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Shostak & Gomberg: Blue Collar World

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BOOK REVIEWS

Blue Collar World. Edited by Arthur B. Shostak and William Gomberg. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1964. Pp. xviii, 622.

For "blue-collar world" read "working-class America." "White collar" stands for the middle class, clerk to corporate head. More is at stake here than descriptive tags based on shirt colors for, during the past two decades, a significant change has been taking place in the structure of our class system. We have come full tilt into the post-industrial society where the need declines for sheer manual labor, and the demand rises sharply for highly skilled technicians to service the new complex equipment and for an army of salaried employees and professional personnel to service the new organizational revolution. In this transition, the skilled worker and the middle-range white collar person have done very well, steadily increasing their share of the consumer goods, social advantages and educational benefits of "the affluent society." But those in the lower reaches of the industrial and clerical hierarchies have been losing ground. The urban poor are increasingly outside the circle of abundance and opportunity. This "new" working class inhabits, in Michael Harrington's phrase, "the other America,"¹ a territory of unemployment and underemployment, inadequate housing and schooling and unstable family and neighborhood patterns. The composition of this population is principally white; but Negroes, a large minority within the minority living below the poverty lines, are especially burdened since racial discrimination intensifies economic problems. Through the complacent Fifties, the growing polarization between a kind of working-class and middle-class elite, on the one hand, and an alienated marginal working class, on the other, went relatively unremarked. Then slowly, here and there, the dismaying facts began to come to light. A series of scholarly and popular books defined the dimensions of the poverty problem. The Government launched a brave, if erratic, "war on poverty." Above all, the Negro Revolution reached a point where racial and economic issues were conjoined as Northern urban Negroes, in particular, found themselves in possession of hard-won civil rights, and yet without the income and resources to properly exploit these breakthroughs. Sit-ins could not create new jobs.

Given this development, it is not surprising that *Blue-Collar World*, while ostensibly about working-class life in general, returns time and again to the special theme of workers who, for one reason or another, are the losers in American society. The editors, an economist (Gomberg) and a sociologist (Shostak) at the University of Pennsylvania, have assembled some sixty essays on the American worker, covering such matters as his style of life, his role as head of the family, his development as an adolescent, his participation in the web of neighborhood and community, his problems of physical and mental illness, his confrontation of the crises of unemployment and retirement and his view of his own proximate future. The contributors are mostly sociologists, a fact which permits the editors to concentrate on the socio-psychological emphasis they prefer. "Is there a style

¹ Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962).

of life peculiar to the blue-collar men who work for a living?" they ask, "and what are its characteristics?"² The advantage of this strategy is that the contributors are freed from the overwhelmingly difficult task of developing proposals to cope with the underlying economic conditions which give rise to the worker style of life and which provide a touchstone to the special despair of the marginal poor described above. With a few exceptions, the contributors are not inclined to raise troubling questions about "the system," much less to enter sweeping indictments as to what is wrong, in the manner of a Veblen or a C. Wright Mills. I will comment later on this deficiency in what is otherwise a useful and, at times, a valuable book.

The contributions to *Blue-Collar World* are highly varied in method and merit (it is a commonplace to have some such phrase in a book review of collections of this type but that makes the situation no less true—and, in any event, one could not summarize each essay). But because the volume is addressed basically to middle-class readers, professional people in and out of the academy, it is perhaps worthwhile to indicate at least one middle-class reader's impressions of the principal threads which run most consistently through the book. First, we in the middle class, even where we reject those simple-minded stereotypes of working-class people (lazy, passive, hedonistic), are not attuned with sufficient sensitivity to the complex differentiation *within* that broad category—"blue-collar people." As S. M. Miller observes,³ we need a much sharper demarcation of poor people: some are relatively stable in both economic and familial patterns, some are stronger in one sphere or the other, while the truly unstable cannot cope with either sphere. The working class family is indeed disorganized in certain respects; it is, at the same time, surprisingly resilient in the face of numerous strains. Edgar Friedenberg⁴ and a number of other contributors⁵ are persuasive in their argument that we do little for the drifting, unemployed youth and drop-out by simply exhorting him to "stay in school." Would it not be equally sensible to consider what kind of school and what kind of work would make more sense *to him*? In a study of manual workers who follow the American ethos and quit working for others to go into small business for themselves, Professors Kurt Mayer and Sidney Goldstein show that the hazards are as currently predicted: sixty per cent of the former workers go under within two years. But they also show that if a worker is realistic—if he forgets rags-to-riches and plans for a modest improvement—he can still "make it."⁶ These and many other illuminating insights are scattered through this book. The reader has to be alert for them, however, for in a number of instances, a perceptive remark is buried in pedantry. (The worst offender is a sociologist who, writing on gambling and working-class leisure, is con-

² P. xiii.

³ Miller, *The American Lower Classes: A Typological Approach*, p. 9, 10-11.

⁴ Friedenberg, *An Ideology of School Withdrawal*, p. 176.

⁵ E.g., Dansereau, *Work and the Teen-Age Blue Collarite*, p. 183; Miller, *The Outlook of Working Class Youth*, p. 122.

⁶ Mayer & Goldstein, *Manual Workers as Small Businessmen*, p. 537.

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strained to write the term bookmaker in quotes as "bookmaker."⁷ Did his informants tell their story to a "sociologist"?)

A second and decisive leitmotif is the recurrent portrait of the blue-collar worker as the *Negro* worker. Within the working class, the bulk of the poverty-stricken are white but, proportionately, the Negro urban poor constitutes the largest bloc of the dissatisfied and the discouraged. There, in the dark ghettos, the cumulative effects of chronic unemployment, bigotry and slum pressures have been relentlessly piling up. Yet the Negro urban poor remains sealed off from the white middle class and elite workers, and even the Negro leaders must grope for new ways to reach their own people. Something of this desperate situation comes through in the many articles touching on the black man in blue collar. But because the central concern is more with social and psychological problems than with the structure of the economic system, a large and unsettling question somehow gets divided off into a number of smaller ones, e.g., a study of the sardonic humor you would obviously expect from Negro working-class television spectators watching what passes for "real life" on the little screen.⁸ Again, it is S. M. Miller who writes, even if too briefly, of the coming confluence of class and race, and it is he who raises the issue of the future political weight of an urban "colored poor" comprised of Negroes and the Spanish-speaking minorities.⁹

Third, and finally, almost every writer alludes to the connection between what C. Wright Mills used to call private troubles and public issues. While some of the studies focus on the stable upper-working-class group and its increasing tendency to behave in some dimensions like middle-class people, most center on the problem of the poverty group, the most distressed in the working class. And, whatever the complexities and exceptions-to-the-rule, the tensions and frustrations in this segment of our population—perhaps thirty to forty million people—are there, beyond dispute. As I noted at the outset, many contributors are thoroughly aware of the poverty question and write perceptively about it. Nonetheless, I find it puzzling that so few among them are willing to risk moving beyond the private socio-psychological troubles of the poverty-stricken to the public issues involved in the persistence of poverty in the midst of plenty. Space precludes documenting this assertion, but let me cite at least a brace of examples of special interest to readers of this journal. Why, for instance, does no essay treat the important question of the confrontation of blue-collar people with the law? In a society which prides itself on equal justice for all, what happens to the poor, the white and particularly the Negro poor, when they are caught up in the cycle of arrest, police interrogation and the court? Does the court-appointed lawyer do what the ethos of justice says he is supposed to do? Here is a *structural* question of grave import. Or consider the issue of credit: Our society, with its paper economy, has now built into the system the

⁷ Zola, *Observations on Gambling in a Lower-Class Setting*, p. 435, 436.

⁸ Blum, *Lower Class Negro Television Spectators: The Concept of Pseudo-Jovial Scepticism*, p. 429.

⁹ Miller, *Some Thoughts on Reform*, p. 298, 302-04.

extension of credit to working-class people in an extraordinary degree. These people would otherwise be sharply limited in obtaining the consumer goods they want, or have been persuaded to want, *now*. Evidently we would not have it otherwise. Why defer gratification? Still, there are ominous overtones here. Is it too easy for a worker to get in too deep? Above all, do working class people know exactly what they have contracted for *legally* in charges and interest? How much blue-collar anxiety is tied into a credit structure which could last a man's lifetime? Obviously credit is necessary and functional; it would be foolish to argue otherwise. But David Caplovitz, writing on "The Problem of Blue-Collar Consumers,"¹⁰ in my judgment the best essay in the book, raises another important structural question: "Society in effect now presents the poor credit risks with the unpalatable choice of not possessing major durables, thereby forfeiting whatever self-respect and comfort is to be derived from consumption, or being exploited in this marketing system."¹¹

These strictures to one side, *Blue-Collar World* does accomplish what it sets out to do—to present a portrait of certain aspects of working-class life in America in the Sixties. Browsing selectively and holding his preconceptions in check, the middle-class professional will find here glimpses of a world he does not know well enough and should know better. Yes, Virginia, there *is* a working class in our middle-class society, and it contains both the contented and the despairing in full measure.

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¹⁰ P. 110.

¹¹ P. 120.