

## Caversham Working Paper, 1996-4

### Pre-Industrial and Industrial as Analytical Categories

In attempting to construct an occupational classification, either for Caversham or New Zealand, one of the central conceptual difficulties is created by change over time. Occupations die and others emerge. Sometimes, as pointed out, the same occupational label remains in use although the nature of the work actually done by a worker so described undergoes a change. In many cases that change is radical and can entail a shift from one class category to another. The theoretical literature is weak on this matter, and has been since Braverman's heroic effort to rescue the old Marxist paradigm. A new conceptual distinction has emerged, however, which purports to identify the central nature of many of these changes, and that is pre-industrial and industrial.

There have been many attempts to identify the nature of this transition, one already examined briefly in relations to skilled trades where an artisanal vocabulary became overlaid with an industrial one. Perhaps the first major effort both to identify the nature of the distinction and its significance was Herbert Gutman's 'Work, Culture and Society in Industrialising America, 1915-1919'.<sup>1</sup> He defined pre-industrial in terms of 'traditional' values, which he then defined with another slippery conceptual label 'pre-capitalist', and contrasted such a society with modern-industrial society where 'time is money' and the Protestant work ethic is central.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the merits of Gutman's distinction the United States, the focus of his analysis, recruited so many immigrants from feudal-peasant societies in southern and eastern Europe that he had clearly identified an important dimension of cultural dissonance even if he had failed to define it satisfactorily. Pre-industrial was evoked by peasant, rural, village etc. and, transposed into industrialising America, resulted in irregular work habits, high rates of absenteeism, resistance to the disciplines of clock time, and a proliferation of customary holidays. It should be noted that in contrasting 'pre-industrial' with 'industrial' values he drew on a long analytical tradition, originating in the Scottish Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century when men struggled to identify the origins and consequences of industrialisation, and sustained by the social-democratic and

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<sup>1</sup>*American Historical Review*, vol. (June 1973), pp.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 552.

socialist traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Sidney Pollard, for instance, in investigating the origins of factory discipline, cited Werner Sombart's passionate declaration that industrial society 'needed ... part humans: soulless, depersonalised, disembodied, who could become members, or little wheels rather, of a complex mechanism.'<sup>3</sup>

Gutman used 'pre-industrial' and 'industrial' as ideal types, although he also used his prose to translate these analytical devices into the sense of lives lived and an actual social world. D.T. Rodgers identified this sleight of hands in 'Tradition, Modernity, and the American Industrial Worker', pointing out that the evidence did not support quite such a simple and clear shift from radically distinct 'pre-industrial' to 'industrial'.<sup>4</sup> By the same token, where Gutman stressed the importance of the Protestant Work Ethic in transforming pre-industrial immigrants into industrial workers, ambitious for success and industrious in their habits, Rodgers tends to blur the neat association of Protestantism with ambition and industrious habits.

Gutman was undoubtedly influenced by another great historian, E.P. Thompson, whose essay on 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism' has long been considered seminal.<sup>5</sup>

see also Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and David Montgomery, 'The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780-1830', *Labor History*, vol. 9 (1968), pp. For Brody's review of Gutman's book see *AHR*, vol. 82 (1977), pp. 195-96.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Factory Discipline in the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, vol. 6 (1963), p. 254.

<sup>4</sup> *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. (1977),

<sup>5</sup> *Past and Present*, 38 (1967)