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Worked Over: The Corporate Sabotage of an American Community

by Dimitra Doukas, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003, 194 pages, ISBN 0-80148861-3.

The rightward turn of politics in the United States, and the seeming inability of working class and rural people to understand their “true” economic interests, inspired Dimitra Doukas, an anthropologist, to examine the confrontation of capital and community in four small towns in upstate New York. This region, the Mohawk Valley, was for most of the 19th century America’s industrial heartland. In the late 19th century, the transformation of the region’s main employer, the Remington Company, from a familial to a corporate model of management, marked the beginning of a class conflict that has lasted for more than a century. The author brings the methods of ethnography – up-close observation, first person accounts, and the quotidian details of a community’s life – to bear on understanding what some would call “class consciousness.” The members of the community she studied call this “old values.” The result is an important although incomplete portrait of a community that has been “worked over” by the forces of capital.

The political disengagement of “the masses,” and their propensity to vote conservatively and to watch reactionary TV news channels has been frequently remarked and despaired. This alienation, the author makes clear, has a strong cultural dimension: an affirmation of the “old values” of respect for hard work well done, commitment to the integrity of community, and strong sanctions against conspicuous consumption, and a distrust of “people who think they’re better than us” (page 5), including, one presumes, liberal commentators. How these oppositions have emerged in the life of a community is the author’s story.

Her approach combines ethnography, local history, and oral history, to construct a narrative of the rise of local

(family-owned) industry (E. Remington and Sons) making high-quality rifles, later taken over by capital and absorbed into a large business empire closely allied with other business interests such as the Duponts and Dodges. The most riveting part of the story is of the takeover of the Remington Works (openly and honestly, where possible, surreptitiously and dishonestly when necessary) by outside capital interests, abetted by local “men of push.” The author traces the decline of a prosperous, self-sufficient community into one that is no longer at the mercy of the corporate empire that has abandoned them; a community that instead suffers a variety of government programs and regulations that leave them no more self-sufficient than did their corporate masters. This story is told with great attention to detail, either from first-hand observation (in the accounts of confrontations of citizens with government agencies) or through historical reconstruction (in the takeover and demise of Remington).

One important set of observations is the contraposition of “producerism” with what Andrew Carnegie called “the gospel of wealth.” This latter term gave a quasi-religious sanction to Social Darwinism, exalting the benefactions of the powerful and justifying the immiseration of the weak. Contrasted to this is “producerism,” a Ricardian concept that acquired its own religious overtones (“the gospel of production”) from John Calvin by way of Max Weber. This ideology was able to make a “successful claim to the national ideology” in the first half of the 19th century, before it was eclipsed by the ascendance of capital. In a producerist view, “Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the

higher consideration" (page 65, quoting Abraham Lincoln). A related contrast, which the author does not develop, is between producerism and the dominant ideology of America's public spaces today, consumerism.

Consumerism, no less than corporate capitalism, stands in opposition to the "old values" that the residents of the Mohawk Valley embrace: in place of hard work and self-sufficiency, it seeks cheap goods, even if the price paid is to send the work offshore. In place of modesty, it substitutes conspicuous consumption of shoddy goods. Although the author took little note of this trend, in the years since she finished her fieldwork, the cyborg of consumerism, Wal-Mart, has opened six big boxes in the Mohawk Valley.

The Valley is no longer in the forefront of confrontations between capital and production; it exemplifies, in Habermas's words, "a past phase of exploitation." What it better exemplifies is a newer form of post-industrial expropriation, as yet un-named, in which the apparatus of government is used to maintain the dependence of peoples who have been worked over by corporate industry. The author describes two telling confrontations, over public utilities and zoning codes. In the first case, the New York Power Authority took over small, local electric utilities, abrogated their service agreements with their ratepayers, and imposed a regime much less sensitive to local conditions. The incongruity is that this was not a case of capital working over a community, so much as a public authority (NYPA) of the sort perfected by Nelson Rockefeller, doing the same in the ultimate interest of its bondholders (whose returns were backed by the state) and a well-connected salaried staff. This

confrontation lacks the raw edges of lockouts and pitched battles between strikers and strikebreakers; but it is expropriation nonetheless, wearing a velvet glove of "public interest."

The second is a confrontation over local zoning codes, again promoted by the leading citizens of the town at the expense of the working class. By forbidding householders from keeping chickens and other farm animals in their back yards, the self-sufficiency of one class was undermined in the interest of improving the property values of another. Again, although not the stuff of grand historical drama, this is one more blow in a community that has suffered numerous such blows.

These two confrontations illustrate both the advantages and the limitations of ethnographic miniaturism for understanding broad historical patterns. The author paints a human face on confrontations that are usually subsumed under broad generalities such as "flexible accumulation" or "class conflict," helping us better understand "old values." On the one hand, the tight focus of ethnography can reveal nuances of process and emergent forms that broad generalities usually gloss over. On the other, ethnography can fail to supply a language for such emergent forms as the use of public authorities to maintain class privilege. These emergent, historical forms have a scale much larger than that of the typical ethnography. By joining her ethnographic research to a substantial body of historical research, Dimitra Doukas makes an important first start at understanding how even the remnants of past phases of exploitation might continue to be, profitably, worked over.

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