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## White Collar/Blue Collar

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## White Collar/Blue Collar

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Examining the determinants of class for women and the ways men experienced gender will help clarify some of the ambiguous status of the clerical sector, but it will still not answer all of our questions. To understand the place of clerical work in the class structure, we need to examine more than just clerical work itself. A major argument of this book is that understanding the impact of clerical work on overall social stratification requires understanding stratification within the manual working class as well. The status of clerical work would perhaps be much clearer in contrast to that of the working class if that working class were itself a monolithic group. However, as the "new labor history" has demonstrated over the past twenty years, the working class did not act or see itself as a seamless whole. The ways in which divisions within the working class affected workers' perceptions of clerical occupations—and clerical workers' perceptions of manual work—highlight many of the ambiguities of the social status of clerical work.

### Keywords

labor movement, gender, clerical work, white collar, blue collar

### Disciplines

Gender and Sexuality | Labor History | Labor Relations

### Comments

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# Introduction

## White Collar/Blue Collar

In its June 1905 issue the national stenographers' monthly, *Phonographic World*, reprinted a short blurb from the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*: "Many readers will be surprised to learn that there are more typewriting machines in use in Pittsburg than in any other American city except New York." The magazine's editors then went on to comment sarcastically, "Yes, not only surprised, but amused."<sup>1</sup> At the time many in the United States would probably have agreed. Pittsburg was "the Iron City," a place of brawny male workers engaged in heavy industry. The image of the typewriter—a word used for both the machine and its operator—would have seemed incongruous with the "Smokey City's" reputation. Despite the snide comment of the *Phonographic World's* editors, however, Pittsburgh's industrial base in fact made that city home to some of the nation's earliest and most famous corporations, among them Westinghouse Electric (founded in 1886), the U.S. Glass Company (1891), and U.S. Steel (1901), as well as the financial institutions of the Mellon family. Beneath the smoke of Pittsburgh's famous factories lay the offices of the corporations that ran them. Within those offices worked the members—both male and female—of the fastest-growing sector of the labor market.

By 1951 C. Wright Mills could state that "by their rise to numerical importance, the white-collar people have upset the nineteenth-century expectation that society would be divided between entrepreneurs and

1. *Phonographic World* 25 (June 1905), 449. The spelling of Pittsburgh's name changed during the years covered in this book. I have used the modern spelling in the text while preserving the original spelling in quotations.

wage workers.”<sup>2</sup> Most ordinary people understood the distinction implied by the phrases “white collar” and “blue collar.” This distinction operated in their daily lives, in their working comprehension of the social structure in which they lived. Post–World War II social scientists also began to use and analyze this new bifurcated model of industrial society. Social mobility studies, for example, traced the movement of individuals and generations from blue-collar into white-collar occupations and pronounced such movement “upward.”

As scholars began to examine this model more closely, however, they began to run into difficulties. Individuals in “low-level” white-collar jobs, it turned out, did not always receive—or perceive—greater benefits, either material or psychic, than individuals in blue-collar occupations. Social theorists began to talk about the “ambiguities” of the social status of clerical work. Some, emphasizing work situations, have argued that nonmanual occupations have been increasingly “proletarianized” over time, creating a “new working class” made up of both manual and nonmanual workers; others have focused on status and maintained that the “collar line” remains the crucial point of division between manual and nonmanual workers.

Whichever theory they use, scholars continue to puzzle over the situation of low-level white-collar workers, that is, clerical and sales workers. For advocates of the proletarianization argument, this group provides a clear case of white-collar wage workers controlling nothing but their labor power. In any division of society into owners and workers, clerical and sales employees clearly belong to the latter group. In addition, examination of workplace conditions reveals a substantial decline across the twentieth century in these workers’ control over the work process, as well as an increase in mechanization and routinization. Nonetheless, scholars have had to come to grips with a continuing status differential between low-level white-collar workers and manual workers. Their analyses have often foundered upon the problems involved in evoking “false consciousness” as an explanatory tool. The “proletarians in false collars” seem to have missed subjectively the decline in their objective conditions.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, scholars focusing on status and differences in

2. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. ix.

3. Emile Lederer (1912), quoted in Michel Crozier, *The World of the Office Worker*, trans. David Landau (New York: Schocken, 1973), p. 25; see also Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), and Mark Stuart Sandler, “Clerical Proletarianization in Capitalist Development,” diss., Michigan State University, 1979.

consciousness have had a difficult time dealing with the deterioration of low-level white-collar workers' material conditions. Over and over they find themselves unable to explain how these clerical and sales workers maintained a sense of superior status despite the increasingly irrefutable fact that they were, when all was said and done, employees—wage workers. Faced with the contradictions of this sector of the work force, they have looked outside the office, arguing that the ambiguity arises in large part from the “embourgeoisement of the blue-collar employee rather than the proletarianization of the white-collar employee.”<sup>4</sup>

Both groups of scholars, in positing a process by which the status of white-collar workers has changed over time, assume an earlier time at which the division between manual workers and clerical workers was explicit and absolute. Historians, whose work by definition explores changes over time, could be expected to have studied this transition from an earlier state of collar-line clarity. Some historians of clerical work have attempted to do just this, most particularly those exploring the proletarianization of clerical workers. Central to their thesis is a description of the “nineteenth-century office,” a workplace in which a small number of employees shared bonds of common interest and personal relationships with their employers. While these studies describe an increasingly depersonalized office, they do not completely account for the sudden and dramatic increase in the numbers of clerical workers in the late nineteenth century. At the same time they often slight the larger economic changes which engendered that explosion of a previously insignificant portion of the work force.<sup>5</sup>

Virtually all examinations of the changing social status of clerical workers have passed over the ways in which gender operated in the clerical sector. Historians and sociologists often note the growing feminization of clerical work as the nineteenth-century “golden age” of the office waned; however, few of them go beyond a few sentences suggesting possible implications for the promotional opportunities of male office

4. Crozier, *World of the Office Worker*, p. 38; see also David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958). Jürgen Kocka, *White Collar Workers in America, 1890–1940: A Social-Political History in International Perspective* (London: Sage, 1980), combines aspects of both analyses.

5. See Lockwood, *Blackcoated Worker*, pp. 19–35; Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, p. 294; Margery W. Davies, *Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers, 1870–1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); and Sandler, “Clerical Proletarianization in Capitalist Development.” See also Stuart M. Blumin, “The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals,” *American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 299–338.

workers.<sup>6</sup> In fact, acknowledgment of the growing numbers of women in clerical work is often accompanied by the systematic dismissal of female office workers from further analysis. This unfortunate tendency obscures not only the connection between organizational changes in clerical work and the feminization of the work force, but the nature of the social position of clerical work as well.

Recent work by women's historians has begun to reverse this trend by focusing on both the dynamics of the feminization of the office work force and the sexual stratification of office jobs. These studies grew out of questions about the sexual segregation of the labor market as a whole as feminists attempted to explain how women ended up in occupations popularly labeled "women's jobs." Margery Davies and others have clarified the process of feminization in the office and its connection to organizational changes in, and the mechanization of, clerical work. It is, however, intriguing but ultimately inadequate for Davies to tell us that "the nineteenth-century clerk had not turned into a proletarian; he had merely turned into a woman."<sup>7</sup>

Despite feminization, large numbers of male workers also entered the clerical work force during the years before World War I. As Cindy Aron has demonstrated in her study of the atypical office workers of the U.S. government during and after the Civil War, feminization of the office work force affected both male and female workers.<sup>8</sup> One of our challenges is to combine the examination of class and status conducted by those interested in male clerical workers with the insights gained from those who focus on feminization and other gender-related interests.

Examining the determinants of class for women and the ways men

6. Crozier, *World of the Office Worker*, p. 16; Lockwood, *Blackcoated Worker*, p. 125; Kocka, *White Collar Workers in America*, pp. 98–101.

7. Davies, *Woman's Place Is at the Typewriter*, p. 175. See also Elyce J. Rotella, *From Home to Office: U.S. Women at Work, 1870–1930* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1981); Samuel Cohn, *The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing: The Feminization of Clerical Labor in Great Britain* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Cindy S. Aron, "To Barter Their Souls for Gold": Female Clerks in Federal Government Offices, 1862–1890," *Journal of American History* 67 (1981), 835–853; Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Roslyn L. Feldberg, "Proletarianizing Clerical Work: Technology and Organizational Control in the Office," in Andrew Zimbalist, ed., *Case Studies on the Labor Process* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), pp. 51–72; Martin Oppenheimer, "Women Office Workers: Petty-Bourgeoisie or New Proletarians?" *Social Scientist* 40–41 (November–December 1975), 55–75; Jane E. Prather, "When the Girls Move In: A Sociological Analysis of the Feminization of the Bank Teller's Job," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33 (1971), 777–782.

8. Cindy Sondik Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle-Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

experienced gender will help clarify some of the ambiguous status of the clerical sector, but it will still not answer all of our questions. To understand the place of clerical work in the class structure, we need to examine more than just clerical work itself. A major argument of this book is that understanding the impact of clerical work on overall social stratification requires understanding stratification within the manual working class as well. The status of clerical work would perhaps be much clearer in contrast to that of the working class if that working class were itself a monolithic group. However, as the "new labor history" has demonstrated over the past twenty years, the working class did not act or see itself as a seamless whole. The ways in which divisions within the working class affected workers' perceptions of clerical occupations—and clerical workers' perceptions of manual work—highlight many of the ambiguities of the social status of clerical work.

Historians have paid careful attention to the ways that overlapping waves of immigration necessitated not a single "creation of a working class" in the United States, but a continuous process of working-class formation. Ethnicity and its attendant complications have been crucial for understanding society in the United States at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Labor historians, beginning with John R. Commons himself, have always been keenly aware of ethnic divisions in the labor force. In recent years the boundary has often blurred between labor history and ethnic history. The resulting exchange of ideas and information has produced a more nuanced view of the working class than would be possible without such cross-fertilization. We need to remember, though, that just as gender refers to both women and men, ethnicity informs the lives of those who are native-born or assimilated as well as those who wear their ethnic identity on the sleeves of their native costumes.

The continuous processes of migration and assimilation in the United States have often obscured other changes within and around the working class. Not only the country's workers, but also the work they were performing, has changed. Differences in skill, reinforced by ethnicity, gender, and race, divided the working class. Because of the strength of ethnic and racial divisions in the United States, historians of the American working class have had greater difficulty dealing with issues of skill than have European historians. Unhampered by as many coinciding cultural divisions, these scholars have described the ways in which distances between highly skilled and lesser skilled workers have determined a range of organizational, political, and social forms of expression and action. In

particular, they have described how skilled workers have played dual roles, sometimes as the self-conscious leaders of a militant working class and sometimes as the self-interested defenders of the status quo.<sup>9</sup> In the United States skilled workers have demonstrated these same contradictory tendencies.<sup>10</sup> The result has been an ambiguity within the working class at least as great as that seen in clerical workers on the other side of the collar line.

Jürgen Kocka has called upon historians of the working class to use the techniques and findings of social mobility studies in order to explore the question, "What is the relative weight of the 'class line,' the outer boundary of the working class, in structuring social reality?"<sup>11</sup> Both scholars of social mobility and labor historians have generally assumed that this "class line" equals the "collar line" between manual and non-manual occupations. The central goal of this book, however, is to explore the very validity of this equation. Did the collar line function as a major social marker for the turn-of-the-century working class? To begin to uncover the answer to this question, we must understand the context in which the rise of the clerical sector took place, a context that included many competing identities arrayed in constellations of varying complexity.

What we are examining, then, is how the rise of the clerical sector influenced the social organization of class at the turn of the century. By "social organization of class" I mean the combination of objective condi-

9. See Eric Hobsbawm, "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in his *Labouring Men* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), pp. 277–315; Geoffrey Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society: Kentish London, 1840–1880* (London: Croom Helm, 1978); John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1974); Robert Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976); as well as the essays in Eric Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 214–272; James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards' Movement* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973); and Michael P. Hanagan, *The Logic of Solidarity: Artisans and Industrial Workers in Three French Towns, 1871–1914* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

10. See Peter R. Shergold, *Working-Class Life: The "American Standard" in Comparative Perspective, 1899–1913* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982); Andrew Dawson, "The Paradox of Dynamic Technological Change and the Labor Aristocracy in the United States, 1880–1914," *Labor History* 20 (1979), 325–351; Dawson, "The Parameters of Craft Consciousness: The Social Outlook of the Skilled Worker, 1890–1920," in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877–1920s: Recent European Research* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 135–155; and Ronald Schatz, "Union Pioneers: The Founders of Local Unions at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1933–1937," *Journal of American History* 66 (1979), 586–602.

11. Jürgen Kocka, "The Study of Social Mobility and the Formation of the Working Class in the 19th Century," *Le Mouvement Sociale* 111 (April–June 1980), 107.



tions and social perceptions that make up people's ideas about how they fit into the socioeconomic structure of their society.<sup>12</sup> Such an analysis requires investigating overlapping sets of issues; that is, defining our interest as the collar line entails identifying and examining both "sides" of that line. This means studying not only what was happening to office jobs at the turn of the century, but also what was happening to manual jobs at the same time, as well as how all of these changes interacted. In addition, the feminization of some office occupations further demands that we pay special attention to how gender operated on either side of—and across—the collar line.

During the 1890s over a thousand teenagers from the families of manual workers entered the Commercial Department of the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, public high school. They enrolled in such courses as book-keeping, commercial law, penmanship, business customs and correspondence, typewriting, and stenography. While many dropped out of the program within months, almost half graduated two or three years after their entrance. Most of the students were boys, though the proportion of girls rose steadily over the course of the decade. These working-class students joined other students from diverse backgrounds in striving to attain jobs as members of Pittsburgh's expanding office work force.

What did it mean to Pittsburgh's working class—and to individual working-class families—to have its sons and daughters enter clerical positions? Pittsburgh provides a microcosm of the most dramatic effects of monopoly capitalism on life in the United States at the turn of the century. As one commentator proclaimed, "In the revolution that has gone on in the iron trade in the past two and a half years, the changes as they have affected operating and sales departments have had most attention in current trade literature. But in the accounting department the upheaval has been just as great."<sup>13</sup> These simultaneous revolutions in work processes reverberated throughout working-class life in Pittsburgh.

The working-class students of the Commercial Department grew up in Pittsburgh's working-class neighborhoods. However, the working world they eventually entered differed not only from that of their parents but also

12. I am indebted to many conversations with Marjorie L. DeVault for my understanding of the social organization of class. See Dorothy E. Smith, "Women, Class and Family," in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register 1983* (London: Merlin, 1983), pp. 1-44, esp. p. 7.

13. R. R. Shuman, "The Malcontent in Office Organization," *Iron Trade Review*, August 15, 1901, p. 19.

from that of previous office workers. The transformation of clerical work—and workers—at the turn of the century requires that we rethink occupational mobility and its implications for workers in the United States. These women and men took into the office the inheritance of their class and gender, their values and aspirations. The ways in which their work experiences changed them would affect not only their own lives but the entire class structure of the country.

Not all of the young people who enrolled in the Commercial Department actually became clerical workers, but their educational choice in itself is significant. Examining who these young people were can help us to discover the significance of the collar line. Without access to questionnaires, diaries, interviews, or other sources that would tell us more explicitly how students within the Commercial Department viewed their options, we can only let their actions speak for them. Educational choices, by exposing beliefs about which occupations are desirable and which are open, begin to make the social organization of class accessible. Proceeding from this assumption, we can uncover, through their actions, the students' own perceptions of the collar line.

The first chapter of this book sets the stage for this inquiry by describing the transformation of clerical work in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. Within this changing economic context Pittsburgh's Commercial Department provided the city's young people with increasingly important skills, as chapter 2 explains. Chapter 3 examines how the new office jobs fit into Pittsburgh's overall job market. The ways in which family structure and expectations combined with new opportunities for clerical employment are explored in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter contains studies of two working-class neighborhoods that sent disproportionate numbers of skilled workers' children to the Commercial Department. Finally, chapter 6 follows the students of the Commercial Department into their working lives, foreshadowing the impact of the development of the clerical sector on twentieth-century social structure.