

PRESS & TELEVISION

Working Life in the Comics

"Whither the Self-Made Man? Comic Culture and the Crisis of Legitimation in the United States" by Jill H. Kasen, in *Social Problems* (Dec. 1980), 208 Rockwell Hall, State University College, Buffalo, N.Y. 14222.

If you want to trace modern Americans' changing attitudes toward work, read the funnies, suggests Kasen, a sociologist at California State College, San Bernardino.

In her survey of comic strips run in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* from 1925 to 1975, Kasen found that "labor history" in the comics fell into three periods. During the age of the Self-Made Man (1925-45), 14 of the 18 strips with "occupational orientations" featured plucky entrepreneurs. Rudy Nebb of "The Nebbs" was typical. He inherited a "water-hole" from an aunt, turned it into a prosperous country resort and mineral-water bottling plant, and finally realized his dream of joining the snooty Ariston country club by threatening to build a stable next door. Lower-middle-class characters were the most common inhabitants of the funny pages (and continued to be through the 1970s). But they were hard workers during the 1920s and '30s. Most had their sights set on Sweldom Beach or Snob's Point. During the Great Depression, when some 15 million Americans were jobless, only one *Evening Bulletin* cartoon family (Winnie Winkle's) fell on hard times.

The widespread prosperity and growth of large corporate bureaucracies during the postwar era made the self-made man obsolete in the comics. And World War II destroyed the appeal of snobbism. A new-style hero emerged: the wise, public-spirited professional like Judge Parker and Rex Morgan, M.D. These characters were middle class, but they had eluded the corporate world and ran their own lives.



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During the late 1960s, cartoonists turned to depicting rank-and-file employees (who comprised 59 percent of the "occupational" strips in 1968 and 69 percent in 1975). Worker discontent and popular malaise were their themes. The work ethic itself took a beating. Thus, in a 1975 "Lolly" strip, a secretary reports that her watch says, "two hours and twenty-seven minutes before five." Characters teetered on the edge of downward mobility. As one teacher in a 1975 "Like Now" cartoon groaned, "The garbage workers are complaining that teachers make al-

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most as much as they do.”

In more optimistic times, Kasen observes, comic strips helped perpetuate Americans' belief in equality of opportunity. Today, they portray a “democracy of underdogs.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Darwin's Faith

“God and Natural Selection: The Darwinian Idea of Design” by Dov Ospovat, in *Journal of the History of Biology* (Fall 1980), c/o 235 Science Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

Charles Darwin (1809–82), whose theory of evolution shook the foundations of religious faith in the West, claimed to believe in God—at least from 1838 to 1859, when he was formulating the theory. But recent biographers dispute him, citing unpublished jottings by Darwin that characterize God as a creature of man's imagination.

Ospovat, a University of Nebraska historian, argues that the naturalist's public testament is true.

In 1838, two years after his globe-girdling research trip aboard the *Beagle* ended, Darwin believed that God worked through “secondary causes.” By this, he meant that the Creator had devised a set of natural laws designed to achieve certain ends, rather than styling and altering each species himself. This suggests to some scholars a view of God as a human construct. “May not the idea of God arise from our confused idea of ‘ought,’ joined with the necessary notion of ‘causation’?” Darwin wondered. But he was not implying that man invented God to explain the unfathomable, Ospovat contends. Instead, Darwin meant that God had produced a human brain organizationally capable of conceiving of the idea of him.

Darwin's spiritual crisis was prompted late in 1838 by his theory of natural selection, which held that successful species develop initially by chance. How could this view dovetail with the notion of a plan of creation? Darwin resolved the dilemma by postulating that evolution's laws guarantee general, not specific, results. The emergence of a particular organ, for example, is governed by chance. But natural selection will never support a structure harmful to an animal.

Not until the 1860s, writes Ospovat, did Darwin abandon his faith. Throughout the 19th century, anatomists studied related structures (such as the bird claw and the human hand) whose differences could not be explained by function alone. Why were tasks sometimes performed by different organs in different creatures (e.g., an elephant draws water with its trunk, but a giraffe laps it up with its tongue)? And why did some species' changes lead to extinction? Darwin could find no answers consistent with the idea of an all-powerful, intelligent Creator. His conventional faith faded into agnosticism.