

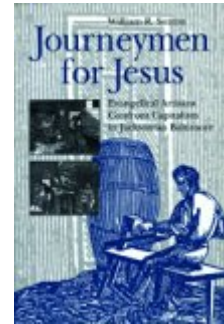
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William R. Sutton. *Journeyman for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. xvi + 351 pp. \$36.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-01773-0; \$94.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-271-01772-3.

William R. Sutton. *Journeyman for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. xvi + 351 pp.

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Labor historians have often urged each other to take more seriously the role of religion in the lives of the working class, but while many have called for this type of analysis, few have taken up the call. Perhaps labor historians feel nervous entering the world of intellectual history or are worried about whether faith is an appropriate topic for social science. Yet important scholars of labor, such as E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, show the rich fruits to be gained from investigating workers' religious words and thoughts. These studies take the intellectual world of workers as seriously as their material world. William Sutton's study shows once again the benefit of combining labor and intellectual history.

Journeyman for Jesus is the complex but rewarding story of the relationship between artisans and evangelicalism in the antebellum era. Looking predominantly at one denomination in one city - namely Methodism in Baltimore - Sutton weaves together two related stories. The first is the reaction of skilled artisans to the pressures of modern liberal capitalism and the second is the changing and often ambivalent role of evangelical religion within that emerging new society. Joining these two tales together is a cast of evangelical workers whose interconnected vision of work and faith shaped their responses to the market revolution.

Sutton's work taps into two related debates in antebellum history. Scholars such as Sean Wilentz have raised the question of whether antebellum artisans, who led strikes and riots but at other times were aspiring mas-

ter workmen and emerging capitalists, were class conscious or not. Indeed, the question of when artisans became workers (with all the class connotations that that implies) is one often investigated in studies of labor in this era. The second debate, discussed by scholars such as Paul Johnson, is whether evangelicalism in this era was a class-based phenomenon. While considering these issues, Sutton suggests that these in fact may not be the central questions. Instead, he seeks to ask how employers and employees alike used their faith to understand a world in which notions of status (and class) were in perpetual flux.

Chapter One uses a dramatic series of journeyman strikes in the early 1830s as a segue into the tense, shifting world of antebellum Baltimore's workplaces. The city was in a period of change as small shops gave way to increasingly large-scale manufacturing establishments, shaking up mutualistic labor relationships between masters and journeymen artisans in which "relatively equal power relationships" gave way to new employer/employee-type relationships (29). Sutton places this within the shift from a "producerist" society, in which a product's value lay in the labor needed to produce it, to a "liberal, capitalist" society in which the market determined value of both product and worker. Strikes broke out over wage rates, working conditions, and outsourcing of less skilled parts of the production process to cheaper labor. This was especially prevalent in skilled professions such as coopering and hatmaking where increased consumer demand gave master workmen the op-

portunity to increase production and profit.

What Sutton highlights in this first chapter are the religious metaphors and arguments developed by both striking artisans and the master workmen they struck against to explain their actions. The strikers protested wages and conditions in moral as much as economic terms. Most popular was the claim, based on Isaiah 3.15, that the owners were “grinding the faces of the poor” by lowering wages to a point where families could not afford to eat. Sutton details how “traditional Protestant morality and religious understanding of work were central to artisan culture” (31). Religion went far beyond church attendance; labor was a sacred act and “greed” an unchristian desire. Sutton reminds us that the Second Great Awakening created an evangelicalism in which total submission to God’s will was followed by a new power to improve oneself and society too. Thus, conversion could provide the basis for artisan “activism regarding the creation of godly social structures or oppositionalism in the face of impious social constructions” (58). On the other hand, this energetic evangelical individualism also had the power to emphasize the “sacrosanctity of individual freedom” and to see acquisitiveness as manifestation of an industrious nature. While this never reached the “crass Social Darwinism” of upper-class Gilded Age evangelicalism, it provided master workmen and investors with biblical license to embrace energetic capitalism (59). Sutton raises a fundamental issue here - one that labor historians interested in religion have struggled over. If there were evangelicals on both sides of these labor disputes, did evangelicalism or even religion really make a difference? The author suggests that it was this very fluidity that made evangelicalism such a powerful tool to understand change in a “cultural environment still under construction” (40).

Having fleshed out the complexity of evangelicalism in the context of labor, Sutton shifts in the next two chapters to the religious arena and documents the development of a new denomination -Methodist Protestantism - by frustrated populists within the Methodist Episcopal Church. The ambivalence about “power and authority” evident among religious artisans also existed within the Methodist denomination. Despite its hierarchical church structure, in which ministers were chosen by the powerful bishops, Methodism had an anti-authoritarian history in America that appeared under threat in the 1830s as the church became increasingly wealthy and respectable. Dissenters in New York, Baltimore and other Methodist centers criticized the lack of lay participation in decision making, particularly over the granting of itineran-

cies (which gave one a license to preach and the possibility of employment as a minister). The most radical dissenters or “populists,” as Sutton refers to them, also called for women and African Americans to have more voice in the denomination.

Men like William Stockton, a bookseller, temperance advocate, and sometime politician criticized the worldliness and greed of his own denomination. Representing “evangelical populism at its purest,” men like Stockton, often self taught and of humble means, felt called to be preachers themselves but grew frustrated as they were recommended for license by their congregations but refused again and again by the bishops (85). Matters came to a head at the 1827 Annual Conference which met that year in Baltimore. Part of the role of the conference was for the bishops to examine current and prospective itinerants and make appointments for the coming year. When the bishops rejected Dennis Dorsey, a outspoken, radical itinerant, local populists were enraged, especially as the decision took away the livelihood of a man with a family to support.

Finally, the radicals broke from the church and decided to form their own denomination, the Methodist Protestant Church. Yet, as Sutton shows, their efforts to create a radical, producerist church were dashed. The exigencies of building and funding a new denomination led the new church leaders to reevaluate issues of authority and independence, as they accepted money from capitalists and sought “respectability.” To do so meant downplaying the role of women and minorities in the church, and avoiding entanglement in controversial political or labor issues. While the denomination flourished (spreading from Baltimore into Maryland, Ohio, and elsewhere), the radical agenda of lay participation and egalitarianism was lost.

While these two fascinating chapters on Methodist Protestantism highlight the tricky relationship between radical populism and church building, it is not always clear how this section fits into the main narrative. Sutton never makes clear who exactly joined the new church and whether it included artisans, although this may reflect a paucity of sources rather than any omission. What is clear is that the men who eventually formed the Methodist Protestant church used the same anti-capitalist, producerist language as the city’s evangelical artisans and experienced the same ambivalence about respectability and acquisitiveness.

Chapters Four and Five return the action to the shopfloor, as Baltimore’s journeymen artisans renewed

their organizing efforts in the late 1830s, and further explore the issues raised in the first chapter. Sutton is quick to remind us that not all artisanal activity was oppositional and workers could be upwardly mobile too. Many master workmen were sympathetic to the journeymen and supported them in their strikes against unjust employers. Artisans, for their part, exhibited a real ambivalence toward their masters; it is too easy to talk of a solid new class conscious anti-employer stance. For example, on July 4, 1833, artisans held a party in Baltimore in which they toasted the masters. Just days later, the hatters and cigarmakers went on strike against those very same bosses. Artisans were torn between blaming particular unjust individual masters for their poor working conditions and blaming the system of innovative capitalism itself. Producerist critiques increasingly “came to describe an intrinsically immoral system, not just a collection of unjust individuals” (154). Customers, too, were part of this oppressive new liberalism, and artisans lashed out at consumers who simply bought the cheapest product without regard to the terms of production.

In response to such an unjust system, workers began to organize in Baltimore, most notably in the multi-trade Workingmen’s Trade Union (or WMTU), which had parallels in New York and Philadelphia. The WMTU showed remarkable brotherhood throughout the early 1830s, as artisans supported fellow workers in other trades during strikes. The city’s printers, for example, printed leaflets for striking hatters. Occasionally, brotherhood extended to sisters too, as male tailors supported striking seamstresses in the city in 1833. The seamstresses also used the language and morality of evangelical producerism as they complained that they deserved a living wage as many were widows and entirely responsible for their families.

But the WMTU worked within the increasingly fractious political atmosphere of Jacksonian Baltimore. By the mid-1830s, after victories for the Ten Hour Day and other improvements, artisans moved into politics and at the same time ruptured their solidarity. Matters came to a head in August, 1835, as a four day riot broke out in the city in response to the collapse of the Bank of Maryland. Rioting crowds attacked bank directors and their homes, and several people were killed in shoot-outs in the city’s streets. The WMTU was not involved in any official way and artisans were present both in the rioting crowds and in the volunteer police force who tried to stop them. But the riot had an impact as artisans divided over the controversial issue of whether the state legislature should reimburse the wealthy bank men who had lost their homes.

In the long term, Sutton notes, the riot helped the public shift from fear of tyranny to fear of anarchy, and union activity increasingly could be placed in the latter. Other signs indicated that liberal ideas had permeated the cultural mainstream, replacing producerism as a unifying ideal. The closed shop, one of the bases of the skilled artisan system, seemed out of place and anti-competitive in the increasingly capitalist society. Brotherliness also appeared outdated, particularly if it hurt one’s own interests: in 1836, Baltimore artisans refused to help their union brothers in New York City who had been imprisoned under new anti-union laws.

The new liberal respectability appeared to have spread among artisan leaders themselves. Instead of the usual parade and fund-raiser, the WMTU held a Fancy Ball to raise money and invited many of the city’s civic leaders. The ball was to raise money for a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. Even though Bruce Laurie has suggested that these sort of educational organizations had a radicalizing potential, Sutton sees the Baltimore society, as well as the ball itself as indication of the increasing respectability of union leadership. The political successes of some Baltimore artisans also distracted artisanal leaders from the unions, suggesting that politics rather than union organizing might be the way to effect change. Even before the Panic of 1837, the unions, particularly communal efforts like the WMTU, declined as a popular oppositional force.

The final pair of chapters review the relationship between artisan struggle and evangelicalism, and show the legacy of evangelical artisanal culture in the changed economic and social climate of the 1840s. Chapter Five pulls together evangelical church building and artisanal struggle to ask what exactly was the role of evangelicals in the trade unions and other organizations, and, conversely, what was the role of artisans within their denominations. Sutton reiterates that the inherent values necessary for both evangelical church builders and organizing trade unions - “self discipline, character-building, deferred gratification, ethical economic behavior, and consideration of the larger good”- were the same (218). He also notes how scholars have seen habits of “frugality, industry and punctuality” as top down values imposed by capitalists to create docile, hardworking employees (219). Sutton’s own study indicates that these values were as much bottom up as top down.

Evangelical artisans were ambiguous about their self identification within their denominations. Sutton uses Columbia Street Methodist Episcopal Church, built in the

early 1840s, to illustrate this ambivalence. Artisans asked the denomination for help establishing a new church in this working-class part of the city. Church leaders grudgingly established a mission church there in 1840, but the members chafed at being considered a mission of a richer church and pushed for independence. Within a few years the church was self-supporting and a 1841 revival was led by artisan preachers: evidence that the artisans asserted “control of their collective life”(223).

Refocusing his attention on the role of these evangelicals in trade unions, Sutton, again focusing on the Methodists, attempts to count how many evangelicals joined such organizations. As any scholar who has attempted to match church membership lists with other sources knows, this can be a frustrating task. The records are fragmentary, but Sutton pulls together church lists, newspapers, personal papers, and union records, to show that many leading union activists, as well as many master workmen, were indeed evangelicals. In an interesting section, the author shifts from journeymen artisans to factory workers. The most important industrial development in 1840s Baltimore was the rise of large-scale textile factories on the edge of the city. These mills have been usually seen as ripe grounds for paternalistic owners to inculcate workers with appropriate religious messages of obedience and hard work. Yet, they were also a place for radical, populist evangelicals to reach out to a working-class audience, and Sutton’s research shows that oftentimes textile workers chose humble, working-class preachers over more elite ministers, and employers unquestioningly footed the bill. As such, “nascent factory paternalism...was more complex than the mere rationalization of exploitation” (245).

But the capitalist developments that brought the textile mills to Baltimore, as well as the economic upheavals of the Panic of 1837, put artisans under deep financial pressure. By the 1840s, the union movement had been shattered by economic hardship and evangelicals began to move their religious focus from collective producerist equality at the workplace to the issue of the moral individual. A new vision of “church communities serving members as havens from the vicious dislocations of metropolitan industrialization” emerged, and workingmen’s trade unions were replaced with workingmen’s temperance and Sabbatarian organizations (258). Temperance was a particular concern; the economic stress of the decade has increased alcoholism among workers,

and individual moral salvation took on a new importance. But Sutton ends by suggesting that the ideas and language of collective producerism could still have powerful resonance. Even in the throes of Gilded Age monopoly capitalism, producerism, particularly religious producerism, undergirded the Knights of Labor, Populism, and even “Debsian socialism” (316).

This is a fine work, with much for readers interested in the nineteenth century, labor, or religious culture to ponder. At times, the structure of the book is hard to follow. We might have been given more of an overview at the start, particularly to help the reader understand the chapter pairings. The strength of the work is Sutton’s skill in uncovering the artisan’s religious world; his familiarity with the language and metaphors of evangelicalism allow him to interpret language and see connections that other labor historians, less trained in nineteenth-century biblical exegesis, might miss. And he is helped by the richness of his sources; discourse in evangelical Baltimore was played out in variety of extant newspapers, newsletters and pamphlets. Of course, these sources have their limits, telling us, for example, little about the religious worlds of women and African Americans, some of whom were both artisans and evangelicals.

Recent events such as the protests outside the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle show that even in our world of seemingly omnipotent global capitalism, labor and other activists are still rethinking the relationship between capitalism and morality. Sutton’s artisans used their evangelical world view to confront capitalism; today’s protesters have more diverse though perhaps less coherent ideologies with which to face the inequities of contemporary capitalism.

(A quick final word about the look of the book. It has a number of minor but annoying typographical errors that a copyeditor could easily have fixed. But the press more than redeems itself by the inclusion of a wonderful set of engravings of artisans at work which begin each chapter [though unfortunately, I could not find a citation for them].)

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