

**Big Business and Industrial Conflict in Nineteenth-Century France: A Social History of the Parisian Gas Company.**



Review Author[s]:  
Frank Dobbin

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in the tendency toward economic reductionism and the concomitant exaggeration of economic power, political economy is ultimately inadequate as a framework because it neglects other sources of power (such as patriarchy) or of motivations and meanings of economic actions.

For Holton, economic sociology overcomes the limitations, while incorporating the strengths, of the two traditions. Unlike economic liberalism, it takes power seriously while, unlike political economy, it does not dismiss or condemn markets and private individualism manifested, for example, in consumption. More important, however, economic sociology "brings culture back in." Building on the insights of Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel, Holton suggests that economic sociology must be "culture-inclusive," making sense of economic actions' meanings and motivations as well as responding to the problem of order, or the relationship between economy and society. Holton writes: "All economic practices . . . have a cultural dimension to them in that they all depend on questions of meaning and action based on agreements to or expectations about meaning" (p. 212). Culture, in addition, may be a force enabling as well as constraining change. In taking culture seriously, then, Holton claims to add a missing component to the two other traditions. The result is a multicausal analytical framework that neither devalues agency nor neglects structural constraints. Thus "economic sociology offers a multi-dimensional synthesis of markets, power and culture" (p. 51).

The concrete shape of Holton's economic sociology is the topic of the final chapter. The multidimensional synthesis turns out to be essentially Parsonian. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this; Parsonian economic sociology deserves a serious reconsideration. Yet the onus remains on its advocates to produce works that are theoretically informed and empirically adequate. A "programmatic manifesto" should not merely return to Parsons and Smelser's 1956 *Economy and Society*; it must, instead, either offer a more thoroughgoing theoretical reconstruction or illustrate how the Parsonian framework can be used to illuminate contemporary economy and society. Unless a viable alternative is presented, demonstrations of defects will not necessarily force adherents of other traditions to alter their analyses.

Robert Holton's book is an accessible and sensible overview. However he has little to say about the revival of economic sociology in the United States in the 1980s, represented, for example, by Harrison White and Mark Granovetter, which departs significantly from the approach advocated in his own *Economy and Society*. Yet its ultimate shortcoming is that it will fail to convince any neoclassical economist or political economist of the error of her or his ways. A "manifesto" must be more than an explication and critique of rival theoretical traditions, no matter how well done, to be judged a success.

*Big Business and Industrial Conflict in Nineteenth-Century France: A Social History of the Parisian Gas Company*, by **Lenard R. Berlanstein**. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. 348 pp. \$42.50 cloth. ISBN: 0-520-07234-0.

FRANK DOBBIN  
*Princeton University*

How can one best grasp the social transformations of the nineteenth century? Social historians have tried training their sights on an exemplary city, a particular social group, an illustrative historical incident, or a single life. Lenard Berlanstein's novel approach is to focus on the microcosm of the Parisian Gas Company during the second half of the century. In examining this publicly chartered private monopoly from the perspectives of four social groups—customers, managers, clerks, and manual workers—Berlanstein produces a rich portrait of the changes in French social relations and *mentalité* between 1855 and 1905 against the backdrop of wider political and social history. By treating each group in turn, Berlanstein explores issues that concerned one or two groups in particular. Providing four very different perspectives on key issues of concern to all gives the book remarkable scope and unusual depth. The result is a rewarding monograph that links the local to the general as well as engaging a score of ongoing theoretical debates.

To chart changes wrought by capitalism's fervor for rationalization and democracy's passion for equality, Berlanstein allows concerns central to each group to drive his analysis. The themes that run through these

chapters are many, and the great triumph of the book is that it weaves together disparate issues that are all too often compartmentalized. This reader was captivated by three themes.

First, much of the manuscript revolves around the historical constitution of class and class conflict. This record of the gas company confirms Charles Tilly's argument, in *The Contentious French* (1986), that labor conflicts that had been confined to the workplace moved up to the national arena in the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet it undermines the widely held view that labor conflict was catalyzed by managerial efforts to deskill craft work, for gas company workers who were not subject to deskilling nonetheless organized to fight their long-standing subordination to authoritarian management. Working-class consciousness emerged largely when manual laborers eschewed the rural life, to which they had returned seasonally, and came to rely on the gas company exclusively.

The elaboration and institutionalization of democracy at the level of the firm are a second theme woven through these pages. The chapters on the Parisian public and on managers find the company at first oriented to serving the elite, and only later expanding the distribution network to democratize access to gas. Meanwhile, traditional managerial paternalism gives way to a more democratic ethic as the company begins to negotiate with unions. For clerks and manual workers, the installation of formal rules governing discipline, wages, and discharge contribute to the democratization of employment, as the tradition of elite discretion over workers is replaced by law. The foundation of legitimate authority in French politics—rule by law—is thus brought to workplace politics.

Third, rationalization receives special attention here as a result of Berlanstein's concern with managers and clerks. Over the course of half a century, the gas company's managers shed many of the managerial traditions that are often attributed to the French: elitism, conservatism, and aversion to risk. Managers' early reluctance to expand service aggressively gives way to an active effort to mass-market gas fixtures and service. Managers' belief in setting wages at the lowest level possible without regard for the surrounding labor market gives way to a market-sensitive

wage policy designed to attract better workers. Managers' traditional commitment to fixed wages gives way to a piece-rate system based on incentives to encourage industriousness.

In each realm Berlanstein charts the elaboration of the sort of "market culture" that William Reddy traced among early textile workers in *The Rise of Market Culture* (1984). However, in *Big Business* the change in *mentalité* is not so evident among clerks and workers, perhaps because, to show that workers were not especially parochial, Berlanstein makes them out to be rational actors from the start. Throughout the book, he uses a wealth of archival evidence to assess prevailing theories of social change and contention, in the process developing and extending our understanding of the nineteenth century.

In *The Working People of Paris, 1871–1914* (1984) Berlanstein gave us a wide-ranging picture of working-class lives during the last decades of the nineteenth century. In *Big Business and Industrial Conflict* he explores a single enterprise from four very different perspectives to give us a view of social change that is more focused, but at the same time wider in scope. The result is a rich, theoretically driven narrative that has much to offer students of labor, social movements, politics, work, management, and social history.

*France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century*, by Whitney Walton. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 240 pp. \$40.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-520-07692-3.

MARK H. LAZERSON  
*State University of New York, Stony Brook*

Before the twentieth century, French and British industrial production offered sharp contrasts: The former produced mostly high-quality, custom-crafted goods made in small numbers by artisans; the latter mass-produced cheap factory wares. Nowhere could these differences be more clearly appreciated than in the 1851 London Crystal Palace exhibition, where French and English producers displayed their wares. Marxists and neoclassical economists have always argued for the