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Betsy Blackmar

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REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

Building the History of Working-Class America

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Bruce Levine, Stephen Brier, David Brundage, Edward Countryman, Dorothy Fennell, Marcus Rediker, and Joshua Brown, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture and Society, Vol. I: From Conquest and Colonization Through Reconstruction and the Great Uprising of 1877* (New York: Pantheon Books 1989).

Joshua Freeman, Nelson Lichtenstein, Stephen Brier, Susan Porter Benson, David Brundage, Bret Eynon, Bruce Levine, Bryan Palmer, and Joshua Brown, *Vol. II: From the Gilded Age to the Present* (New York: Pantheon 1992).

SOME SIXTY YEARS AGO, Charles Beard and Mary Beard speculated in *The Rise of American Civilization* that "when the full story of self-government in America is written, reviewing the commonplace no less than the spectacular, pages on the cellular growth of local craft unions will be placed besides the records of town meetings; while chapters on the formation of national labor structures will complement the sections on the origin and development of the federal Constitution." Someday historians would recognize and document the "prosaic effort of trade union agents and secretaries" that had helped bring "about an immense and compact organization of industrial workers capable of supporting their demands

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by something more potent than words."[1] The Beards' predictions rested on the recognition that their own story was not yet complete.

Who Built America?, drawing on three decades of work in labour and social history, places the "commonplace" at the centre of American history to provide a powerful account of the struggle for democracy. Scholars, the preface notes, have "unearth[ed] a long and sustained history of conflict among Americans of different classes, races, national origins, and genders over the meaning of American ideals of liberty and equality and the distribution of the nation's enormous material wealth." The two volumes of *Who Built America?* were written under the auspices of the American Social History Project, organized by Herbert Gutman and Stephen Brier in 1981 to develop a "new national synthesis" that would incorporate this work and "recast the older economic and political analysis." (I-xii) In foregrounding the lives and struggles of ordinary Americans, the authors have indeed produced a spectacular history.

The project succeeds in presenting the history of working people as a national history by vividly tracing the social relations of an ever-changing political economy. The first volume moves from the colonial activity of seizing territory and organizing land and labour within the international mercantilist system to the formation of the distinctive economies of slave labour in the South and free (and increasingly waged) labour in the North. The contests over the shape of the economy internal to these labour systems ultimately led to the battle between them, climaxing with the Civil War as the "Second American Revolution" that established and integrated the national political economy of industrial capitalism.

If Volume I plays out the transition to industrial capitalism, Volume II traces the more ambiguous transmutations of its corporate monopoly form. It charts the rise and fall of the "American century" by marking out three periods: the consolidation of corporate power and pitched battles over industrial production from the 1870s to 1917; the triumph of Fordism, rise of industrial unionism, and turn to government as a mediator of class conflict from World War I through World War I; and postwar conflicts over the welfare and warfare state, the economic shift from industry to finance and service, the gradual erosion of the "settlement" between industrial management and organized labour, and the politics of "rights" and reaction.

To ground history in political economy is to temper romantic claims of agency, to set, if you will, the forces of production alongside social relations. The issue of power is at the center of Volume I's rendering of the coerced labour of slavery but also of its account of the gradual incorporation of farms and crafts into a market economy. The authors explain the twin processes of capital formation and expropriation with satisfying concreteness by taking the reader through the transformation of the work process from crafts to manufacturing; from independent to

[1]Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York 1933), 214.

market-driven and mechanized farming; from plantations to sharecropping. The making of the American working classes is presented as both an objective and subjective process. What bound Americans together ideologically was an aspiration to independence and control over the fruit of their labour; what divided them were fears of competition and ongoing investments in the hierarchies of skill, race, sex, and ownership of property.

The power to control the material resources of land, money, credit, tools, and labour power necessary for subsistence or accumulation — the two often at odds — is also the subject of contest in Volume II, with first the railroads and then the automobile standing as the representative industries of capitalist production. By focusing on these industries — and such intersecting areas as steel and coal-mining — the authors capture the key shift from making producer to consumer goods as well as the critical centers of labour conflict before World War II. One only wishes Volume II had given greater attention to the work process in the non-industrial sectors — especially in the post-war era — to complete the rich survey of how Americans "built" their economy.

In the second volume the struggles to control resources that support power assume the increasingly important forms of organization and claims on the authority of the state. The rise of corporations and monopolies as a response to market competition is most fully explained in the last chapter of Volume I. Following and effective recapitulation of themes that juxtaposes the 1876 Centennial exposition's celebration of material progress to the Great Uprising of 1877, Volume II turns to a regional survey of the stratification of the labour market and hence of the working classes. This focus is crucial to the authors' identification of the collapse of a unifying producerist ideology as a key weakness in labour organizing at the end of the 19th century (visible, for example, in the turn from the heady openness of the Knights of Labor to renewed tactics of exclusion — craft unionism, immigration restriction, and Jim Crow). The vulnerabilities and internal contradictions of capital itself are alluded to in a discussion of the ravages of the business cycle, but less attention is given throughout to the factions among capitalists and their consequence for different groups of workers, to the relation of local or regional entrepreneurs to national corporations, for example, the influence of finance on corporate strategies, the ways in which the profit motives of real estate and distribution structured social relations beyond the factory gates. The quick successful rendering of the sometimes divided face of capitalist power and employers' different strategies in the chapter on the 1920s suggests such themes might have become a fuller part of the analysis in the preceding sections.

Still, the greatest strength of Volume II's synthesis is the account of labour organizing within the heavy and then mass production industries, and this is an epic that goes to the core of understanding class conflict as a force in American history. As the authors make quite clear, the power capital achieved through concentration was not recognized as legitimate in the late 19th century. And lacking legitimacy or consent, industrialists stripped the veneer off the rights of private property and

contract and resorted to violence to secure their ends. *Who Built America?* re-periodizes American history with a chronology not of elections or of key legislation but of battles to control the resources of production: 1877, Wounded Knee, Haymarket, Homestead, Pullman, Ludlow, 1919, the Memorial Day Massacre — these are moments that few American students walk into the classroom understanding as part of their national heritage. In ways that the Beards anticipated, *Who Built America?* reconstructs solidly the history of the labour movement and trade unionism that underlay most of these confrontations; the volumes give coherence, depth, and urgency to the institutional history of unions and further explore the relation of organized workers to their own communities (paying attention, for example, to the importance of "strike support") and especially to working people who remained unorganized, whether unskilled immigrant and women workers in factories or sharecroppers and migrant workers in the fields.

In synthesizing labour history into working-class history, *Who Built America?* interweaves the conclusions of countless monographs. If the overarching analysis is not surprising, it is nonetheless convincing, with the authors reshaping subtly the claims of a "radical tradition" of artisanal republicanism into a more persuasive account of uneven class formations, shifting ideologies, and confused as well as creative tactics within the labour movement. The authors work squarely in the tradition of Herbert Gutman's own thinking when they highlight the struggle of immigrant industrial workers and the gulf between skilled and unskilled workers, but they also examine the interdependency of organizing on different fronts. Only with respect to the handling of late 19th-century politics does one sense a kind of unexamined romanticism that moves too quickly over the divided economic interests of farmers and workers or of old and new immigrants, and only in the post-World War II era does the story of the labour movement lose some of its power to illuminate the condition of working people within and outside its circle.

Beyond the depth of work in labour history on which *Who Built America?* itself is able to build, the synthesis succeeds through the skill of presentation. The books' illustrations effectively reinforce our sense of the stakes in class conflict by showing us not simply the moments of clash — a visual record that alone speaks volumes about the shaping forces of American history — but also the stream of editorial comment, organizing appeals, and ideological repressions that permeated popular culture as well as business and government propaganda. Joshua Brown, the visual editor, has created a richly layered pictorial narrative by including woodcuts, photographs, paintings, cartoons, comic strips, posters, newspaper headlines, magazine covers, advertisements, and movie stills; sometimes the illustrations introduce a lively irony, and their captions help a reader think about how social history impinges on the style, content, and distribution of popular cultural forms. Among the gems that leaven the grim record of social conflict in Volume II are a comic-strip of the luckless tramp "Happy Hooligan" accused of being an anarchist, a Columbia Records advertisement co-opting the 1960s counterculture,

a photograph of Al Capone at a baseball game with the comment that he was "known to wield a bat himself on occasion." (II-314)

The power of the narrative of class conflict stems from other simple but effective stylistic decisions, none more so than recording the numbers of people who died or were injured in each encounter. With a certain archness that perhaps seemed necessary to impress their point on readers who were startled to find the story of labour was part of the rise of civilization, the Beards wrote of the eight-hour movement leading to Haymarket: "In the course of this movement a dispute occurred at the McCormick harvester works, ending in lockout of the men, a local disturbance, a collision with the police, and the deaths of the several laborers. If society at large was inclined to take little note of this eventuality, friends of the obscure dead, quite naturally, refused to let it pass unheeded."[2] The authors of *Who Built America?* are determined not to let the "obscure dead" pass unheeded. They address an audience that not only has been taught to discount labour as a "special interest" but that has little imagination for death as the price of taking risks in organizing.

The authors give somewhat less descriptive weight to the everyday violence of paid and unpaid working conditions in industrial America, although here again strategically sized and placed illustrations amplify the point: what was exceptional about the US in the late 19th century was not simply universal white male suffrage or the ethnic diversity of its working people, but the highest rate of industrial accidents in the world, the highest mortality rate in western cities, and lynching as a public ritual. Most Americans probably don't like to think of these conditions as the price that was paid for achieving "the highest standard of living in the world"; nor do they have a vocabulary to articulate the violence to the spirit that continues on the assembly lines and in bureaucratic offices.

The text helps provide that vocabulary, further depeens a reader's understanding of the stakes in these contests, and highlights other venues through its use of documents, which, in Volume II especially, cover a wide range of working-class Americans' experiences and judgments. It is through the documents that the reader most directly confronts the particular violence visited on black Americans, from the controlling terms of a sharecropping contract ("no vine crops ... that is no watermelons [or[squashes ... are to be planted in the cotton or corn") to a gripping first-hand account of the 1917 race riot in East St. Louis; the documents also stand the text in good stead by elaborating on working conditions in garment factories, migrant harvesting, laundries, the telephone industry, McDonald's, the Silicon Valley, and in other people's kitchens and parlors. The documents further convey the widespread anger (that of a small petroleum producer driven out of business by John D. Rockefeller, for example), fear (the experience of rust-belt unemployment in the 1970s), and sweet triumph (the sensation of actually shutting down production in a 1936 sit-down strike in an Akron, Ohio tire plant) that have characterized

[2] *Ibid.*, 232.

Americans' effort to come to terms with the capitalist order. Occasionally the documents challenge the text's own handling of particular issues: the anti-feminist statement of a founder of "Mothers on the March" in the late 1970s ("God, liberate us from the Liberators!") is far more revealing of her perceptions and loyalties than the text's dry assertion that such women feared that "equality would undermine the implicit bargain upon which traditional marriage and family life were based." (II-629) Similarly, Jo Ann Robinson's account of the organizing work of the Women's Political Council to launch the Montgomery bus boycott prompts the reader to amend the text's observation on the same page that "black ministers and later college students were the organizing cadre" of the Civil Rights movement. (II-541)

The authors also use collective and individual biography to bring working people's choices and commitments alive. Volume I's sketch of German and Irish immigrants gives a presence to those groups that we miss in discussions of later immigrant groups. And one of the most effective narrative passages of Volume II is a series of thirteen biographical vignettes that illuminate the social constraints and personal decisions that led to "accommodation or resistance" in the Gilded Age. Through these biographies the authors are able to demonstrate concretely how the abstract categories of class, race, sex, or nationality affected people's daily lives and to explore as well when those categories alone are not sufficient to explain how individuals responded to injustice. Although key labour leaders — John L. Lewis and A. Phillips Randolf — assume a comparable presence later in the book, as the use of biography fades so too does our sense of the disparate individuals who have made up the collectivity of "working people."

Some of the text's best writing comes when the authors draw on a deep historiographic base to offer their own fresh and richly detailed depictions of a way of life as well as moments of confrontation — chapters on slave society and free labour in the antebellum North, for example. Similarily, the clearly focused and vivid account of labour battles during the "Great Upheavals" of the 1880s and 1890s reveals the authors' own command of the interpretative issues and research in the field. The prose is weaker in chapters where the authors piece together work in disparate fields (the history of women, religion, or cities) without sorting out their own thematic priorities, where trends or patterns are asserted but not demonstrated or explained, where an "expanding city" rather than owners of real estate, for example, become the agent of a housing crisis (II-13) or when poverty is caused by "structural changes" but not concrete class relations (II-553). But overall the text is written in a compelling style, and at moments — as in Volume I's chapters on the Civil War and Reconstruction — the prose takes off with a fluent eloquence that suggests that the authors are confident that their readers are with them in sympathy and analysis. At other moments the authors effectively sink into particular episodes to punctuate their argument. The engrossing account of the sit-in strike at the General Motors plants in Flint Michigan works as a powerful culmination to the sixty-year struggle of industrial workers to organize.

In the face of capital's enormous power, systematic organizing and often violent social contests brought about political transformations. The authors of both volumes of *Who Built America?* have dramatically repositioned the conventional institutions of politics in their account of the 19th century. In many periods it would appear that the Constitution, two-party system, and electoral politics didn't much matter in shaping the policies of government; and, indeed, government itself didn't much matter to most ordinary Americans. Politics come to the forefront at two critical junctures — the Civil War and Reconstruction, and the making of New Deal labour policy. But elsewhere in the book, endless debates over tariffs, currency, taxes, public improvements, protective legislation, a federal anti-lynching law, or federal vs. state jurisdiction go on largely offstage without fundamentally altering the field of political economy. Such issues are often acknowledged in passing — tariff policy helped contribute working-class votes to Republican party rule, for example — but they are seldom presented as central to working people's own political commitments. Yet, political alignments and divisions over these issues determined how far state and federal governments could go in their subsidization of capital or defense of labour; the hold of party politics — as much as cultural diversity — weakened the possibilities for an overt politics of class; and the inherited terms of political debate determined how Americans approached a fundamental redefinition of the relation of government and economy in the 20th century. To elaborate on the party system's ambiguous response to issues raised at the grassroots level and to delve into who supported what kind of measures would not require hackneyed narratives of elections or presidents; rather it would entail greater precision in spelling out what difference political alignments and the definitions of "electoral issues" made for the scope of political democracy and for the strategies of "reform."

Although this is not the authors' intention, the effect of placing conventional politics in the background is to undercut the readers' appreciation of the process that carried political struggles from local and state arenas to the national government. The authors explain workers' alienation from governments controlled by business interests in the late 19th century by focusing on the capitalists' use of state power — the police, the militia, the army, and the courts — against the labour movement. But they don't fully situate the other side of this alienation — the extraordinary (by today's standards at least) participation in electoral politics that formed one basis of cross-class coalitions which, in turn, exerted pressure on lawmakers and sustained experiments with state regulation and reform. The authors seem fundamentally ambivalent, moreover, about the place of "reformers" in a history of working people, and this ambivalence gets in the way of taking a fresh look at the institution-building and legislative experiments that emerged out of the "populist" ferment and were crucial to the trajectory of the decades that followed. Doubtless working-class Americans were themselves ambivalent about their relation to reform-minded lawyers, intellectuals, philanthropists, politicians, social workers, and socialists, to say nothing of corporate managers in the National Civic

Federation. But historians like Meredith Tax and Linda Gordan have suggested more complicated ways to examine working people's relation to these sometime "allies" and to assess the formation and consequences of specific alliances at particular moments.

The ever-rising and impossible-to-pin-down "middle classes" aren't really given a face in *Who Built America?* They appear (somewhat interchangeably with the "upper class" and the "elite") as permanently frozen uptight Protestant Victorians in cultural battles that stretch from the 1820s through the 1920s, or they weigh in as an amorphous "public" which at some moments joined the campaigns against national corporations and monopoly, for example, while at other times grew tired of strikes or endorsed government repression of labour radicalism. But because they have no face nor politics nor vested interests, we don't really know how it is that "middle-class" Americans inserted their own ideology of managerial hierarchy into negotiations between capital and labour or their own entitlements into the definition of the welfare state. American historians need new and more complicated ways to think about working people's changing relations to the middle class, both as a social group and as an ideological construct, in order to understand the legitimation of capitalist power in the 20th century.

In their uncertain handling of progressivism and the formation of a corporate liberal ideology that appealed to some workers as well as to professionals and managers, the authors lose a chance to set up the full ambiguities of what emerges, alongside the triumph of industrial organizing, as the second volume's theme: working people's assertion of new claims on the federal government and the building of the regulatory, welfare state. Fortunately, the chapters on World War I and the twenties reach back to give Progressive-era initiatives more coherence and to suggest the turn in emphasis that came with the elaboration of business-government collaboration. These chapters are also among the most successful in establishing the relation between productive forces and relations ("Fordism"), foreign as well as domestic economic policy, residual and emergent cultural forms, different employers' strategies, and developments (farm depression and migration, the rise of the Klan, immigration restriction) that renewed and reconfigured social divisions in an era of labour quiescence. Perhaps it is the very defeat of the labour movement — another moment that is powerfully rendered in the narrative of 1919 — that, as a practical matter, opens up the space to draw a more integrated picture of political economy, social relations, and culture in the 1920s.

In presenting the 1930s as a key moment in which "labor democratizes America," the authors steer a historiographical path between a defense and a critique of the New Deal and the liberal welfare state. They emphasize the importance of the federal government's recognition of and support for union organizing that paved the way for the CIO and, after the war, established the terms of a "settlement" between managers and workers that limited the reach of industrial unionism as a broad-based social movement. They also explain the impact of government policy on farming, thereby setting up the dramatic postwar transfor-

mation of the South. But the authors shortchange the politics that shaped the other policies of the welfare state — for example, Southerners' and small employers' hold on who would be included in the Social Security and Fair Employment Standards Act; the gendered difference between the "neutral" bureaucratic administration of unemployment insurance and the personalized and humiliating administration of Aid to Dependent Children; or the producer-consumer alliance that established homeownership as worthy of government subsidy and as crucial to sustained economic growth and social stability. The language of the chapters on the New Deal — "government now acknowledged its obligation to provide a minimum standard of economic security for those least able to help themselves" — is at moments itself curiously depoliticized. (II-375) In effect the New Deal responded to a depression that crossed social boundaries not simply by promoting a new sense of democratic entitlements but by providing new sets of categories of worthy and unworthy working people. Without giving us the political background of this process, the authors lose the opportunity to prepare the reader for the emergence of "the poor" as a category that was ideologically separated from "working people," who themselves were ideologically absorbed into the ubiquitous "middle class" of the post-war era.

Although analytically shrewd in many places, the chapters on post-World War II America don't carry quite the same narrative force of the earlier chapters, in part because they seem to lose confidence in the value of systematic class analysis for explaining social change. The last section bears the burden, moreover, of explaining how the democratizing victories of industrial class conflict gave way, leaving American workers politically as well as economically vulnerable at the end of the 20th century. The authors return to the analysis of political economy and social stratification to set the stage. They explain the internal contradictions of the military-industrial complex, how it stimulated economic growth in the forties and fifties and then sapped that growth from the Vietnam War through the Age of Reagan. The authors also explicate the contrasting condition of labour in the unionized primary sector of big industry and the largely non-unionized secondary sectors of service. They point to the new unionism of hospital, clerical, and government workers, although, as noted, one would like to have seen the successes and failures of these organizing struggles given the same attention as the steel and automobile workers of earlier generations. Instead, the last section places its emphasis on the "rights consciousness" of social movements. These movements, however, are less comfortably situated within political economy. Indeed, arguing that social movements of the 1950s and 1960s "provided the pivot upon which post war history would turn," the authors go on to suggest that these movements centered on "personal liberation" as opposed to "economic issues" and offered a critique of such concerns as "hypocrisy" rather than of power. (II-480, 544) Elsewhere in the text the authors have recognized that issues of dignity, respect, and autonomy were political not simply because they were personal but because they challenged the premises and power of exploitation. But the materialist ground for the civil rights

and feminist movements has not been laid with quite the same care and analytic clarity as was the struggle to organize industrial workers, and consequently the narrative of these struggles tend to get stranded in isolated categories ("African Americans," "women") that, even as "fault lines," lose their coherent tie to the collective subject of working people.

The repression of the Cold War eroded a widespread critique of capital and displaced the language of class conflict with the liberal promise of economic growth and abundance. But the text itself verges on taking this turn when it implies that class conflict did not underlay the post-war era's struggle for rights. Fortunately the chapters on the fifties and sixties themselves provide plenty of information for a reader who wants to reconsider this conceptualization and to sustain a materialist analysis of the fights against economic privilege and discrimination, exploitation in agribusiness, or the paucity and disciplinary administration of welfare benefits. We can piece together the impact of New Deal farm policy, the failure of the CIO's "Operation Dixie," and the decision of Birmingham's business leaders and politicians that preserving segregation "was not worth the price," for example, to fill in the fundamental changes that both prompted black Americans to organize themselves into a "rights movement" and contributed to their success in the South. And the authors have given us the background to fill in how the structure of employment and government policies set the contours of failure in the North. But throughout one wishes there had been a fuller discussion of corporate capital's own stakes and participation in the turns of liberal, left, and right-wing politics.

The disappearance of capitalists as active parties to the changes and conflicts of the post-war era is also a problem in the analysis of women as members of the working class and of feminism as a social movement. The lucid explanation of the sectoral divisions within the labour movement is undercut by a descriptive tendency to identify unionized men with a sociological status (oddly "united" and "homogenous" with "middle-class Americans," II-508) rather than with a class that includes their non-unionized working wives and daughters; and these latter workers, exploited at the workplace but governed by "roles" at home, are not allowed to be primary agents of "working people's" history. The discussion of feminism presents the slogan of "the personal is political" and the organizing strategy of consciousness-raising in ways that struck me as trivializing. The authors don't examine the substance of feminist critiques of men's power — for example, the far-reaching materialist analysis of men's use of violence to control women and their labour; nor does the text explore the depth and reach of grassroots institution-building that carried this analysis into new social practices. The rendering of feminism as a generational story of the late sixties and early seventies, moreover, obscures its relation to the dramatic increase in the numbers of working women in the fifties and sixties as well as the complexity of class tensions stirred up by feminists' claims to speak for "women" as a collective subject. Recently socialist-feminist scholars have re-examined and revised their analyses of the relation of late

capitalism to the transformation of gender relations.[3] They have begun to explore how black and white working-class women and men alike struggled to preserve "autonomy" in the face of economic pressures that destroyed family systems that had sustained working people for generations. Because the family has not been treated seriously as a changing arena of material social relations — as a constitutive element of political economy — the text does not effectively narrate the ambiguous implications of these developments for American working people or their varied responses to feminism.

It is clear that there is much historical work to be done in analyzing the relations of social movements to structural changes of the post war era, and it seems possible that in the process the struggles of "working people" will move more to the forefront of the narratives of the 1960s. Understanding the politics of the last two decades will require not simply attention to the "backlash" against the social movements that the media helped define as the sources of change and turmoil but a fuller look at the turmoil unleashed by capital's own revision of the "settlement" with the working classes, its aggression and obstinence within the rapidly expanding service sector, at the sources and fuller effects of grassroots activism that did not capture the media's eye, at the material conditions of alienation as well as activism. It will require examining how liberalism, including "liberation" ideologies, served capitalist interests as well as how business contributed to the shaping of cross-class right-wing coalitions; and it will require testing further the last chapter's hypothesis that the multinational turn of American capitalists came in part in response to the pressures of the "rights" movements, particularly the new burdens of environmental regulation and occupational health and safety. To its credit, the text's last chapter boldly sketches out interpretations of the global turn of American corporations and the debacle of domestic politics that suggest many areas for future research.

The enormous difficulty of constructing a coherent analyses of the class politics of the last twenty years has prompted scholars as well as activists to see "culture" and identity" as primary fields of struggle. Having done a magnificent job of synthesizing labour history and using it as a framework to examine both working-class and national history, and a good if not quite complete job of explaining the contours of American political history in light of class conflict, *Who Built America?* also takes up the challenge of integrating culture into its analysis of American history.

Who Built America? comes out of the scholarship of the New Left and these roots have shaped both its respect for culture as a condition of consciousness (and hence agency) and its response to the recent scholarship of "radical" cultural theory and multiculturalism. The very project of writing a synthesis is premised on confidence in narrative cohesion, in the possibility of creating and speaking for

[3]See, for example, essays in Karen V. Hansen and Ilene J. Philipson, *Women, Class and the Feminist Imagination: A Socialist Feminist Reader* (Philadelphia 1990).

definitive human subjects, explaining sequences of cause and effect, prioritizing moments and areas of conflict. To define the subject as "working people," however internally divided this collective subject is shown to be, is not only to affirm a common history but also to confront the difficulties and messiness of democracy. The authors go a far stretch not simply toward inclusiveness but toward explaining relations among different groups of working Americans. They demonstrate how the distribution of land and the stratification of the labour market placed native-Americans, Chicano, Chinese, East European, Puerto Rican, and black Americans in different kinds of jobs and neighbourhoods and how their interests at critical moments have been objectively as well as subjectively divided. Although the authors occasionally invoke "racism," "nativism," "sexism" as abstractions, they more often suggest that the meanings of these terms are historically contingent, that they assume institutional forms — exclusion, Jim Crow, private housing — but also were experienced and negotiated through particular relations in particular times and places. The discussion of working women, moreover, is far better integrated within the overarching narrative in Volume II, which by and large overcomes Volume I's sometimes irritating adherence to a vocabulary of women's sphere (although, as noted, it sometimes substitutes the equally useless crutch of "roles" when talking about the household relations of people who in few other settings are thought to follow fixed scripts).

In the *Rise of American Civilization*, the Beards introduced separate chapters on culture as an effect of social, political and economic change, and in those chapters they took the measure of literature, art, education, architecture, religion, and social theories with a yardstick of what they considered progress. This approach yielded plenty of irony alongside appreciation, especially in their concluding Veblenesque attack on the "machine age" as the epitome of capitalist culture. Perhaps the confidence of the Beards' cultural criticism stemmed from the fact that they were largely addressing the values and products of their own class, but they also understood these fields of culture as shaping a civilization, which, though constituted through class relations, affected Americans irrespective of class. *Who Built America?* takes a more anthropological approach to culture and views it less as a marker of civilization than as itself an arena of contest and even a causal force in the process of the change. At some moments the authors succeed beautifully in elucidating the cultural dimensions of contest. Thus, the American Revolution represented not simply the fight over home rule and who would rule at home but also over the conventions of hierarchy and deference that organized everyday life. Similarly, the authors make it clear that working-class cultural institution — the saloon in the late 19th century, and more vaguely, ethnic newspapers, neighborhoods, churches — could serve as important resources in the forging of collective loyalties and actions. In other places, however, the invocation of "culture" — ideology? institutions? behaviors? identity? — is less satisfying in explaining working-class Americans' motives, loyalties, or actions and especially in explaining their relations to one another and to ruling classes.

Working-class culture — and especially the leisure activities of youths — tends to emerge as a lively sphere of collective self-expression, but it is not always clear what significance or weight we should assign to commercial cultural forms in contrast to say, family obligations, religious commitments, or voluntary associations. More concrete detail about the social composition, theology, or rituals of black churches, for example, or the content of ethnic newspapers, or the organization of working-class neighbourhoods, would help readers understand how they worked as "resources" for resistance. And if culture is a realm of contest it is sometimes less clearly one of the productive "forces" and "relations" that have their own history alongside those of the economy. There are notable exceptions: the captions to the illustrations provide a running commentary on the process of cultural production and reception, and at moments the text explores the ways in which the dominant culture absorbed or modified cultural forms from subordinate communities in a dynamic (but largely non-reciprocal) process. But the authors' appreciation for culture as a domain of contest sometimes seems to come at the expense of the critical insights that the Beards brought to their assessment of the impact of capitalist social relations on American culture as a whole.

This being said, this synthesis also refutes the charge that the cultural turn in social history evades the questions of power as defined through politics with a capital P. Rather, the text suggests that if historians are to imagine the collective subjects of a national history, they must grapple with the ways in which Americans struggled to build democratic institutions in the face of capitalist power in all areas of their lives. And, at the same time, they must come to terms with how working-class Americans have not simply accommodated but themselves actively contributed to the making of a capitalist culture. As the authors recognize, there are troubling questions that arise from this story, questions about complicity, resentment, and alienation as modes of working-class culture and politics — questions about ordinary Americans' own accountability for the failures of democratic promises. In many places — especially in their analysis of the labour movement — the authors confront these questions head-on. Still, one misses a fuller discussion of American empire not because the reader needs more details on foreign policy but because, whatever their opposition to particular policies, working people's deep investment in the privileges and benefits of capitalist empire over the course of a century has shaped their culture — and American civilization — as fundamentally as the media which carried the message. As that empire severs its national moorings and as working-class Americans struggle to defend their democratic gains, the text leaves us with the urgent question of how culture — not as ascribed "identity," but as lived social relations and collective consciousness — will sustain or suppress resistance in the future.

The success and value of *Who Built America?* lies not simply in its fulfilment of the mission of constructing a vital new synthesis, but in the ways that this synthesis helps clarify work that still must be done. The text suggests to labour historians ways to move beyond the shop floor and union halls to construct a

broader history of class relations, and it suggests to historians in other specialized fields the inadequacy of conceptualizing social relations or cultural identities without reference to issues of class power. *Who Built America?* presents an invitation to historians in all fields to take up the challenge of relating their work to the collective subject of a national history, of placing different groups of Americans in creative as well as antagonistic relation to one another, of imagining the commonplace as a source of spectacular change. Neither a Whig nor a victim's history, these volumes offer a compelling and lucid account of how working people have made history not under the conditions of their own choosing, and its implicit moral is that if Americans want to live in a democratic society they will have to continue this struggle. One finishes reading the two texts with profound admiration and respect both for the working people who built America and for the historians who have constructed their moving story.