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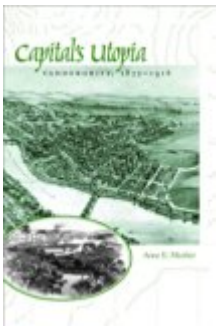

Anne E. Mosher. *Capital's Utopia: The Steel Industry's Search for Urban Order at Vandergrift, 1854-1916.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. x + 249 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-7381-2.

Reviewed by Henry McKiven

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A premise of the author's argument is that a change in the mode of production in the late-nineteenth-century iron industry initiated a process that led to the ascendancy of "capital" in the United States. Essential to this transformation was the application of technology to processes traditionally controlled by craftsmen. In no industry was change more jarring than in the iron and steel industry. As Mosher carefully explains, the shift from iron to steel production entailed the application of technology that ultimately reduced the power of workers by reducing or eliminating the need for skilled workers. At the same time, opportunities for local farmers and others to find work in the growing steel industry sharply increased. This transformation generated tension between some workers and management, but many other workers sought the new jobs being created as the industry modernized. Now-redundant skilled workers, most affiliated with the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, went on strike in an effort to preserve their status in the industry. Management defeated the strike by elevating unskilled and semiskilled workers. Unskilled and semiskilled workers willingly took higher status jobs, which paid more, operating modern machinery.

According to Mosher, the president of Apollo Iron and Steel, George McMurtry, decided to construct a model industrial town for employees of the company. McMurtry was influenced by the ideas of George Pullman and others in the United States and Europe who believed that the behavior of workers was intimately connected to the environment in which they lived. Thus McMurtry hired the firm of Frederick Law Olmstead to create a plan for a town filled with curved streets, appealing houses on large lots, and plenty of open spaces. Well schooled in the shortcomings of "model communities" that rented housing to workers, such as Pullman, McMurtry insisted that houses in Vandergrift be affordable so the men could purchase them. Because of concerns about expense and popular taste, not every detail of the Olmstead plan was ultimately implemented. For example, the company reduced lot sizes so it could sell more houses and later, upon expansion, adopted the grid pattern of streets. However, the fundamental emphasis on a pleasing environ-

ment and home ownership remained until the company's merger with U.S. Steel. Expansion and continued deskilling of the work force brought an increased number of absentee landlords, renters, and boarding houses.

Mosher's clearly written work joins a number of recent studies that have explored the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century interest in the relationship between worker behavior and their lives away from the workplace. As she correctly emphasizes, employers became increasingly concerned with worker loyalty as they faced union challenges to the consequences of the transformation of work, which Mosher describes in detail and very well. While technological innovation probably did not originate from a primary desire to expand class power, as Mosher suggests, it did, by undermining the power of skilled workers, enhance the ability of management to fend off labor unions under certain market conditions.

Workers who benefited from welfare capitalism were less likely to go on strike, unless, of course, the employer failed to meet employees' expectations or they had better choices elsewhere. As studies of southern textile mill villages have demonstrated, welfare capitalism was the product of negotiation between employer and employee. Welfare capitalism, then, was not simply a reflection of the interests of the "capitalist class," as Mosher argues. Mosher uncritically accepts statements by union leaders that construct the actions of McMurtry in terms of class conflict. She does not provide conclusive evidence that social control was McMurtry's central concern. It is telling that Mosher frequently employs the construction "may have" to introduce assertions about motives. For example, she states on page 80 that McMurtry "may have been trying to use home ownership to maintain social control." To be fair, Mosher did not have the sources she needed to assess motive, but she could have offered several possible explanations for the emphasis on home ownership and chose the labor movement's explanation. Perhaps, McMurtry responded to workers' desire to own property and to live in reasonably pleasant communities. He did not have to "manipulate" many Americans, or immigrants for that matter, in order to convince them of the benefits of home ownership. While union members viewed the creation of Vandergrift as a reflection of class interests and paternalism, most others embraced an alternative view that emphasized rewards of hard work.

McMurtry may have been concerned with competition from others and decided the way to attract employees was to offer them what they wanted and what unions could not provide. Such a policy promoted social order but did not necessarily enhance social control. Indeed, by offering men a stake in their communities, McMurtry and his successors, it appears, also accepted their control of their communities. Perhaps power in the community was the trade-off for the loss of power at work. Maybe American workers and immigrants willingly exchanged improvements in their standard of living for control at work. Or, maybe work was not as alienating as Mosher suggests. After all, many of the men who went to work in the steel industry derived pleasure and status from operating some of the most modern machinery in the world. Mosher does not consider these possibilities or others as she tendentiously makes her case for capitalist economic and social hegemony.

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