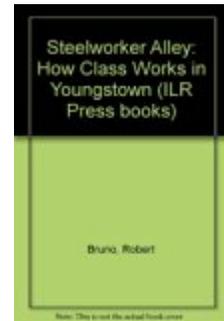


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Bruno. *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999. x + 222 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8600-5; \$57.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3439-6.

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The Rediscovery of Class

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Some time ago, a curious thing happened. It occurred with almost no fanfare or public comment. Marxists or leftists in history and the social sciences in the American academy stopped believing in class. In its place they substituted race, gender, and/or sexual preference. Although the ideologies of the left, it could be argued, had become bankrupt even with class-based analysis, without it the leftist project veered into the realm of inadvertent self-parody, since Marxism without class was scarcely Marxism. Yet, the sudden disappearance of class as a meaningful analytical category left a large void that has not been filled.

In *Steelworker Alley*, Robert Bruno argues convincingly that class is real and it matters. Bruno's book is based on interviews with retired steelworkers in Youngstown, Ohio, a city dominated until quite recently by a few major employers, mainly Republic Steel and Youngstown Sheet and Tube. The son of a steelworker himself, the author covers the period from the end of World War II to the end of Youngstown's steel producing days in the 1980s. The workers he studies are largely Italian, Croatian, Puerto Rican, and African American. Other major groups, such as Poles, do not appear.

This book contains three main strengths and three main weaknesses. Its first, and perhaps most important strength is that Bruno bucks the trend of contemporary academe by taking blue-collar workers, especially white ethnic blue-collar workers, seriously. He inter-

views steelworkers and their wives, listens to their stories, allows them to speak, and treats what they have to say with respect. The book is dedicated in part to "working class people, like my parents, who never thought they were important enough." Perhaps the strongest and most charming part of the book is the author's engagement with his own steelworker father, whose unknown life first sparks Bruno's interest. The author's father is a fairly taciturn man who, when the subject turns to his life in the steel mill, becomes animated: "He went off without a push. His body sat erect in the chair, his shoulders flew back, eyes widened, arms worked like a chalkboard pointer and Dad spoke with authority. I was surprised" (p. 165).

The book covers in great detail what work is like for a steelworker. The workers at once love their jobs and one even remembers how he could not wait to come to work. Yet, it is not the job itself that attracts them, but the close bonds formed in the plant and through shared union activities. As one worker notes, he spent more time with his fellow workers than with his family. At the same time, work is the site for ferocious resentment at management, not simply for the petty humiliations and stupidities inflicted on them on a daily basis but for the collective memory, often handed down from parents and grandparents, of how the workers were beaten, tear gassed, and shot by police and company goons during strikes.

Steelworker Alley is also important in that it is a rare study of second- and third-generation east and south Eu-

ropean Americans in the years after World War II. It bears more than passing resemblance to Paul Wrobel's crucial study of working-class Polish Americans in Detroit, *Our Way*, though whereas Wrobel's book seems to have a better grasp on community, Bruno's book has a better grasp on work. The lack of sustained research on east and south European Americans after 1939 is a serious gap in the literature.

The book's weaknesses begin with the author's seemingly insufficient understanding of either religion or ethnicity. Signs of faith and ethnicity pop up frequently in the book, but there seems no coherent analysis of either. Is it truly possible for us to separate these worker's Italian-ness or Croatian-ness from their Catholicism or from their class? Does not their sense of what it means to be a Croatian or Italian Catholic depend on their understanding of what it means to be working class and vice versa? In the case of working-class white ethnics, and perhaps others as well, their sense of ethnic identity was forged at the same time as their sense of being workers was forming.

Although for Bruno, ethnicity is secondary to class, since workers cluster in distinct neighborhoods and socialize together, clearly it is highly important. We know that ethnicity provides (and continues to provide) an important avenue for union mobilization, even though there has been much discussion of whether ethnic and racial differences prevented some broader social revolution in the United States. Bruno shows that in the case of Youngstown, ethnic conflicts did not significantly harm unionization. Rather the common steel mill/union hall experience seems to build bridges across ethnic lines.

Second, if class matters in Youngstown, as Bruno says it does, then what can be said after the steel plants close? The people he interviews are retired. They have sent their children to college and to a life that is both materially and psychologically far different than the one they knew. Class did matter. Does it or will it still matter, or is Bruno yet one more anthropologist interviewing a dying tribe?

Finally, *Steelworker Alley* inadvertently points up an important conceptual problem in that it is difficult for scholars to talk about class without reference to Marxism. Rather than looking for new ways to see the working class, scholars have only a tired, shopworn ideology to trot out, one which their more fashionable and hip post modern colleagues have shed like snakes sliding out of dead skin. Although Bruno tries to find some radical past to make Youngstown's steelworkers more palatable to leftist tastes, aside from a few references to the Communist party and the late and little-lamented Gus Hall, like their counterparts elsewhere Youngstown's workers rejected leftist ideology. Their labor radicalism was reactive and based on a defense of their human dignity as ethnics and workers. They did not seek to overthrow the social order or establish a socialist workers' paradise. A clearer understanding of the history of American ethnic working class, and indeed the movement for workers' rights, will not come about until the need to justify that class in leftist terminology has been done away with.

Despite its flaws Bruno's book is an important and often moving account of a group, a class, and a way of life that deserves far more attention.

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