

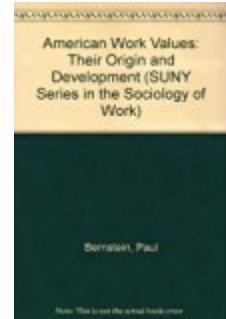
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Paul Bernstein. *American Work Values: Their Origin and Development*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. viii + 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-7914-3215-0.

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Bernstein surveys a massive literature about work values and attitudes, including a wide array of primary sources. The bibliography is some sixty-six pages and runs the gamut from original Puritan expositions of the “Protestant ethic” through some of the most recent opinion surveys on work attitudes. Someone interested in this field should check this book if for the bibliography alone.

As the bibliography makes clear, this is a book with a wide sweep. Bernstein documents the development of American work values, attitudes, and practices from the earliest colonial years through the 1990s. He organizes his material around four “continuities” or themes: 1) the search for job security; 2) the belief in work as opportunity; 3) the evolving work ethic (starting with the religious view of work as “calling” and ending with the contemporary “worth ethic”); 4) the debate over the community’s obligation to those without work.

Perhaps as interesting are the “discontinuities” that mark the transitions between the several stages of development that Bernstein delimits. The era of the Puritan ethic, Bernstein says, lasted into the first part of the eighteenth century; this was when work was understood as a divine calling. The second era, work as opportunity, began with Benjamin Franklin and lasted through much of the nineteenth century; one worked for utilitarian goals, and virtues became means to an end. As Bernstein surveys the present century, he discovers at least three distinct eras: the era of efficiency (Taylorism), the “human relations” era, and a new “human resources” era.

Common to all the eras are the four “continuities,” which play out in ways unique to each era. For example, the Puritan notion of the “deserving and undeserving poor” shares much with the welfare-reform concepts of the 1990s, including similar perceptions of the motives

of the poor.

For each of his eras, Bernstein describes both the work values articulated by the dominant members of society (whether Puritan clergymen or top business managers) as well as the counter values of the economically weak members of society. This is an intriguing approach, but it has its weaknesses. The articulate members of society leave a rich source of writings to be mined. The poor, unemployed, or enslaved, leave far less of a record, and Bernstein often is forced to infer their values. This problem gets worse the further one goes back in time. In the present era, Bernstein can rely on opinion surveys and the like to get a reading of the values of the otherwise inarticulate; however, in the colonial era it is much more difficult to infer the values of those without a voice. Would the economically weak have held the counter values Bernstein has inferred, or might they have internalized the dominant values after all?

Value systems are important in understanding human behavior (probably as much as maximization models), and Bernstein makes a meaningful contribution in expositing them. However, his work suffers from some weaknesses. It is ironic that Bernstein writes more clearly and is more convincing in his analysis of earlier centuries than the present one. In dealing with values in the twentieth century, Bernstein becomes unclear and much less convincing. He tends to equate changing management practices (Taylorism, welfare capitalism, etc.) with changes in values. Surely value systems are more fundamental than passing management practices and are rooted more deeply in the society at large; consequently values should have more staying power than management strategies. Does management’s adoption of, or giving up of, say, time-and-motion studies really represent

a change in a whole society's values? Or are management practices merely an adaptation at the margins of more enduring societal values? It is difficult to believe that there have been at least three different major values eras in the twentieth century; surely values have more staying power than that. The management practices and philosophies that Bernstein equates with twentieth-century American work values seem to be far less deeply rooted in the culture than, say, the utilitarian values of a Benjamin Franklin, which some commentators argue are with us still.

Another weakness of the book is that Bernstein allows the abundant data of the twentieth century to drown his ideas. He writes more convincingly of the dominant values of earlier centuries, it seems to me, precisely because he sticks to values clearly articulated by good representatives of their times. In his discussion of recent years Bernstein seems to get bogged down citing almost any court case, election result, opinion-survey result, or researcher's observation that has any relation to work. The result is somewhat disjointed and unconvincing.

Bernstein's treatment of Affirmative Action in the workplace provides a good example of the weakness of his treatment of the present century. After pages of details about Affirmative Action's genesis and evolution, Bernstein ends with a seven-line paragraph that con-

cludes that Affirmative Action simultaneously affirms and denies key American work values; hence, presumably, the mixed response to Affirmative Action and its mixed prospects. This reader would have expected the emphasis to be reversed: Bernstein should have given a short explanation of Affirmative Action, then have given a detailed analysis of why the program both taps into and simultaneously rejects central American values.

In sum, this book provides a solid overview of the development of American work values, attitudes, and practices over several centuries. Bernstein does a very good job until he reaches the twentieth century. In fact, his chapter on the Puritan work ethic is superior. The unstated thesis of the book, that fundamental values are central to understanding economic behavior, is indisputable. Therefore, works like this one enhance our understanding of economic behavior, and complement other, more abstract, methods of analysis. Finally, the bibliography alone makes the book worthwhile.

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