

US CIVILIZATION MODULE:

BOOK REPORT

Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America is a non-fictional novel published in 1976 by Herbert G. Gutman, regrouping essays on a wide range of topics, each connected to the major theme of the American working class, its beliefs and behaviours during the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century. My book report focuses on one chapter in particular, entitled “*Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: the Christian spirit in the Gilded Age*”. In this chapter, Gutman’s core argument is that most historians who look into the US Labor Movement of the late 19th century fail to account for the impact religious beliefs, and more specifically Protestantism, had on the way workers viewed labour, and in what ways such beliefs played a great part in shaping the ideologies at the root of the workers’ movement. In actual fact, the reason why I chose to study this chapter is that I myself feel that indeed, in history books, not much seems to be said about the impact of religion on the workers’ movements when they experienced major social and economic changes as they moved from a pre-industrial to a fully industrial age in the USA.

The problematics my report will seek to answer are the following:

1. **How effectively does Gutman support his core argument?**
2. **What conflicting Gilded Age ideologies and class interests are put into light, and how?**
3. **To what extent is this chapter a successful, self-reflective essay?**

Gutman postulates that “*Labour historians have studied the question of how and why American workers reacted to the social and economic changes which occurred between 1850 and 1900, but most have simply sought to analyse the internal class and interest struggles between business unionists, utopian dreamers and socialist radicals without evaluating the ‘mind’ of the workers,*” that is to say, “*the modes of thought and perception through which he confronted the industrialization process and which helped shape his behaviour.*”¹ I agree with the author that such a narrow scope of analysis undermines the real complexities of the workers’ everyday life and challenges faced. Thus, in choosing to tackle the recurrent subject of US Labor from a relatively

uncommon perspective, Gutman creates an interesting read which invites the reader to consider and evaluate for himself the plausible links existing between Protestantism and the Labor Movement.

Greater weight is added to the author's argument as he backs it up by quoting different influential personalities who shared and expressed the same point of view as his, at the time. For example, he quotes J. L. Talmon who wrote in 1963 that "*events, facts, data, happenings, assume their significance from the way in which they are experienced*"², or the Boston labour leader and editor Frank K. Foster, who claimed in 1888 that "*the dry names and dates furnish but a small part of the history of the labour movement. To understand its real meaning one must comprehend the spirit animating it*"³. In so doing, one realises that the author's thesis isn't especially new, but that rather, he chooses to explore pre-existing reflections concerning the study of the US Labor Movement. I found this pertinent because he doesn't just set about to explore new grounds starting from nothing, but looks at evidence peculiar to the Gilded Age which, already then, went into the direction of his thesis.

Gutman goes on to support his argument by giving concrete examples of how religion impacted labour workers. He postulates that "*self-protection and trade-unionism especially enjoyed the blessings of God*", meaning that for him, the spirit of trade unions was especially influenced by Christian principles of brotherhood and aspiration to perfection. Indeed, according to *the Cigar-Maker's Journal* of 1894, "*the time is not far distant when the wage earners shall stand on the rock of independence and sing, 'Nearer, My God, to Thee'. We need not fire and sword, but [to] organize, unionize...*"⁴. That same year a *Railway Times* article read: "*so-called 'labor agitators' who are such, not for the love of money, but for the love of humanity, are true followers of Christ and are striving to establish upon earth the kingdom of God, for which disciples are taught to pray*"⁵. Moreover, an entry in *the United Workers' Journal*, 1897 read: "*blessed are the union men. They are the salt of the earth which keeps uncontaminated the pure principles of brotherhood in the breast of their fellow toilers, and which if allowed to die, would make us doubt the fatherhood of God*"⁶.

Not only does Gutman share evidence of the Christian motives underlying labour ideology, but

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he also provides evidence testifying of a very strong correlation made between important Christian figures and how, in their respective ways, they were seen as a prefiguration of labor movements of unrest, which, in a sense, sanctioned them. "*Brother Knights*", a fellow unionist advised in the *Philadelphia Journal of United Labor*, 1882, "allow me to say that Moses, while fleeing from bondage and endeavouring to deliver his people from the hands of the Egyptian destroyer, received the imperative command from God, to 'go forward'"⁷. William Mahon, the international president of the Motorman's Union, lectured at the Businessman's Bible Class of the Detroit First Congregational Church, saying that "*Christ was crucified for disturbing the national order of things... [by] the conservative goody goody people, whose plan Jesus spoilt.*"

This leads us to consider the author's point illustrated in Thompson's statement, that, in fact, "*behind every form of popular direct action, some legitimising notion of right is to be found*"⁸. The parallel Gutman wants to establish with the Gilded Age labor reformers here is that according to him, they sought justification of their principles and motives through the adoption of ideologies that sanctioned and legitimised the particular alternative they proposed, that they may feel that what they propose is justified by values that transcend the particular social order they criticise. The author supports his point by saying that a way of doing this was for these reformers to "*crudely reinterpret the past, the vague and broadly shared national values to sanction their behaviour*", then argue that their critique of the dominant order and its ideology was "*consistent with very basic values*"⁹: this was the case for trade unionists, labour reformers and labour radicals who "*felt the transition from a preindustrial to an industrial society and who bore the social, economic and psychological brunt of the American industrializing process after 1860.*" Even though he gives an insightful analysis of how religious ideas came to stand as effective, propagating ideologies influencing US Labor unionists, I think the limit here is that Gutman doesn't tell us how indeed, concretely, these workers were the ones to really feel the social, economic and psychological changes the Gilded Age imposed on them. I felt the essay lacked examples of personal testimonies; most evidence is drawn from newspapers, yet one can ask himself whether they were truly representative of a majority of labour workers or not.

Still, Gutman makes his points effective by giving detailed historical background as he builds his arguments. For example, he explains that before 1850, few Americans had direct contact with an

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industrial society, whereas after 1850, rapid industrialization altered the social structure and offered more or less opportunities for workers to work, but at the same time, created greater dependence to industry. Phenomena such as urbanisation and immigration lead to major changes in class and status relationships, and also to the emergence of a new ideology: the “*laissez-faire*” attitude. It evolved with the gradual realisation that “*the mores of a simpler agricultural and commercial era did not fit the conditions of an age characterized by the swift accumulation of industrial power*”¹⁰, as Ralph Gabriel puts it in his *Course of American Democratic Thought*, 1956. In order to respond to these hitherto unseen disruptions in the social, economic and psychological situations which the US people experienced, two religious ideologies, both centred around Protestantism, emerged as a means to answer and react against the early disintegrating consequences of rapid industrialization, which in fact represented the material preconditions necessary for these religious ideologies to rise. However, Gutman argues that “*parallel developments are not necessarily synonymous even though they occur at the same time and share a common mode of expression*”¹¹. This is the object of the second problematic of my report.

For background information, during the Gilded Age, Protestantism was seen as “*a conformist, culture-bound Christianity that warmly embraced the rising industrialist, drained the aspiring rich of conscience and confused or pacified the poor*”¹² whereas gradually, Protestant clergymen broke free from this Institutional Protestantism, and pioneered it. In my opinion, Gutman very successfully assesses the conflicting Christian ideologies caused by the US’ rapid industrialisation: Institutional Protestantism, or the “Social Gospel”, versus Labour Evangelism. Throughout the chapter, the author depicts a clear picture of both and helps the reader to compare and contrast both ideologies, showing how one spirit can materialise itself differently due to the viewpoint bias that conflicting class consciousnesses are bound to create.

Indeed, socio-economically speaking, Institutional Protestantism was supported by the educated, pious middle and upper classes and was believed to emerge from a post-Civil War “*burst of technological and industrial expansion [which] created unbridled cheerfulness, confidence and complacency among the American people*”¹³, as Hudson puts it. Its core principle was that no

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existing connection was recognised between economic behaviour and moral conduct, and therefore this paved the way for secular institutions and values to develop. In contrast, the working classes felt that Institutional Protestantism heightened moral dilemmas and gave them reason to be angry because it supported the *laissez faire* attitude from which they did not benefit, and thus, they became fervent advocates of Labour Evangelism: it sought Christian perfectionism, i.e., what McLoughlin calls “*progress, in all its forms, that was divinely directed toward the perfection of the world*”¹⁴ , as well as justification by divine justice: George E. Ward stated: “*God is infinite and eternal justice so that he who strives to promote and establish justice upon earth is a co-worker with God*”¹⁵. Here, in thus opposing the two differing Protestant ideologies, I think that Gutman very effectively accounts for a discrepancy in viewpoints due to opposite readings of the historical materialism these two different classes observed and experienced around them : the religious ideology of those advocating for Institutional Protestantism “*grew out of intellectual dissatisfaction with the suffering of others, and through argument*” and was thus unable to understand the immediacy of labour discontent. In contrast, what the working classes saw around them was merely a rapidly changing society in which they worked very hard and faced everyday strife without profiteering from the advancement. Gutman’s limit once again is that he fails to give precise examples of how indeed workers underwent harsh living and working conditions which would explain their reaction.

Secondly, Institutional Protestantism believed society would change through the conversion of the individual, that his changed character would produce a social transformation, whereas Labour Evangelists pleaded for revolt or withdrawal from such a society as one which doesn’t represent them, and rather, believed that such initiatives should be undertaken as a group, rather than as an individual. Union men saw themselves as the “*rapidly-evolving God-men vivified by the eternal truths and energizing principles of the gospel of Christ*”¹⁶, as quoted the Railway Times in 1894, where brotherhood held an essential place in union relationships. Finally, Institutional Protestantism emphasized that in industrial America, interference with the entrepreneur’s freedom violated “divine” or “scientific” laws, and equated poverty and failure with sin. Here, one can perceive how, perniciously, capitalist principles were turned into religious principles to justify the doings of rich businessmen, who could use this new ideology as a religious principle to justify their pursuit of ‘private profit’ motives to make more money for themselves, without truly caring for others, namely

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the poorer man, and his conditions. Thus, Gutman asserts that “*labor evangels found the most essential characteristics of the rapidly developing new industrial social order un-Christian and violative of God’s will*”¹⁷, where brotherhood didn’t prevail and individualism was encouraged instead.

Finally, I will now discuss to what extent I can say that this chapter is a successful, self-reflective essay. First, what I found particularly enjoyable and enriching about the read is that it doesn’t just focus on the links between Protestantism and Labor Unionism, but it gives a larger, broader scope of the various effects Protestantism had on people’s lives in general. For example, the author asserts that “*Christian tradition did not diminish*” in the late 1800s and that “*no apparent connection existed between a particular brand of labor reform and Christianity: all shared it*”¹⁸. He quotes Oscar Handlin to argue that Protestantism helped many of the Gilded Age businessmen restore “*the sense of human solidarity infused with religious values*”, simply thanks to the fact of sharing a common faith in a just God, in believing in divine retribution if injustice persisted and in sanctioning organized opposition to the new industrialism to condemn the insensitivity of Institutional Protestantism. Indeed, Uriah Stephens, founder of Knights of Labor who trained for the Baptist ministry, declares that Knights of labor should build upon “*the immutable basis of the Fatherhood of God and the logical principle of the Brotherhood of Man*”¹⁹. Another effect of Labour Protestantism advanced by Gutman is that “*it offered the uprooted but discontented Protestant worker ties with certainties of his past and reasons for his disaffection with the present by denying for him the premises of Gilded Age America and the not yet ‘conventional wisdom’ of that day*”²⁰. Gutman shows here, by quoting E. J. Hobsbrawm, that “*the new industrial world had no pattern of life suited to the new age: people drew on the spiritual resources at their disposal, preindustrial custom and religion*”²¹, because they realised that their morals didn’t fit the historical materialism they were witnessing around them (Ralf Gabriel says it beautifully: “*the mores of a simpler agricultural and commercial era did not fit the conditions of an age characterised by the swift accumulation of industrial power*”²²). As a result of this, even though material conditions

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changed, minds didn't, therefore workers didn't have an abrupt alienation from the past but rather, their religious tradition enabled them not to lose grasp of the rapidly changing world, but rather to have a critical eye upon it.

This Christianity thus served to condemn particular aspects of the new society of the time. Gutman mentions the Chicago Knights of Labor's utter discontent regarding exploitative child factory labour, which caused them to say in 1886: "*When Jesus said 'Suffer little children to come to me,' He did not have a shirt or cloak factory nor a planning mill, that He wanted to put them into at 40 cents a day. He wanted to bless them and show them the light*"²³. Not only does Gutman present Labour Evangelism as being the working class' eye-opener on their society, but he also provides evidence testifying to the workers' social class consciousness, which makes the read particularly rich and insightful. Debs, in a speech to a throng of Chicago people, said reminded the crowd that "*All men are created free*", "*slavery and bondage are in contravention of the Creator's decree and have their origin in man's depravity*". [...] "*Without sympathy, there could be no humanity, no elevating, refining, ennobling influences*"²⁴. Mc Neil, an abolitionist who became an *American Federation of Labor* trade unionist and Christian socialist, declared in 1896, that "*Submission is good, but the order of God may light the torch of revolution*"²⁵. Black activists in the early *United Mine Workers of America* (1890-1900) were also influenced by such evangelical Protestantism which pushed for perfect holiness in the world, as Gutman shows by citing Richard L. Davis, most important UMW Negro leader, 1897: "*The Holy Writ taught that in unity there is strength*"²⁶.

My personal opinion concerning Gutman's evaluation of the effects of religion on workers' lives in a broader scale is that it is positively self-critical: I think the author's strength is that he acknowledges the limits of his trying to establish links between Protestantism and the labour unionists' day-to-day behaviour. Indeed, he says "*it is risky to assume too close a relationship between religious sentiment and rhetoric and everyday behavior, and it is equally perilous to view church attendance and affiliation as proof of religious belief or not attending church as presumptive evidence of the opposite*"²⁷. He also recognises that although the evidence he uses "*indicates the*

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*existence of a working-class social Christianity and suggests that Protestantism had a particular meaning for Gilded Age labor leaders, social radicals and even ordinary workers, it is hazardous to infer too much from it alone about the working class*²⁸. Moreover, he makes the critical point that the different functions of religion and its effects on the lower classes “*cannot be interpreted only through what leading clergymen have said*”²⁹, or what religious journals stated, and he goes on to explain what needs to be studied in order to acquire a greater and fuller knowledge of the question: he mentions a need to look into the varieties of working-class community life, the social and economic structure that gave them shape, what associations the workers joined (churches, societies, unions) and the importance of determining whether they were linked to a larger community and of analysing what values they had.

To conclude, I thought that Gutman managed to powerfully support his thesis thanks to his profuse use of evidence, as he quotes many different newspapers and personalities of the Gilded Age to account for his main argument. However, I feel the essay would have been more complete if more personal and concrete testimonies of workers were included. Having said this, I still maintain that Gutman’s choice to tackle a disregarded aspect of US Labour history which nevertheless was greatly influential in the midst of the US’ profound economic and social changes of the late 1890s is particularly interesting because very few historians harbour the history of US Labor under the light of religion, or rather, the most popular history books do not necessarily explore the subject from such a perspective. What is cunning about Gutman’s work is that he accounts for the social class struggles existing between the upper classes and the working class through a thorough analysis of the classes’ respective interpretations of Protestantism and illustrates how one initial religious ideology can take on very contrastive colours according to which class consciousness it speaks from. I found this chapter of Gutman’s novel thoroughly informative as well as particularly perceptive: what I enjoyed most was the balance between these two aspects and the author’s self-reflexivity, the critical eye with which he observes not only the subject but his own arguments about it. *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* is definitely a book I would recommend because it sheds light on uncommon aspects of US Labor history and helps to have a deeper understanding of workers’ behaviour during the Gilded Age.

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