to satisfy because the implicit functionalism of her work remains. "Adaptation" is the key word in this work and it is used as a construct to connect the family and industrialization. While commendably trying to relate family and work dialectically, she too often falls back on this conception. In the process, as Lise Vogel wrote in 1978, her "functionalism . . . translates the class struggle into a harmless game of variables."[5]

Pierre Vilar has commented that "to the author of the *Communist Manifesto*, history is no chess board, and the class struggle is no game. It is not even a 'strategy.' It is a battle."[6] Social historians should always remind themselves that their subjects, in these cases, Manchester workers from 1840 to 1933, were playing no game when they struggled with their employers.

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[5] Lise Vogel, "The Contested Domain: A Note on the Family in the Transition to Capitalism," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 (1978), 50-73, quotation at 58. For congruent critiques, see Christopher Lasch, "The Family and History," *New York Review of Books*, 22 (13 November 1975), 33-8; his "The Emotions of Family Life," *ibid.* (27 November 1975), 37-42; and his "What the Doctor Ordered," *ibid.* (11 December 1975), 50-4. Also helpful was Linda Kealey, "Women's Work in the United States: Recent Trends in Historical Research," *Atlantis*, 4 (1979), 133-42.

[6] Pierre Vilar, "Marxist History, a History in the Making," *New Left Review*, 80 (1973), 65-105, quotation at 101.