

Lowell Conference on Industrial History

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The Fourth Annual Lowell Conference on Industrial History was held at the University of Lowell, Lowell, Massachusetts on April 29th and 30th, 1983. The theme of the conference, "The Industrial City," encompassed a wide range of topics from the physical form of cities to the lives of their inhabitants. A full-morning session on "The Urban Industrial Community" addressed directly central concerns of the new working class history. John Bodnar, Indiana University, presented a profile of the European immigrants who became the majority of the American industrial labor force. Bodnar's new research suggests commonalities of economic class and outlook despite differing national origins, and he emphasized that immigrants were more inclined to capitalist notions of achieving personal wealth in the emerging industrial world than those who did not immigrate. Although Bodnar's work is somewhat conjectural at this point, it should provide important information on the predispositions of American industrial workers toward capitalism and the labor movement.

Frank Couvares, Amherst College, also sought to counter the compartmentalism that afflicts the ethnic approach to the American working class by describing the growth of an urban working-class popular culture in the early twentieth century. As well as insisting on the cosmopolitanism of the working class, he contended that popular culture must be seen as a creation of the working class itself and not, as many Marxists insist, as part of the hegemonic apparatus of the capitalist class. The issue of capitalist versus worker control and culture was explored from a different angle by Susan Hirsch, Northwestern University. She noted that studies of the creation of bureaucratic job structures in modern industry have emphasized their role as management tools to obliterate worker control. To the extent that such job structures replicate ethnic, racial, and sexual hierarchies, they divide workers. But to understand the lack of unity that often afflicts workers, Hirsch suggests one must see job segregation not merely as the product of a management strategy by also as an expression of worker values and pressure.

Two sessions featuring papers by Eric Lampard, State University of New York, Stony Brook, and Sam Bass Warner, Jr., Boston University, addressed the development of the physical form and environment of American industrial cities. Lampard presented an ecological perspective on the development of industrial cities.

emphasizing their dependence on market forces. Warner discussed the role of patriarchal capitalist values in the development of electrical technology and its impact on urban life. Through the medium of biography, he revealed how private values were turned into public works which shaped the lives of millions. In her comments, Ruth Schwartz Cowan, State University of New York, Stony Brook, further emphasized how important this approach is by describing how different electrification might have been had electrical engineers been socialist feminists.

Two sessions addressed the contemporary problems of capitalist industrial cities as depressed relics of the past. While attracting new private concerns is the method of revivification most discussed by city councils in the United States, both David Sekers of the Styal Museum in England and the staff of the Lowell National Historical Park presented the notion of museums as a catalyst for prosperity. Large parts of the built environment of old industrial cities can be made into museums which recreate the history of how industrial workers toiled and lived. As a basis for a tourist industry and civic pride, such museums function much as other capitalist economic development programs. In the right hands, however, they can also contribute to keeping labor's history alive for new generations of workers. As the session, "Preserving the Industrial City," revealed, however, the gulf between preservationists and the contemporary working class is great, and the possibilities of such an approach in the United States are severely limited, both by the bourgeois character of the preservation movement and the narrow vision of the labor movement.