

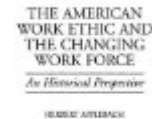
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Herbert Applebaum. *The American Work Ethic and the Changing Work Force: An Historical Perspective.* Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998. xvii + 228 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-30677-8.

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The *American Work Ethic* surveys American's ideological outlook toward work from the colonial period to the present. The book is divided into three sections – the colonial period, the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century – which allows Herbert Applebaum simultaneously to present the development of industrialization with the changing voices and identities of the work force. The book begins by explaining that “[a] strong work ethic emphasizes the moral superiority of work over idleness, pride in craft over carelessness, [and] earned income over unearned income” (x). This conventional notion of the work ethic, Applebaum reminds readers, differed with interpretations from colonial housewives maintaining home manufacturing and slaves being robbed of the fruits of their labor.

As the factories of the nineteenth century emerged and “[t]he craftsman’s work ethic of independence gave way to a work ethic of dependence”(67) because of deskilling, men, women, Blacks, and immigrants found themselves as low paid unskilled laborers. A desire for self-sufficiency remained as many laborers continued to believe that “untiring labor [was] necessary for the good of the economy,” but they also realized that their hard work allowed the hegemonic class to grow wealthier (94).

In his section on the twentieth century, Applebaum deals with the growing scholarship which insists that we have seen “of the demise of the work ethic”(133). The establishment of permanent wage workers, a greater desire for leisure time, and the increase in mass production jobs allowing corporations to view people as disposable have transformed attitudes toward work. Applebaum dismisses the notion that the work ethic is extinct; he contends that like the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century attitudes toward work

took on and will take on new meanings. *The American Work Ethic* suggests that even though robots will compose future factory work forces, someone will have to fix these mechanical laborers. The work ethic of high tech workers will become one that “will include constant education and re-education. . . . [T]he work ethic of the high-tech age will be one that will require workers to accept change and uncertainty along with new assignments and new challenges”(151-152). Indeed, as these three sections tell readers, there has never been one work ethic because the fluidity of the American economy continually affects workplace culture and attitudes.

The greatest strength of *The American Work Ethic* is its sub-theme, the transformation of industrialization. This is an excellent single volume account of the evolution of American industrial development. Applebaum continually reminds us that the differing voices and varying occupations performed by American workers leads to a matrix of beliefs and therefore sets of work ethics rather than a single ideological outlook toward our jobs. Yet, this story of evolving work ethics and altered work environments is not a new one.

Applebaum tells us his work is a synthesis from the beginning, however, it may be a bit of an over-synthesis. Applebaum sees the work ethic everywhere. He first explains it as being linked to the republican beliefs of farmers and artisans and reinterpreted by colonial women and slaves to fit their circumstances. With the rise of nineteenth century factories increasing capitalist hegemony, Applebaum seems unsure as how to explain the ethos of work. Indeed he is correct to draw our attention to the complexities of the work ethic, but he has the work ethic

encompassing both David Montgomery's conception of workers' control and Max Weber's synthesis of Protestantism and the desire for profit.

Despite this problem, *The American Work Ethic* performs its task. Applebaum synthesizes America's industrial history and mixes in the voices of farmers, crafts-

men, women, African-Americans, immigrants, and capitalists.

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