

Death and Rebirth of the American Mill Town

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CRITIQUES

Death and Rebirth of the American Mill Town

Alan Dawley

THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY mill town is dead or dying. The abandoned shoe and textile mills of New England and the decaying steel mills of Pennsylvania are fossil remains of the Age of Carboniferous Capitalism. Yet everywhere dead mill towns are being reborn in late twentieth-century minds. There is a transubstantiation of puddling furnaces, coal breakers, and boarding houses, long since abandoned to the wrecking crew or the hired arsonist, now reappearing in a spate of books, pictures, exhibits, oral histories, and museum restorations. Many of these are excellent reconstructions of the past. A few are to the grimy reality of the mill town what Williamsburg is to slavery or the National Geographic is to Third World poverty.

One dimension that should not be lost in this rebirth is power, that is, the power equation between mill owners and mill hands. I do not think there is any doubt which side had the better of the other, but that does not mean there is no reason to discuss the question of who ruled the nineteenth-century industrial community and how. The question had hidden dilemmas. First of all, the forms of authority inherited from the eighteenth century were breaking down. There was a long transition in which early manufacturers adapted old forms — paternalism, parentalism, bonded and dependent labour — but manufacturers themselves abandoned these practices as impediments to the free exploitation of wage labour. In the name of equal rights and self-improvement, they led the attack against imperialism, with its reciprocal obligations of deference from below in return for provision from above. They championed free labour against slavery in the South and against bond servitude in the North. But if the old forms of authority in the workplace were to give way, what would take their place?

Secondly, the old bases of authority in the community were eroding as well. The gentlemen of property and standing who once governed on the basis of deference, patronage, and the presumptive privilege of office holding were able to count on these methods no longer, as their towns grew with countless strangers, their churches filled with contention between evangelicals and freethinkers, their election campaigns became crusading rivalries

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among Whigs, Jacksonians, Anti-Masons, and Workingmen, and their neighbourhoods and favourite haunts became increasingly segregated along class lines, so that the voluntary associations like the Odd Fellows, fire companies, and mechanics' associations that bridged the classes had more and more social distance to bridge. More unsettling was the appropriation of republican traditions of popular self-government by the fledgling labour movement. Given this perpetually disordered environment, and the emergence of labour opposition to the capitalists of the era, again there was the question of how the industrialists were going to run the new mill towns.

In short, here was a society increasingly subject to the regimen of industrial capitalism, yet increasingly democratic at the same time, and for the same reasons. But if capitalism and democracy expanded together, they did so in mutual contradiction. Never before had a people so free, so independent, so sovereign been so freely fleeced of their independence and their wealth. In America's mill towns, the people reigned but property ruled. To understand why this was so, it will be useful to examine recent case studies of industrial communities against a backdrop of the major social theories that have provided the empirical studies with their underlying assumptions and questions. It will be convenient to divide the discussion into two parts: *legitimation* — the way rightful authority was conferred on the powerful; and *domination* — the institutions through which the powerful commanded others to obey.

I

HISTORIANS ASKING THE QUESTION "who governs?" are working in a milieu of social theory established in the original intellectual reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Certainly, the leading figure was Marx, and it is around his challenge to political economy that rival schemes were worked out, or against which other theories must be tested. Marx and Engels synthesized historical materialism by taking the Hegelian idea of history as a dialectical process, subtracting Hegel's idealism and then combining the result with the Enlightenment philosophy of materialism. To this they added the socialist commitment not merely to interpret the world but to change it. For Marx, the object of knowledge is not metaphysics, but practical human activity directed at securing existence, out of which, to be sure, metaphysical conceptions arise. As the struggle for survival moves through progressively higher stages, classes emerge based on the exploitation of producers by non-producers, with the historical character of class relations being determined by the mode of production of a given epoch, whether slave, feudal, or capitalist. In the last and highest stage, the productive powers of collective humanity have been developed to such a degree that for the first time since this long upward march began it is not only possible but necessary to eliminate class exploitation for progress to proceed.

Marx was not the first to invest the analysis of power with economic content — he credits the political economists with the "discovery" of class strug-

gle¹ — nor was he an “economic determinist,” but his grounding of power in the mode of production transferred attention from the high politics of statecraft to class relations, and it remains the point of departure for study of the impact of the rise of capitalism on modern civilization.

One reason Marxian social theory surpassed the Political Economy on which it so heavily depended is that it never lost sight of the whole social process. Classical economics increasingly narrowed its vision until it took in nothing but the marketplace. There in the lonely domain of Economic Man, the acquisitive individual was King. People circulated through labour markets and mobility ladders the same way goods circulated through commodity markets. Classical economics was materialist to the core, and mechanical in its view of the laws of commodity exchange. Many of the great intellectual monuments of the nineteenth century were products of mechanical materialism — the pioneering collections of social and industrial statistics, the great advances in machine technology, and the remarkable accomplishment of the decennial census. Invaluable as these records are for historical research, they incorporate the assumptions of the marketplace. Current studies which dote on them for information on economic growth and welfare, technology, or mobility remain locked into the same marketplace assumptions that generated the sources in the first place.² One can traverse 1,000s of pages of arid text on how many people moved in and out of community X without ever stumbling across the notion that some people made out at others' expense, or that in rising up mobility ladders and ethnic escalators, it was necessary to climb over someone else's back.

Durkheim offered a path out of marketplace assumptions, but one that only leads to equally great difficulties of its own. Durkheim took Herbert Spencer's sovereign individual, stripped him of his titles, and subjected him to an all-encompassing social order in which the social organism itself was lord. Durkheim was in dead earnest in insisting society was an organism. In a revealing aphorism he elevated it to Supreme Being: “Society is God.” This divine organism depended for survival on the harmonious functioning of its internal organs, and, owing to the progressive division of labour, the mutual interdependence of its various parts was getting increasingly complex. Mindful of the breakdown of traditional customs and religious values, the problem, as Durkheim saw it, was to find a new morality suitable to this complex division of labour. The answer was just around the corner of circular reasoning: “Since the division of labor becomes the chief source of social solidarity, it becomes, at

¹ Marx to Weydemeyer, 5 March 1852 in *Letters to Americans* (New York 1953), 43-46.

² Douglas C. North, *Growth and Welfare in the American Past* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1966). Perhaps the best passages in Anthony Wallace's *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York 1978) are those on machinery. For all their sensitivity to the human beings amidst their statistics, Clyde and Sally Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers* (Cambridge, Mass. 1978) do not escape the limitations of their sources.

the same time, the foundation of the moral order." Anything that disturbed the internal harmony of the organism was a rebel in heaven, and both self-interest and class interest were cast out. In effect, Durkheim was offering a compromise — the elimination of customary and legal inequalities of caste and class in return for social peace. Now, since these old forms of privilege were in an advanced stage of decay, as Tocqueville witnessed in his travels in North America, the main burden fell on those for whom the new order of industrial capitalism was something less than divine, but who were expected, just the same, to renounce their discontent and submit to the "new discipline" of "organic solidarity."³

The conservative implications of this one-sided bargain are obvious. The implication for social theory amounts to a stupendous evasion of problems of power and exploitation. Where rulers and ruled perform mutually beneficial functions, there are no victors or victims and thus no reasons to confront power in terms of antagonism or exploitation, a failure in analysis repeatedly pointed out by the critics of structural-functionalism — Mills on Parsons, Harris on Durkheim, and Thompson on Althusser.⁴

If Durkheim was an evasion of Marx, Weber was a very serious rejoinder. Whether his subject was bureaucracy, status, or charisma, Weber assumed that power was organized hierarchically and that those who did not have it contested those who did. His definition of power as the ability to work your will regardless of resistance is frequently encountered today, and his tripartite division of society into separate hierarchies of class, status, and party underlies a number of contemporary studies in social history.⁵ In his reply to Marxian class analysis Weber reduces class to its narrowest economic content, confining it to marketplace operations that govern the distribution of wealth and income, and then he deploys the concepts of status to occupy the territory that has been vacated. The resulting definition of class is far more economist than anything Marx ever imagined, and his notion of status, or "honour" as an autonomous ladder of rank is rather arbitrary. But because he assumes an unequal balance of power between classes and ranks, there remains, for all the shortcomings, something of value for understanding how democratic societies and the mill towns within them were ruled.

It is probably true that few historians bother to read social theory in the original, but their underlying assumptions commonly go back to one or another theoretical position. The main line of transmission has been through urban sociology. Maurice Stein has shown that Robert Park operated on the same

³ Emile Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society* (New York 1933 [1893]), 396, 398, 401, and *passim*.

⁴ C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York 1959), ch. 2; Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York 1968), 464-482; Edward Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London 1978), *passim*.

⁵ Max Weber, excerpts from *Economy and Society*, in *From Max Weber*, H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, eds. (New York 1946), 180-195.

assumptions about social organization as Durkheim, that the Lynds asked questions about industrialization that followed Marx, and that Warner dealt with status and bureaucracy in ways similar to Weber.⁶ The contribution of mechanical materialism has been less evident.

II

ROUSSEAU PROVIDES A TEXT to start the discussion of legitimation. "The strongest is never strong enough to be always master unless he transforms his Might into Right, and Obedience into Duty."⁷ The problem for the industrialists in winning rightful authority within their own ranks, from those they exploited, and from those they displaced was that ideas of equality had eroded old assumptions of rank and degree. The problem for historians in reconstructing the system of legitimating beliefs is that the result will be so convincing we will be left wondering what it was that had to be legitimated in the first place.

That is exactly what happens when symbolic anthropology goes to work on the Industrial Revolution. There are now several attempts to explore the culture of the mill town as a common system of beliefs uniting magnates and mill hands, and the results are so consistently dismal that there must be something more than individual failings behind them. The failure, rather, is in the flawed assumptions of symbolic anthropology. To isolate two, there is a Durkheimian tendency to equate culture, defined as the most complex whole, with some harmonious whole in which exploitation, domination, and conflict are either absent altogether, or are forever striving mightily toward the equilibrium state of harmony. A second assumption is the treatment of symbols as things, forgetting that mental symbols are inextricably mired in the grubby material facts of daily life. The later work of Clifford Geertz is an example of the second. Geertz defines culture as "symbolic action," a set of significant signals, meaningful winks, that people flash at one another which make life worth living. In "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," a classic in the symbolist idiom, he writes, "societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them."⁸ The other assumption shows up in the influential work of Mary Douglas. *Natural Symbols*, her highly creative effort to expand on Durkheim's "Society is God," can be faulted for failing to relate religion to structures of domination and subordination, leaving no way that religious myths, beliefs, and symbols can be considered as part of some ruling ideology, or as an essential part of a given system of production.⁹

⁶ Maurice Stein, *Eclipse of Community* (New York 1964 [1960]), chs. 1-3.

⁷ J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York 1962), 172.

⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York 1973), 453.

⁹ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York 1970); see also, *Purity and Danger* (London 1966). Lest there be any misunderstanding, my criticism of the symbolists is not intended to apply to all anthropology. Anthropology has its share of academic swindlers and an occasional crackpot, but it also contains a rich literature steeped in humanism, which, when grounded in analysis of material circumstances sows reward-

What happens when the symbolist's search for the most complex whole is directed toward industrial society itself? One answer is *Rockdale*, Anthony Wallace's Currier-and-Ives portrait of a sleepy village in southeastern Pennsylvania where textile mills nestled in among happy cottages and well-stocked barns in the decade before the Civil War.

The town was still a part of the antebellum rural north that is evoked partly by Currier and Ives pictures of cozy farms and little country mills, and partly by the Hudson River School's wilder landscapes. In both images the elements of technology are often visible, but they are not obtrusive. *Rockdale* was in truth a pastoral community not far from wilderness.¹⁰

After many more pages of this Golden Ageism, the text pushes back in time to explore the origins of rural industrialization, and it is not long before we find out that we have been dreaming. In fact, there was trouble in Eden — workers protesting long hours and harsh conditions, nobsticks getting dunked, turn-outs, strike processions, rough music, and a trial and conviction for conspiracy and riot. Furthermore, there was a titanic battle for the hearts and minds of the operatives waged by evangelical Christianity against freethinking Enlightenment. Raging for almost two decades, the battle not only set Painite workers against pious employers but divided the upper class against itself, as the educated elite lined up on one side or the other. Then, by 1850, it was all over. The evangelicals won. Harmony was restored. The mood was symbolized by the popularity of Henry Carey's celebration of Christian industrialism, *The Harmony of Interests, Agricultural, Manufacturing, and Commercial*.¹¹

This is not the first of Wallace's books to treat religion as the vital force capable of unifying a divided society. In *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, he presented a revitalization movement among the Seneca led by the prophet Handsome Lake, who preached accommodation with the whites along with re-establishment of certain Seneca traditions, and who sparked a revivalist upsurge among a people who had grown disoriented and dispirited. The cyclical theme of *Rockdale* was also first worked out for the Seneca, where a period of stress, discord, and disintegration was followed by a period of revival, harmony, and reintegration. Besides its presumed merits as retrospective ethnography — it was well received by anthropologists — this was a richly humane and deeply compassionate work.¹²

Rockdale suffers in comparison. Working people are stunted imitations of

ing insights in the field of history. Examples include E.E. Evans-Pritchard's study of a pre-historic people *The Nuer* (New York 1940), and in a modern historical frame, George Dalton, *Economic Anthropology and Development* (New York 1971), Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston 1957), and Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York 1969).

¹⁰ Wallace, *Rockdale*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, chs. 6-8.

¹² Wallace, *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York 1969).

the educated elite. While the latter debated Unitarianism, Swedenborgianism, and whether the *Doctrine of Endless Punishment is Taught in the Bible*, the labouring folk, "simple Bible-reading working class people," followed along as best they could under the tutelage of Sunday School mistresses and personal benefactors who provided religious instruction. We learn something about favoured lower-class proteges of these benevolent ladies from their soul-saving diaries, but almost nothing about those unfavoured ones who did not attend Bible class. If evidence on working-class culture is weak in Rockdale, it is abundant in nearby Philadelphia, where Wallace has gone for evidence on the elite, and where he would have found much on working-class religion, though it would not have suited his purposes.¹³

In the end, the argument that labouring people were dutifully lined up in evangelical ranks ready to go off and fight as Christian soldiers against slavery fails to surmount the contrary evidence of passionate diversity in the labouring classes between Catholic and Protestant. Furthermore, it is not even clear that the industrial gentry were in very good evangelical order, either. Theirs was a remarkably pallid evangelism, bereft of revivalist encampments, conversion experiences, or divine visitations. None of the Bible sisterhood spoke in tongues, nor did their husbands fall out on the floor in paroxysms of religious ecstasy. To say these antics were beneath their station is to say there was more to their way of life than perfervid religion. Evangelism was but a part of their ethical universe, which also harboured crass utilitarian values and did its daily turns according to the commonplace wisdom of the marketplace. Their Christianity could be seen every day on its knees prostrating itself before the gods of Manchester, and the pursuit of profit more than the pursuit of the millennium governed their behaviour towards their employees. Henry Carey is a poor stand-in for Handsome Lake.

For all that, at least *Rockdale* recognizes that capitalism was established through struggle, and that some actual suffering attended its early phases. But if we turn our attention to the New England industrial village that is the subject of *Anthropology Toward History: Culture and Work in a 19th Century Maine Town*, by Richard P. Horwitz, we see nothing whatsoever to disturb the pastoral idyll. The very assumptions and definitions built into the method preclude serious disturbance. Culture is defined as "whatever one has to know or believe to operate in a socially acceptable manner." Acceptable to whom?

The method employed here evades that question by presuming a unified world view shared by all segments of the community. Even if certain values were held in common, that does not mean they were used in the same way by everyone. If master and slave shared paternalist values, they nonetheless used them to opposite ends, the one to legitimate slavery, the other to deny its legitimacy. In the same way, temperance, Methodism, or nativism, could unite

¹³ Wallace, *Rockdale*, 324, ch. 7 *passim*: see Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia 1980).

upper and lower ranks in common beliefs, but it has been shown how industrial employer and employee used these values in their own interests, the one seeking to impose temperance as a form of work discipline, the other as a demonstration of self-control and independence from employer discipline. So to accept the middle-class mentality that dominated the printed word as the blueprint of the whole culture is to mistake the self-serving values of one segment of the community — a large segment, to be sure — for the “most complex whole.” What is most preposterous is that this replication of an ideological construct is then passed off as objective science, or “ethnoscience.”¹⁴

Paul Johnson's *Shopkeepers Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York* is a different kind of book. Johnson's contribution is to link the revivalism of the Burned-Over-District with nascent industrial capitalism through the concept of free moral agency. When Charles Grandison Finney preached that man was responsible for the well-being of his own body and soul, his message fell on the welcome ears of expectant capitalists and aspiring artisans waiting to hear a moral justification for the realities of life in the competitive marketplace. Johnson argues convincingly that as familial and paternalist forms of labour discipline and employer obligation fell away to leave the free labourer naked before his employer, the doctrine of free moral agency stepped in to legitimate the new social relationships: “Workmen who continued to drink and carouse and stay away from church were no longer considered errant children; they were free moral agents who had chosen to oppose the Coming Kingdom. They could be hired when they were needed, fired without a qualm when they were not.”¹⁵ This argument goes further toward explaining how industrial capitalism came to be legitimated than anything recently written on the subject.

Now, Johnson gives all the credit to Emile Durkheim. Maybe so, but the reader of *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* will search in vain for passages linking religious consciousness to material life, and it is all but inconceivable that Durkheim could write a sentence like “the Rochester revival was generated in the problem of social class.” For Durkheim the study of religion began not with social cleavage but with the social totality which was the very “social fact” that made religion possible.¹⁶ But that may be putting up too strong an objection, for in the end, Johnson reaches a harmonious Durkheimian conclusion. The Rochester revival ropes in some segments of the wage-earning population, and as the newly self-disciplined wage earners cleave to their no longer paternalist employers, the “problem of social class” is solved. By 1831 the shopkeepers' millennium has actually arrived and class relations in Rochester look exactly as Wallace would have them appear in Rockdale 20 years later.

The fatal flaw in this formula is the same as that in *Rockdale*: there is no

¹⁴ Horwitz, (Middletown, Conn. 1979), ch. 1.

¹⁵ Johnson, (New York 1978), 141.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 135; Durkheim, *Elementary Forms* (New York 1961), 488-496.

provision for the regeneration of resistance anew, even as old conflicts are finding their way toward resolution. Just when cultural anthropology seems to be advancing our understanding of the industrial revolution, it calls a retreat to the safe ground of social harmony. No wonder; the conceptual assumptions of cultural anthropology summon us back there, back to God, or to a secular incarnation of Him as organic solidarity, or social equilibrium.

Better strategies for exploring legitimation are available. There is, first of all, the concept of "ruling ideas," the way Marx and Engels treated the prevailing ideas of an age in *German Ideology*: "The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its dominance."¹⁷ A good part of nineteenth-century intellectual history can be encompassed by this — freedom of contract, equality of opportunity, consent of the governed, and what these all added up to, the conviction that the United States was a classless society where a man could make it on his own, and, if not, that was his own fault. The contest between North and South only heightened this system of belief by bringing it into conflict with an opposing system where the master class made no secret of its rule.

Or if the concept of "ruling ideas" seems too crude in tying ideas so tightly to class interest, then there is "hegemony," as developed by Antonio Gramsci and used with telling effect in Edward Thompson's eighteenth-century England and Eugene Genovese's American slave South. The advantage of hegemony is to avoid the twin failures of symbolic anthropology, first, by locating a system of symbols firmly within the whole social process, and second, by remembering that the symbols express the "lived dominance and subordination of particular classes."¹⁸ This leaves crucial room for struggle in which subordinate classes use the common ideas of the age in their own interests, as industrial workers turned egalitarian assumptions on their employers to denounce this new breed of money aristocrats.

In short, Marxian strategies succeed precisely where symbolic anthropology fails, first, in locating legitimating beliefs within a given, ever-changing material environment, and second, in remembering that what is being legitimated is a structure of power with built-in conflicts between the strong and the weak.

III

TURNING NEXT TO THE question of domination, we run up against the same con-

¹⁷ Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, excerpted in *Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert Tucker, ed. (New York 1972), 136-7.

¹⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York 1971), Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith, eds.; E.P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 382-405; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York 1974); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford 1977).

tradition between democracy and capitalism, only in another aspect, in the clash of institutions. There was, first of all, the vitality of democratic institutions at the community level — ward clubs, party machines, city councils — not the textbook idea of democracy, but popular participation, just the same. To complement this, there was the remarkable weakness of top-down, centralized governing institutions. In the absence of strong establishments in the military, the church, and the bureaucracy, contentious local bodies were pretty much allowed to go their own factious ways. There was nothing like the Continental European State, a fortress of central power entrenched behind earthworks of secret police, tax collectors, and provincial administrators, and engaged in war against its subjects.¹⁹ For the United States it is impossible to speak of “domination” in this sense, and for the same reason it is awkward to speak in terms of the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie,” or the “absolutism of private property.” Yet these concepts retain some value for nineteenth-century America. Surely the owner of capital had an absolute right to collect the surplus proceeds of his employees’ labour, to invest them where he chose, and to conduct his business as a business, not a charity.

In exercising these property rights, industrialists provoked opposition in the workplace (not discussed here) and in the community.

The tension between capitalist domination and democratic opposition can be discussed conveniently under three headings: urban political economy, the politics of pluralism, and social discipline. The political economy of the industrial city cannot be described as *laissez-faire*, nor will the expansion of city sewage and water systems, fire protection, paved streets, and street railways fit under the neutral rubric “civic improvement.” Businessmen had vital economic interests in these costly projects — water for manufacturing, elimination of industrial waste, fire protection and better transit for efficient transportation of goods and employees. All these required action by city government, often over the objections of small property owners who balked at mortgaging the future of their communities to build public works for private enterprise. Their opposition was overridden by the sheer weight of capital, which alternately blandished and intimidated the resident middle class into voting land grants to entice a railroad away from a rival city and tax abatements to encourage a factory to settle.²⁰ In the Pittsburgh district an invidious gerrymandering gave steel companies huge tax breaks; the Carnegie Works were located in one borough, which assessed mill property at 30 per cent, while most of the mill employees lived across the street in Homestead, where residential property was assessed at 80 per cent. That still was not enough to pay for sanitary streets or pure water; Homestead water was said to be so full of industrial chemicals no respectable microbe dared live in it.²¹

¹⁹ Gramsci, “State and Civil Society,” in *Prison Notebooks*, 229-39.

²⁰ These giveaways are merely repeated on a regional and imperial scale in the twentieth century.

²¹ Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (Pittsburgh 1974

When civic boosterism was not enough, bribery would do. Behind countless business favours was the mighty chain of corruption running from the whiskey distiller or the traction magnate to the party boss. As Cincinnati's Boss Cox said after going on retainer for the gas company that was seeking a city franchise, "You don't blame a man for looking out for No. 1, do you?"²² Maybe the necessity to bribe a lot of low level public officials was one perverse sign of the vitality of democracy; a surer sign was the rise of urban populism around anti-monopoly issues like equal taxation, cheap fares, and municipal ownership of utilities. Detroit's Republican reformer Hazen Pingree represents the type: one campaign ditty went, to the tune of "Yankee Doodle," "Pingree's fight has always been/ In favor of the masses,/ He's broken up the ring machine/ And boodle schemes he smashes."²³

The difference between Cox and Pingree was not one of organization — Pingree built a "righteous machine" of his own — but one of political orientation, the one trying to eliminate class conflict, the other to intensify it. I do not think it is possible to fathom the political economy of the city without asking questions about class interests. For this reason, we will get little help from mechanical materialism, so preoccupied with the Brownian movement of mobile individuals, or from Durkheim, who believed the social organism could not exist if it was internally divided against itself. This assumption underlies the Chicago School of urban sociology, which envisioned the city as an organism divided into interdependent ecological zones called "natural areas," and which has influenced some historical writing on industrial cities. Park and Wirth²⁴ relished the pluralism of urban neighbourhoods, from the Gold Coast to the slum, the ghetto to the Zone of Emergence, and the respectable suburb to the tenderloin. The function of the party boss was to integrate the various zones into a harmonious whole.²⁵

There are better strategies for dealing with the cultural pluralism of the city. At the least, some attempt ought to be made to mesh the horizontal groupings of ethnic, religious, and neighbourhood associations with the vertical class structure. One creative approach pioneered by Herbert Gutman has been to

[1910]), 20-21, 24.

²² Zane Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati* (New York 1968), 93.

²³ Melvin Holli, *Reform in Detroit: Hazen Pingree and Urban Politics* (New York 1969), 141.

²⁴ Robert Park, *Human Communities* (Glencoe, Ill. 1952); Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1938); Wirth, *The Ghetto* (Chicago, 1928).

²⁵ Miller, *Boss Cox*, sees the city divided into functional business and residential zones politically integrated by the boss. The role of the party in electoral politics at the state level is viewed much the same way by Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics* (New York 1970), who awards the 1890s to the McKinley Republicans because they learned what the Bryan Democrats did not, namely, to become "a functioning integrative mechanism," 375.

treat immigration to industrial cities as a double adaptation of wage earners to industrial capitalism and of ethnics to a WASP environment.²⁶ This has many possibilities. One study of Slavic immigrants in a Pennsylvania steel town shows how the economic predicament of low wage workers forced them to turn inward to the immigrant community for such supports as sick and death benefits, and how the ethnic lodge and the patronage machine, rather than the radical party organization, became their political rallying ground.²⁷

There has been a fruitful Weberian influence in some of this work. Like Marx, Weber shifts the analysis of power from the State to society. His tripartite division of society — class, status, and party — has shaped assumptions about the interaction of separate hierarchies in a way that bears on the well-worn question of American labour studies: Why is there no socialism? A study of Newark traces the prevalence of status politics rather than class politics back to the class cleavages of industrialization itself. In taking control of production away from the household producer, industrial capitalists subverted the status of old-time craftsmen; wage-earner descendants of the craftsmen, in turn, tried to recoup their position in a search for status through ethnic and religious organizations. The very scramble of competing status groups so dominated party politics that the economic issues which might have united wage earners as a class were all but excluded, and that gave away the game to the industrialists.²⁸ Although suffering from an economist rendering of "class," this is a sophisticated argument, one that refutes the myth of the classless society, and, at the same time, explains why American politics lacked the sharp class lines of Europe. The party system did not dominate unwilling subjects so much as co-opt willing ones.

But in the end, the industrialists depended on coercion when harmony broke down. Right makes legitimacy, but force makes might. Industrialists called to their aid the institutions of social discipline — law, police, courts, prisons — and beyond that, when necessary, broke the law and used illegal force to control their unruly communities. The use of spies and gun thugs will not be found in the statute books, nor will these aspects of mill town life be found in the benign annals of Chicago-school urban history. It is ironic that the city with the greatest reputation for bare-knuckled violence should have given its name to a sociology of urban harmony in which the social order of the city is maintained not by oppressive force, but by the benevolent authority of police, schools, and political machines, all of which function in the interests of the whole organism, not one of its parts as against others. "Law 'n' Order" really is "law" and "order." Given the obvious deficiencies of this notion of "social

²⁶ Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York 1976).

²⁷ John Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town* (Pittsburgh 1977).

²⁸ Susan Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of the Crafts in Newark* (Philadelphia 1978).

control," and to avoid confusing the issue, the term should be dispensed with, so we can get on with the analysis of how industrialists ruled, recognizing on whose behalf force was used.²⁹

The double standard of the law is a place to begin. In the age of equality before the law, the owners' tactics of class struggle were perfectly legal, while the tactics of wage earners were at least under immediate suspicion. Compare the strike with the lockout. The strike was forever attracting injunctions, but no nineteenth-century judge ever enjoined a manufacturer to end a lockout and open his plant with union labour. Or compare the boycott and the blacklist. The boycott was to the strike what the blacklist was to the lockout, an indirect, limited form of coercion. But the boycott was always in trouble with conspiracy laws, while the blacklist got off scott free. Much has been written lately about the law as a hegemonic force, seemingly applied alike to the powerful and the weak.³⁰ But it is worth remembering that it was first and foremost an instrument of coercion at the disposal of property in ways not available to wage labour.

The history of the police is a record of on-going struggle for control.³¹ Manufacturers promoted the professionalization of police to replace part-time worker-constables with full-time officers subordinate to a military style chain of command and independent of the loyalties of family and neighbourhood, sometimes under state supervision to check the influence of local pro-labour politicians. In the extreme case of the company town, local police on the company payroll were indistinguishable from the company guard.³² But local police remained susceptible to working-class influence through family, unions, and politics. At their height, the Knights of Labor were appointing police chiefs. The unreliability of the police was the reason manufacturers had to call upon hiring armies of Pinkertons.

When local police showed reluctance to perform their duty, the telegraph would sing, summoning out of town police and state militia. Then there would often be a riot. Rail junction towns would start crawling with masked vigilantes who would storm the round house and kill the engines.³³ In the coal regions roving bands would sweep through the mine patch shutting down the mines and

²⁹ Stein, *Eclipse*, 26-27. Useful strictures on social control, functionalism, and positivism are offered by Gareth Stedman Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 (1976), 295-305.

³⁰ Douglas Hay, "Property, Authority, and the Criminal Law," *Albion's Fatal Tree*, D. Hay, et al., eds. (New York 1975); Genovese, "The Hegemonic Function of the Law," *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

³¹ Alan Dawley, *Class and Community* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976), 104-113; Daniel Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-1884* (Urbana, Ill. 1978), 183-215.

³² Henry Schuyler, *The Roeblings* (New Brunswick 1930), is a good account of the company town through the eyes of retired owners.

³³ These vigilante escapades are detailed in U.S. Congress, *Investigation of Labor Troubles*, House Report No. 4174, 49th Congress, 2 sess. (Washington 1886).

coke ovens and crowds would surround the scab boarding house and menace trainloads of blacklegs, but then graciously give them dinner and pay their way out of town.³⁴ In the great riots at Pittsburgh in 1877 and Chicago in 1894, desperate mobs took revenge for militia killings by putting the torch to railroad property. And then it would be all over. Crowd action in strikes made it difficult for industrialists to rule these towns, but mob rule itself could last three or four days at most before it was spent, giving way to the State's version of law and order and restoring the rights of property.

Discipline became totalitarian in the company town. An instructive contrast exists between the coal regions, where there was almost continuous warfare, and the textile towns, which were comparatively quiet. In the mine patch everything was an instrument of discipline: housing — the threat of eviction kept people in line; scrip — it kept families dependent on the company store; the "pluck-me" store — not only a pernicious means of repossessing wages, but a fear tactic, since the loss of a job meant the loss of credit. All manner of strangers — farmers, peddlers, walking delegates — were warned out of town, and the Bill of Rights, like the union organizer, had to sneak back in at night.³⁵ Unions had to be set up with secret passwords and elaborate rituals, and when unions were busted, men resorted to riot, threatening letters, and lynch law, and tried to operate underground from secret societies made legendary by the Mollie Maguires, who were, in turn, infiltrated by provocateurs and set up for judicial murder. The common characterization of this industrial despotism in feudal terms — wage serfdom, Robber Barons, and the like — is unfair to feudalism, which at least held up an ideal of reciprocal obligations.

By contrast, the textile town was an example of successful company paternalism. As recent studies comparing textiles to ironmaking (Walkowitz) and textiles to shoemaking (Cumbler) make clear,³⁶ the comparative quiet of the textile town was unusual. There were networks of paternalist dependency in many mill towns — company housing, company stores, company sponsorship of church and recreational activities — but only in textile towns did they do what they were supposed to.

This may be the reason that functionalism, in the person of Neil Smelser, seized upon textiles to demonstrate its case, and that functionalist assumptions sometimes creep into the studies of family-factory interaction which portray mill owners and mill hands adapting to one another out of mutual interest.³⁷

³⁴ Victor Greene, *The Slavic Community on Strike* (Notre Dame 1968); see the descriptions of miners in the Hocking Valley, Ohio, in *National Labor Tribune*, August-October 1884.

³⁵ A vivid account of these conditions can be found in Pennsylvania Bureau of Statistics of Labour and Agriculture, *First Annual Report* (Harrisburg 1874).

³⁶ Walkowitz, *Worker City*; John Cumbler, *Working Class Community in Industrial America* (Westport, Ct. 1979).

³⁷ Neil Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution* (Chicago 1959), esp., Introduction; this approach has been sophisticated by Tamara Hareven, "Family Time

One only need ask what were the special conditions that made paternalism possible to see how unequal was the adaptation. First, textile wages were exceptionally low, requiring the employment of several family members for subsistence, a dependency only intensified by the hiring of large proportions of women and recent immigrants, those groups with the fewest resources and the most limited occupational alternatives.³⁸ Second, textile technology was exceptionally far along toward machine production, having usurped control of the labour process, thus further diminishing workers' potential power. It is significant that the one group of workers who did not fit this pattern — the skilled mule spinners — were the most dependably militant force in the industry. Thus it was not paternalism *per se* that made textile towns so well governed. If there is any doubt about this, one need only look at paternalism's great failure, Pullman, Illinois, where a less regimented labour process and a less dependent labour force hooked up with the militant traditions of railway workers to challenge a paternalist system in the 1894 strike.³⁹

The class content of these non-democratic forms of discipline, whether benevolent-paternalist or violent-police, is obvious enough to make functionalist models inapplicable to community power. But the same thing is true of the democratic forms of government, as well — the law before which every citizen stood equal, the political parties which won mass support, and the city governments which were open to all regardless of birth or family. They disclosed in the results of courtroom proceedings, political decisions, and urban taxing and spending policies the class justice and class interests at work. If we watch what the political system did, as well as what it said, we will see a system with a specific class content, notwithstanding its democratic form.

IV

TO SUMMARIZE, we have been looking at the contradictory aspect of the nineteenth-century mill town as a democratic community ruled by capital. The contradiction arose in the first place because the Industrial Revolution subverted old forms of authority over the labouring classes and the new forms conceded a good deal more popular participation in running things than the old order had allowed. The problem for the industrialists was how to keep the legal emancipation of labour, which they themselves promoted, from leading on to a sorry state of affairs where society was governed in the interests of the creators of wealth, not its appropriators. Finding both mechanical materialism and Durkheimian sociology unable even to recognize the existence of the problem, we got some help from other quarters, from Weberian concepts of power hierar-

and Industrial Time: Family and Work in a Planned Corporation Town, 1900-1920." in *Family and Kin in Urban Communities*. Hareven, ed. (New York 1977), which describes "co-operation and mutual exploitation" between families and the industrial system, 203.

³⁸ In addition to Hareven see Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work* (New York 1979).

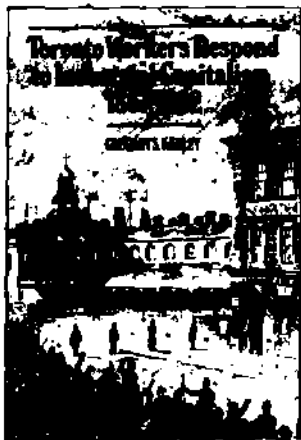
³⁹ Almont Lindsey, *The Pullman Strike* (Chicago 1942).

chies, and above all, from the class analysis at the heart of historical materialism. At that point, it was a matter of seeing how the class rule of the industrialists was secured through a system of myths and beliefs that legitimated their power, while at the same time encouraging challenges to it, and through the institutions of private property and state coercion that enabled them to dominate their communities at moments of crisis.

We began with the mill town dying or already dead. But for millions of people the death throes drag on. Steel companies continue to take profits out of old communities to build elsewhere. Manufacturers of all sorts cannibalize their assets in existing plants in the Northeast to pay for investments in the cheap labour climates of the Sunbelt. Multinationals ship capital and jobs overseas to exploit foreign labour for the dubious benefit of United States consumers who will lose in unemployment and welfare costs what they may gain in cheaper goods. It is no wonder that industrial workers refer to recently negotiated benefits they will get in the event a plant closes as "burial insurance." It is a telling comment on what happens when people entrust their communities to capital.

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