
BACKGROUND BOOKS

JOBS IN AMERICA

"When men are employed," wrote Benjamin Franklin, "they are best contented." America was one of the West's first nations where, for lack of a leisured aristocracy, everybody worked for a living.

After independence from Britain, the U.S. urban work force consisted of the gentry (merchants, lawyers, ministers), "mechanics" (carpenters, masons, shoemakers, tailors, bakers, butchers), and unskilled workers (day laborers, free blacks, and, in the South, slaves).

Because of their uncommon expertise, the mechanics were, in effect, their own bosses, even when, as journeymen, they worked for a salary. These artisans often took Mondays off, as well as Saturdays and Sundays, for leisure pursuits—mostly drinking and gambling.

Their relatively jolly life is recorded in **Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson** (New York Univ., 1979). Historian Howard B. Rock goes on to note that, in New York's shipyards, workers routinely interrupted their toil four times a day for candy and cakes, and as many as 10 times for grog (beer). Only when industrialization loomed in the early 1800s did craftsmen adopt a more disciplined, 60-hour work week.

According to historian Daniel T. Rodgers, the famed New England textile mills of the 1820s were ahead of their time. In **The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920** (Univ. of Chicago, 1978), he writes that "as late as 1850, the centers of

manufacturing remained the home and the workshop." The transition to the factory system came quickly, however. During the 1840s, for example, small shoe shops were the norm; by the 1870s, shoemakers had become machine operators in shoe plants.

Tracing the work ethic back to its Puritan roots, Rodgers argues that 19th-century industrialization "upset the [old] certainty that hard work would bring economic success."

For their part, labor leaders of the 1860s were quick to recognize the impact of the new division of labor, the increasing size of the workshop, and the tendency to concentrate production in factories. In a thorough history, **Industrialization and the American Labor Movement, 1850-1900** (Univ. of Chicago, 1978), CUNY historian Irwin Yellowitz describes the response of the nascent unions, such as the iron-molders and the machinists. Union organizers attempted to control the supply of skilled labor—a successful tactic in preindustrial days, but one that proved inadequate as factory owners brought in machines and the need for craftsmen diminished.

However, the unions seldom opposed technology as such; they sought to protect their members' wages and working conditions. During the 1870s, trade union officials called for an eight-hour work day and immigration quotas. Employers and employees began to battle for control of the workplace.

Economist Richard Edwards contends that the employers won. In his

well-argued **Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century** (Basic Books, 1979), he maintains that the growth of job categories, work rules, and promotion procedures ultimately led workers to identify not with a boss or foreman but with their company. During the 1940s, for example, IBM pioneered the "cradle-to-grave" corporation welfare state to insure employee allegiance.

Labor leaders also competed for workers' loyalties. Along with the steelworkers' Philip Murray and the autoworkers' Walter Reuther, the coalminers' John L. Lewis stands out among the union chieftains of the 1930s and '40s.

In their detailed **John L. Lewis: A Biography** (Times Books, 1978), Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine follow this son of Welsh immigrants from his first job in an Ohio coal mine to his powerful role as the autocratic president of the United Mine Workers of America (1920-60) and founder and first president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Lewis successfully, sometimes violently, organized workers in the coal, steel, auto, and tire and rubber industries.

But unions provided no guarantees against layoffs, especially during the Great Depression.

In **Unemployment in History: Economic Thought and Public Policy** (Harper, 1978, cloth; 1979, paper), Columbia University historian John A. Garraty first discusses Western explanations of the persistence of poverty and joblessness. He finds none, including those of David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and John Maynard Keynes, totally satisfactory. Nor does history, he adds, offer many examples of successful make-work programs.

"Policy intellectuals" tend to disagree with Garraty, as evidenced by **Creating Jobs: Public Employment Programs and Wage Subsidies** (Brookings, 1978, cloth & paper). The book is a collection of seven highly technical analyses of public and private job schemes. Summing up, editor John L. Palmer, a Brookings economist, and Wisconsin sociologist Irwin Garfinkel suggest that a broad approach, applying federal wage subsidies to private as well as public jobs, would help end the plight of the chronically unemployed low-income worker.

The two large groups most affected by the changing shape of the U.S. labor market have been women and farmers.

In the 19th century, New England's burgeoning textile mills destroyed the chief cash income—from home spinning and weaving—of local farmers' daughters, suggests historian Thomas Dublin in **Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860** (Columbia, 1979). By 1860, more than 60,000 women had flocked to the mill towns, to work for as little as 44¢ a day (in 1836), less than half the pay of male workers.

Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker (Greenwood, 1977), edited by Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, is a bright cluster of 10 essays on topics ranging from the mills of Lowell to Italian-American women garment workers in 20th-century New York City. Historian Caroline F. Ware points out that although 9 out of 10 women are in the labor force at some time in their lives, fewer than half of them are fully employed at any given moment. Even the paternalists who ran the New England textile mills did not expect factory women to remain

at their jobs forever. Most ended their mill careers and got married by the age of 26.

Keeping men and women down on the farm has proved difficult. So notes University of Pennsylvania historian John L. Shover in **First Majority—Last Minority: The Transformation of Rural Life in America** (Northern Ill. Univ., 1976, cloth & paper). Between 1929 and 1965 alone, more than 30 million Americans moved off the land to better opportunities elsewhere.

By 1973, less than 5 percent of America's work force was engaged in agriculture (versus 27 percent in 1920). Shover shows that, thanks to farm mechanization and higher productivity, America no longer *needs* many farmers to produce bumper crops. In 1820, one farm worker supplied subsistence for four people; in 1945, the ratio was 1 to 14.6, in 1969, 1 to 45.3.

Labor in the Twentieth Century (Academic Press, 1978), edited by Harvard's John T. Dunlop (former Secretary of Labor) and Cornell's Walter Galenson, is a statistics-packed mini-encyclopedia analyzing the changing scene in the United States, Great Britain, West Germany, France, and Japan.

A new movement that seeks to put workers on corporate boards has caught on in Scandinavia and West Germany, but not in America, as editor Svetozar Pejovich makes clear in an eight-essay review of **The Codetermination Movement in the West: Labor Participation in the Management of Business Firms** (Lexington, 1978).

The Soviet worker's bleak lot and his low productivity are examined in **Industrial Labor in the U.S.S.R.** (Pergamon, 1979, cloth & paper), edited by Arcadius Kahan and Blair

Ruble, and sponsored by the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute. Essays by 16 scholars cover unions, workers' daily lives (complicated by rampant alcoholism), strikes, and political activism. During the mid-1970s, a Russian worker enjoyed a standard of living roughly similar to that of his U.S. counterpart 50 years earlier.

In **Japanese Blue Collar: The Changing Tradition** (Univ. of Calif., 1971, cloth & paper), University of Michigan sociologist Robert E. Coles notes that Japanese workers often remain with the same employer throughout their careers. The lack of movement from company to company carries over into social life as well; employees associate with co-workers rather than with people holding similar jobs in other factories.

Britain's declining worker productivity has often been attributed by scholars to worker alienation. In **What Went Wrong? Why Hasn't Having More Made People Happier?** (Pantheon, 1979, cloth & paper), social worker Jeremy Seabrook records the discontent of England's factory hands. He finds that class-conscious Britons lament the loss of the sense of purpose that brought them together during World War II. They blame technology for depriving them of pride of workmanship, and they are quick to fault the growing minority of Asian and Caribbean immigrants for current economic ills.

What do U.S. workers think? One set of answers is in Studs Terkel's **Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do** (Pantheon, 1974, cloth; Avon, 1975, paper). A best-selling collection of interviews with more than 130 individuals—from a movie critic to a washroom attendant—*Working* has often been

cited as evidence that Americans do not like their jobs. What emerges more clearly is the love/hate relationship most people have with their work. Terkel records many complaints, but there is much satisfaction as well. One 32-year-old Brooklyn man joined the fire department. Of firemen, he says proudly: "You actually see them produce. You see them put out a fire . . . come out with babies in their hands . . . give mouth-to-mouth when a guy's dying . . . That's real."

Robert Schrank's **Ten Thousand Working Days** (MIT, 1978, cloth; 1979, paper) is an informal, sometimes rambling, examination of Americans at their jobs. Many academic specialists, argues Schrank, a Ford Foundation sociologist, neglect the importance of human relationships. The social rituals—coffee and smoke breaks, lunch time, in-jokes—are especially important to people whose daily tasks do not provide creative outlets.

Yet those who do have good jobs are often dissatisfied too. U.S. novelists have taken up where scholars lag in penetrating the anxieties of America's class of middle managers.

J. P. Marquand's satires—notably **Point of No Return** (Little, Brown, 1949)—depict the mid-career predicaments of New England Brahmins and Manhattan executives. A popular novel that chronicles a bright young man's effort to make it big on Madison Avenue is Sloan Wilson's **The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit** (Simon & Schuster, 1955). And an updated portrait of the

troubled corporate male appears in Joseph Heller's **Something Happened** (Knopf, 1974, cloth; Ballantine, 1975, paper).

A fair number of Americans, it seems, earn good incomes by analyzing the current employment scene and predicting its future.

Two informative studies are Columbia economist Eli Ginsberg's latest examination of manpower policy—**Good Jobs, Bad Jobs, No Jobs** (Harvard, 1979)—and a gathering of cogent essays on **Work in America: The Decade Ahead** (Van Nostrand, 1979), edited by Clark Kerr and Jerome M. Rosow.

Many commentators on the future state of work in America have been influenced by Daniel Bell's much-debated **The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting** (Basic Books, 1973, cloth; 1976, paper). Bell sees U.S. society in the future as characterized by an increasing shift from a goods-producing to a service economy. New science-based industries will come to the fore; a professional class of elite workers will process and codify highly complex information for industry and government. These specialists will become more powerful as technical advice becomes essential to politicians' decisions (e.g., on such issues as construction of nuclear power plants).

But people will be all important. "In the salient experience of work," Bell writes, "men live more and more outside nature, and less and less with machinery and things; they live with and encounter one another."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Suggestions for this essay came from James O'Toole and former Wilson Center Fellow Edwin M. Epstein, professor of business administration at the University of California, Berkeley.*