1 Introduction

The Worker in American Society

The 1950s ushered in a period of rapid and extensive changes in the pattern of American life. Widespread affluence, and the breakdown of income differentials between occupational groups, appeared to be fast becoming a reality, while the emergence of the mass produced, middle income suburb brought together people from differing occupational, religious or ethnic backgrounds; people who traditionally had been segregated residually. Change was also apparent in the workplace, most notably in the rationalisation and mechanisation of large numbers of white collar jobs. In the midst of all this, television became almost standard equipment: by 1955 seven out of every ten American homes had at least one set and television viewing took up more leisure time than any other activity.

Increasing recognition of the nature and extent of these and other developments gave rise to a good deal of conjecture as to their impact on the class structure of the United States. In particular social scientists and social commentators alike became concerned with the analysis of changes that might be occurring in the structure and composition of the working class. While there has been no shortage of speculations and hypotheses regarding the nature of such changes, discussion, for the most part, has focused on the blurring or disappearance of what was 'perhaps the most fundamental cleavage in American society',¹ and the consequent absorption into the middle class of large numbers of blue collar or manual workers.

The idea of the American worker becoming bourgeois, however, is not new. Indeed the last quarter of the nineteenth century was the scene of lively, and often bitter debate on the subject. Much of the discussion revolved around the issue of American 'exceptionalism'. Sheer size, an abundance of raw materials, an ethnically diversified population and the absence of a hereditary aristocracy meant that the United States had to be regarded as a society distinct from those of Western Europe. The question that arose was whether therefore, 'America stood above class antagonisms and struggles',² and whether therefore capitalism would ever be superseded in that society. While little agreement was reached on this latter
question there was a good deal of unanimity regarding the existence of middle class or ‘bourgeois’ aspirations amongst a substantial segment of the working class. For example, the Central Committee of the Furniture Workers’ Union of North America warned in 1879 that:

The natural and justifiable longing of every person for well-being and independence has, among many working men, been developed in a wrong direction. They imitate the so-called higher classes in the maxim ‘Everyone for himself and God for us all.’ Yet they do not imitate them in combining for a common interest of their class.

Through the unexampled prosperity of American industry and commerce after the Civil War, which lasted for half a decade, the working people learned to think and act in a capitalist way... There was no lack of farseeing leaders in these decades who admonished their fellows to stick to their organisations to which they owed so much. But the capitalist spirit of society had taken hold of the masses, and the voice of the leaders was disregarded.

The ‘unexampled prosperity’ of the American worker was also seen by other writers, notably Marx and Engels, as being one of the bases of his identification with the bourgeois ethos. In a general exposition on the theory of ‘Wages, Price and Profit’ written in 1865, Marx explained the relatively high standard of wages in the United States by reference to the fact that in this society ‘the law of supply and demand favours the working man’. Similarly, writing some years later and discussing the particular features of the United States that presented ‘very great and peculiar difficulties for a steady development of a workers’ party’, Engels commented ‘...through the protective tariff system and the steadily growing domestic market the workers must have been exposed to a prosperity no trace of which has been seen here in Europe for years now...’

Engels also placed importance on the tendency for workers, newly arrived in the United States, to dissociate themselves from the societies that had been left behind, and consequently to over-identify with the American capitalistic ethos:

It is remarkable, but quite natural, that in such a young country, which has never known feudalism and has grown up on a bourgeois basis from the first, bourgeois prejudices should also be so strongly rooted in the working class. Out of his very opposition to the mother country – which is still clothed in its feudal disguise – the American worker also imagines that the bourgeois regime as traditionally inherited is something progressive and superior by nature and for all time, *a non plus ultra.*
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Furthermore, he added, this process was reinforced by the opportunities that existed for upward mobility in nineteenth century America – opportunities which were seen as being greater than those available in Europe. Craftsmen were perhaps in the most favourable position, the move from employee to entrepreneur in the same skilled trade being both common and straightforward. ‘For America after all was the ideal of all bourgeois... a country rich, vast, expanding... Here everyone could become, if not a capitalist, at all events an independent man, producing or trading, with his own means for his own account.’

These then are some of the reasons advanced in explanation of the ‘bourgeois tendencies’ of large numbers of American workers in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It is, however, important to realise that most of those who participated in the discussion saw these as only short-run factors. America was undoubtedly an exceptional country: it was therefore not surprising that her working class should temporarily exhibit exceptional features. Nonetheless, the future pattern of economic growth meant that the role of the small entrepreneur in manufacturing would diminish considerably. Large corporations were already in evidence, requiring vast amounts of capital for plant and machinery. The opportunities for upward mobility could be expected to dwindle accordingly. Similarly the increasing mechanisation and improvement of production techniques was gradually reducing the bargaining power of manual workers: their ‘unexampled prosperity’ could not be expected to last forever. And finally, with the ending of large scale immigration from Europe, a ‘native’ American labour force would become established. Working class consciousness could then be expected to develop. Certainly Marx and Engels were under no illusions as to the ultimate fate of American capitalism: ‘...the American working class is moving, and no mistake. And after a few false starts they will get into the right track soon enough.’ Indeed, ‘Once the Americans get started it will be with an energy and violence compared with which we in Europe shall be mere children.’

Nonetheless, as I have already noted, in recent years discussion of the middle class worker has been reactivated. And while contemporary discourse is more varied than that of the previous period, and by no means limited to Marxists or writers from the left, there are important similarities between some of the claims of nineteenth century theorists and certain of the hypotheses advanced by present day scholars and commentators. In particular, current debate has been stimulated by the rapid post-war increase in the earnings of blue collar workers, an increase which has been relatively less pronounced for substantial numbers of clerical and other non-manual employees.

Awareness of this change in the economic fortunes of both skilled and non-skilled manual workers led a number of writers – particularly Kurt
The Aristocracy of Labour

B. Mayer – to suggest that ‘the traditional dividing line between manual workers and white collar employees no longer holds, because large segments of the working class now share a “white collar” style of life and many also accept middle class values and beliefs’.

In terms of constant (1959) dollars, Mayer pointed out, median family incomes rose 50 per cent during the 1950s alone. This meant that the proportion of families receiving less than $5,000 per annum fell from 80 per cent in 1949 to 42 per cent in 1959. At the same time families earning between $5,000 and $10,000 rose from 17 to 43 per cent during the same period, while those numbers fortunate enough to receive in excess of $10,000 increased from 3 to 15 per cent of the total. To be sure, in 1959 around one fifth of families were earning less than $3,000 per annum – Michael Harrington’s ‘other America’ – but this must not be allowed to detract from the fact that the vast majority of Americans, manual and non-manual workers alike, were now enjoying an income that previously had been the prerogative of the established middle class. This meant that in terms of the distribution of income ‘American society has changed its shape from the traditional pyramid to a diamond bulging at the middle and somewhat flat at the bottom’.

Following on from the assumption that changes in the distribution of income must have a ‘fundamental impact’ upon class structure, Mayer therefore felt able to claim that America was becoming a middle class or even ‘classless’ society. Increasing numbers of manual workers would now be able to adopt a middle class life style, purchase their own homes and furnish them with consumer durables that had previously been beyond their means. Furthermore, to the extent that home-ownership has often entailed a move to suburbia, then we have, so it has been suggested, a clear and unambiguous explanation for the blurring or disappearance of traditional class lines.

While the process of suburbanisation has been going on in the United States since the first half of the eighteenth century, the mass produced suburb, offering homes (and often mortgages) well within the reach of the manual worker, is very much part of the economic boom following the end of the Second World War. Indeed, the rise of such suburbs has been termed ‘one of the major social changes of the twentieth century’.

The purchase of a house in such a tract has often meant, for a blue collar worker living in the East at any rate, a move away from a traditional working class area near the central city. In many instances, such areas were also ethnic enclaves, the Italian community described in Gans’s study of South Boston being an extreme example. Migration to suburbia from such a neighbourhood will, in most cases, bring about the disruption of old friendships and weaken extended family ties. And at the same time as the hold of family and friends is weakened, so the argument went, the new suburbanite is exposed to new pressures; pressures which are by
their very nature middle class. For working class arrivals to suburbia will have as neighbours people from a variety of backgrounds and occupational situations, many of them white collar.¹⁴ Aﬄuent workers will therefore become increasingly exposed to a middle class ideology and style of life, both of which they will gradually come to adopt. The most fervent exponent of this view was undoubtedly William H. Whyte, who, in the mid 1950s, argued that newly emerged suburbs had become the ‘second great melting pot’. Indeed the ‘expansion of the lower limits of the middle class...is so pronounced in the new suburbs that it almost seems as if they were made for that function’.¹⁵

In this connection a good deal of importance has been attached to the impact of the mass media. Lenski, for example, has claimed that ‘...not only has the middle class been increasing in size relative to the working class, but its social standards are permeating the working class more and more with each passing year, thanks to the growing inﬂuence of the mass media. As a result, an ever increasing number of people who are objectively manual workers think and act like the middle class.’¹⁶

The conditions giving rise to renewed debate on the middle class worker were thus largely distinct from those associated with the debate in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and result in differing conclusions. For none of the social scientists or commentators addressing himself to the problem of the embourgeoisement of blue collar workers sees this process as transitory in character. Notions of ‘false consciousness’ or predictions concerning a reversal of the process are totally absent from the literature. Indeed, one scholar has recently argued that the reverse is the case: ‘...in the Unites States...class consciousness among manual workers is a transitional phenomenon – characterising workers not yet accustomed to the modern metropolis and the modern work place’.¹⁷ But this does not mean that American social science has accepted without question the arguments put forward by writers such as Mayer, Bernard, Whyte, or Wilensky.

Criticism of the embourgeoisement thesis in America has taken two forms. First, a number of authors have suggested that the blurring of class lines is more apparent than real. While they have recognised that large numbers of manual workers are enjoying a new found affluence, often expressed in the purchase of homes, cars, or consumer goods, they point out that these material gains on the part of the working class can only be viewed as part of a general ‘upgrading’ of American life styles. In other words, as manual workers have, in the post-war years, come to adopt what was previously a middle class life style, members of this latter class have also altered behavioural and consumption patterns. Class differentials, and barriers, have therefore remained intact.¹⁸ There has, in addition, been a small amount of research into particular aspects of the thesis that workers are becoming accepted into the middle class. Com-
parison of the life styles of manual and non-manual groups in that most notorious of new suburbs – Levittown, Long Island – showed, for example, ‘no indication that the suburban situation in any way modifies class patterns’.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, one writer has gone further, suggesting not only that the manual/non-manual line of demarcation remains as the most significant cleavage within the American class structure, but also that skilled craftsmen form an ‘autonomous status group’ within the working class.\textsuperscript{20}

A second group of writers have accepted the idea that significant changes are occurring in the middle ranges of the American class structure, but have gone on to argue that these do not involve an expansion of the lower limits of the middle class. In particular, it has been suggested that lower level clerical workers have become progressively detached from the established middle class and are in the process of becoming absorbed into the upper reaches of the traditional working class. The increased rationalisation and mechanisation of clerical tasks is thought to be obliterating many of the features that have, in the past, kept the work situation of the white collar worker quite distinct from that of the manual employee. At the same time it would appear that, with an increasing emphasis being placed upon technical and professional qualifications, opportunities for clerical workers to rise to managerial or executive positions are dwindling fast. Both these developments, it is argued, are making the class position of clerical workers more and more similar to that of wage-earners.\textsuperscript{21} At the same time, as larger numbers of children from blue collar homes gain high school diplomas, recruitment from the working class ranks to fill positions in white collar occupations must increase accordingly. This may be leading, we are told, to the large scale ‘importing’ of traditional working class values into the lower levels of the established middle class. This means that ‘contrary to the popular theorising about the “bourgeoisification of the workers”, the actual process is one of “proletarianisation” (or more realistically for the United States, “liberalising”) of the lower middle-class ranks’.\textsuperscript{22}

These were the main arguments being advanced by the mid 1960s concerning the changing class position of the affluent worker, and, to a lesser extent, the clerk in American society. To the observer, however, the striking characteristic of this debate was the almost total absence of anything more than rudimentary empirical data. At best, points of view were bolstered with recourse to the secondary analysis of existing (and often aged) information, or to statistics (often taken from the U.S. Census) relating to only one aspect of class situation. At worst, the ‘fact’ that changes \textit{had} taken place was accepted unquestioningly, and used to ‘explain’ other developments in the social structure.\textsuperscript{23} Neither of these alternatives could be regarded as satisfactory. Accordingly, in 1967, the author initiated a study aimed at evaluating, on the
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basis of substantial evidence, some of the various claims and counterclaims that had been put forward in the preceding years. In the remainder of this chapter I say something about the city in which the investigation was carried out and the form which it took.

The Community of Providence

Providence is the capital of the smallest and most densely settled state in the Union, Rhode Island. In 1965 the city’s population numbered just over 187,000. In 1940 the figure was 253,504. This shrinking in size is not a phenomenon confined to Providence by any means, and is linked to the move to the suburbs that, as already pointed out, has become a feature of American society. In this particular case it is reinforced by a significant amount of migration away from the city and state altogether. This latter process is associated with the economic difficulties that have beset Rhode Island in recent years. In contrast to the rest of the country, in Providence the median age of the city’s residents has steadily increased over time. During the past twenty or so years this has not been the national pattern. For the United States as a whole, the post-war ‘baby boom’ resulted in the median age of the total population being pulled down to 29.5 years in 1960. During the same period it rose from 31.7 to 31.9 in Rhode Island. Indeed in Providence in 1960 13 per cent of the population were over 65 years of age while only 25 per cent were below 15. The comparable proportions for the total society were 9 per cent and 31 per cent respectively.

The age structure of Providence can be explained with reference to two main features of the city. First, as already pointed out, the population is declining. Movement to suburbs within the state, and out of the state completely is specially selective of young single people and couples, often with children. Secondly, the high degree of urbanisation and manufacturing, both influencing the large percentage of married women in the labour force, has kept the birth rate of Providence below average. This is so despite the large numbers of Catholics in the city and state.

For the first hundred years or so of its existence, Providence was peopled almost completely with English colonists. This monopoly was slightly threatened towards the end of the eighteenth century with the arrival of small numbers of Huguenots, Portuguese Jews and Swedes. But it was not until around 1830 that significant numbers of foreign born began to arrive and settle in the area, and especially in Providence. By the middle of the nineteenth century 16 per cent of the people of Rhode Island had been born abroad. Of this 16 per cent almost three-quarters were Irish. However, in the period 1860–90, the Irish were replaced by French-Canadians as the major ethnic group settling in Rhode Island. Finally, after the wave of French-Canadian immigration had reached its peak
around 1890, it was superseded by the arrival of large numbers of Italians in the state, nearly all of whom settled in the capital city.

These three main waves of immigration were such, that in the period between 1840 and 1910, Rhode Island and Providence moved from a situation where almost the entire population was of English Puritan stock to one where a third were foreign-born, and 70 per cent were of foreign origin. Not only did these waves of immigration make their presence felt in terms of nationality, but also with regard to religion, as all three of these recent groups of arrivals were Catholic. Thus the homogeneous Anglo Saxon Protestant population of 1840 found itself by 1910, as well as being only one of several national groupings in the city, practising a minority religion. The state census of 1905 showed the majority of the population to be Catholics. This situation remains at the present time.

With the coming of the First World War and the subsequent imposition of immigration quotas by the Federal Government, the days of rapid increase in numbers of foreign born settling in the state, and the days of rapid increase in the growth of Providence as a city were over. From around 1910, there has been a steady decline in the numbers of people born abroad. By 1960 only 12 per cent of the people of Providence were not Americans by birth. But the three great waves of immigration have still not become completely absorbed: 44 per cent of the city could still be classified as foreign born or of foreign stock, i.e. having a paternal grandfather born outside the United States. As would be expected, given their relatively late arrival, Italians comprise the largest single group amongst Providence’s ethnic minorities. In 1960, 38 per cent of foreign stock in the city were of Italian descent. This number represented about 16 per cent of the city’s total population. In contrast the Irish and French-Canadians only accounted for roughly 5 per cent each. The only other national groupings of measurable size in the Providence of the 1960s are British, Russians (predominantly Jews), Portuguese and Poles.

In contrast to this large ethnic population, the number of blacks in Providence is not large. In Rhode Island non-whites make up something over 2 per cent of the total population, while in Providence the figure is nearer 6 per cent. As in other major American cities, non-whites are concentrated in certain areas of the town. However, in contrast to many other cities, these areas are to nowhere near the same extent exclusively inhabited by black people. In 1960, the three census tracts with the heaviest concentrations of non-whites contained 56 per cent, 44 per cent and 22 per cent respectively. Taking into account the large segment of Providence’s population that is of foreign stock, this relatively small percentage of non-whites is not difficult to explain. As Goldstein and Mayer have pointed out, ‘Rhode Island has never been as attractive to Southern
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Negro migrants as other industrial centres of the North because of the presence of a large working class immigrant population.  

Providence and Rhode Island were in the vanguard of the development of manufacturing in the United States, and the region continues to be one of the most highly industrialised in the country. Until the end of the nineteenth century, Rhode Island was one of the leading centres of textiles manufacture. A variety of cloths was produced, but primarily cottons, woollens and worsteds. However, since 1920, the cotton industry especially has been in a permanent state of decline, as firms have gradually moved out of the state and relocated in the South. This movement has not left the rest of the region’s economy unaffected. The woollen and worsted industries were not influenced by this exodus in the 1920s, but since the end of the last war they too have been losing to competition from the South. The decline of the textile industry has therefore become a fact of life for both Rhode Island and Providence. In 1919 the textile industry employed 75,000 people, over half of the manufacturing labour force of the state. In 1965 the comparable figures were 21,000 and 18 per cent respectively.

The nineteenth century also saw the emergence of a number of metal working trades in Rhode Island, primarily engaged in the manufacture of specialised tools and machinery for the developing textile industry. However, diversification took place relatively early, and for the whole of this century a large variety of goods has been produced in the area. Nevertheless, decline in the textile industry brought about a severe contraction in the metal working trades, especially those that were most directly concerned with the building of textile producing machines. But this was not the only branch to suffer. The domination of the industrial scene by cloth manufacturing was such that its demise affected nearly all sectors of the state’s economy. However, the economic boom brought along by the Second World War and lasting through until the 1950s was enjoyed almost entirely by the metal trades of Rhode Island. Between 1939 and 1947 the number of people engaged in the production of all kinds of machinery almost doubled: from 9,500 to 18,400. Today metal and machining production constitutes the single largest source of employment in Providence. Within the Providence–Pawtucket Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (S.M.S.A.) in 1960, just over one quarter of the manufacturing labour force was employed in the metal trades. The comparable figure for the textile industries was just one fifth. In 1966 the metals and machining industries in Rhode Island employed over 37,000 people.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century a jeweller by the name of Nehemiah Dodge began making jewellery in Providence out of cheap alloy, rather than gold. Today the American low and medium price jewellery industry is centred in the Providence–Attelboro area. In 1967 there were 85 costume jewellery factories in Providence alone. Around
18,000 workers are engaged in the manufacture of various kinds of jewellery and silverware, constituting around 16 per cent of the manufacturing labour force. Finally, fourth in rank among Rhode Island’s industries is the production of rubber and plastics. Again, the manufacture of rubber goods has long been associated with the state. And although initially the industry was virtually limited to the production of the Providence shoe – a type of footwear made of vulcanised rubber – it is, at present, fairly diverse, turning out a wide variety of products. Within the Providence–Pawtucket S.M.S.A. around 6 per cent of the labour force are concerned with the industry, comprising over 8,000 workers.

These four main industries form the industrial basis of Providence and Rhode Island, together with lesser manufactures such as food processing, optical goods and chemical products. Two features are striking: first, the very high degree of industrialisation in the state; secondly, the pronounced dependence on only a few industries, one of which has been in a state of decline for a long time. In 1950, 44 per cent of the labour force were engaged in manufacturing. By 1967 this figure had dropped to 38 per cent. Within this 38 per cent total textiles are coming to play a lesser role and, correspondingly, the metal industries a more important one, even though, in absolute terms, they have grown little during the 1960s. Nevertheless, there are signs that Providence is at last recovering from a period of economic insecurity and weakness, that has lasted – interrupted only by period of wartime artificial expansion – since the 1920s. In 1950, 7.5 per cent of the male labour force were unemployed. By 1966 the figure had dropped to 4.2 per cent.

The fact that the region has not enjoyed prosperity for the large part of this century is reflected in several demographic characteristics of its population. Rhode Island has proportionately fewer adults who have completed high school, or graduated from college, than the other New England states, or, for that matter, the country as a whole. Similarly, Rhode Island and Providence both have a significantly larger percentage of the labour force in manual or blue collar occupations than is the case for the rest of the country. Whereas for the United States, the segment of the workforce that is urban blue collar has fallen below 50 per cent, in Providence in 1970 56 per cent of the workforce were still in this category.

Table 1 shows the relative proportions of the labour forces of selected cities that are in white and blue collar occupations. In terms of total labour force, Providence has a smaller proportion of non-manual workers than any of the other cities shown with the exception of the automobile city, Flint, Michigan. As far as the female labour force is concerned Providence, of all metropolitan areas shown, has the smallest percentage engaged in white collar occupations. Indeed, there is a significantly higher proportion of females in the labour force in Providence than for the nation as a whole. These women are employed largely in non-skilled