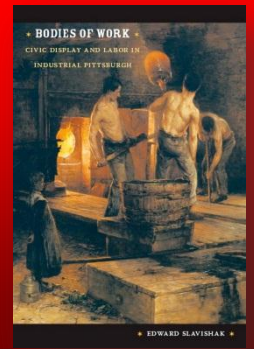


Edward Slavishak, (2008)

Bodies of Work – Civic Display and Labor in Industrial Pittsburgh
Durham and London, Duke University Press

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Writing on the role of imagery in the French Revolution, Simon Schama notes: 'As trite and repetitious as these images were, they represented a systematic attempt by the propagandists of Jacobin culture to build a new purified public morality. The Nation would not be truly secure until those whom it compromised internalised the values on which it had been constructed' (Schama 1989 p.770). Schama asserts: '...it was to images, in their broadest sense, that the Jacobin evangelicals paid special attention. Fabre d'Eglantine, for example, Danton's poet friend (and accomplice in speculation), used sense impression theory from the Enlightenment to convince the Convention that, 'we conceive nothing except by images: even the most abstract analysis or the most metaphysical formulations can only take effect through images' (Schama 1989, p.770).

Fast forward to the USA in the gilded age and Edward Slavishak provides a fascinating thesis; an explanation of how and why elites seek to use imagery and their accompanying narratives as a form of ideological hegemony to sustain specific economic and social systems that exact compliance and acceptance from working people. Equally how workers themselves, and others in society – journalists and social scientists – contest this hegemony – not only with images and narratives of their own, but also by exploring the objective realities that the dominant imagery seeks to mask.

Imagery provides the backbone to Slavishak's study of Pittsburgh at the turn of the Twentieth Century, in this instance it is the rugged manliness of the skilled Anglo American industrial working man, and how key historical actors used it as an edifice of an industrial revolution driven by free enterprise. The physical representation of working bodies encapsulated industrial capitalism and civic pride. It symbolised, legitimised, and energised the capitalist dynamic in a specific time frame (1890-1915) and specific place, Pittsburgh.

Driven by the agenda of business leaders, 'the boosters', the working man's body became the personification of success, making the City attractive to the external world and encouraging investment in markets. It was also designed to internalise acceptance amongst the workers themselves, leaving established labour arrangements within the workplace and society unquestioned. Despite this hegemonic intent the book recognises there is a vast difference between establishing what Pittsburghers and workers actually thought about work, and the 'small sample of individuals and institutions' who 'decided what those audiences should think about work' in the service of economic and professional goals (Slavishak, p.7).

Pittsburgh was seen in 1901 as the City, 'where above all other places a realisation of the majesty of manual work burns itself into the brain' (Slavishak, p.10). Perversely, but also deliberately, this romantic image, was diffused at a time when the physical craft and skills associated with coal extraction, steel and glass production were being undermined by mechanisation, and where the work process itself was changing in nature. The labour market was being transformed through immigration from Eastern Europe, and the dominant imagery represented East Europeans as, 'swarthy, dark and brutish' in contrast to the positive presentation of the noble Anglo American worker (p.61). A detail from the cover of Life magazine 1912 portrays a Pittsburgh industrial worker, 'Broad shouldered, muscular, pale...the Pittsburgh worker was the heart of the City...' and also male. In a shorter chapter on women workers, 'Delicately built', Slavishak relates in some detail contemporary accounts of the disadvantaged position of women within the labour market, and the appalling and exploitive working conditions, relating these also to female ethnicity. However both boosters and reformers omitted images of women from public displays, as undermining narratives based on the body of the male industrial worker. This was part of the marginalisation of working women in the 19th century. The boosters could hardly use the impact of industrial work on women's bodies as a heroic device, whilst reformers essentially felt that the negative impact of industrial work on women was best resolved by their exclusion from the labour market.

The study's key theme is the dominant elite's desire to conceal the body as representing the exploitive nature of production and project it as an all pervading visual endorsement of the prevailing economic system. Contemporary fine artists, their publishers and exhibitors, the romantics, the carnivals, pageants, parades, and street 'masques' were all actually conceived as masking the realities of the relations of production from the workers themselves and the wider society.

However the book recognises the nuanced nature of narratives related to imagery and hegemony, and the role of contestation and counter representations of workers, originating in accounts of contemporary journalists, and social scientists. This is demonstrated in the famous Homestead strike of 1892 where a violent dispute between workers and the Carnegie Steel Company, described by Krause as a quasi-mythical epic, involved battles with the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, and eventually the mobilisation of the National Guard. This represented a potential breakdown of the established order, and the use of workers bodies as weapons against the employing class. Reporters, novelists, and social critics' representation of workers portrayed their bodies as a collective phalanx moving en mass against employers, and using their physical power against the system.

Individual acts of strength and bravery were also highlighted; workers bodies contrary to the wishes of the elites could no longer simply feature as the passive and willing partners of mechanised production. But even here attempts were made to stand the end of self-restraint on its head, pro employer observers presented the protesters as morally deficient, referred to racial characteristics based on southern and central European ethnicity, and presented the more fractious strikers as faceless members of an unruly mob. However, the attempts at analysis and explanation of the event represented a setback for the boosters' attempts at a dominant iconography.

The second source of counter narrative was from those social scientists who placed 'inhumane and deadly work' and its impact at the centre of their research. This was informed by the Pittsburgh surveys which were conducted in 1907 and 1908 and published over the next five years. Their image of the worker, informed by data and statistics, was one of bodies broken by accidents, disease, and toil. It exposed work injuries. A union journal referred to industrial progress, 'paved with skulls and walled with corpses.' (Slavishak, p.199). The elites sought to rebuff this critique by creating positive images of the tenacious working man where the capacity to deal with hard labour was represented as heroic (Slavishak p.225).

In addition employers and legislators devised strategies and manipulated workman's compensation systems in order to render 'broken bodies' invisible from the public eye. This was complemented and consolidated by prosthesis companies whose initiatives in dealing with serious injuries and limb losses were designed to make the body look good, evidenced in photographs and illustrations. This chapter presents a remarkable insight into the capacity of capitalism to absorb and seek to re-define empirically based social critiques.

In the concluding section of the book Slavishak re-iterates the study's focus on the industrial working body. He cites a source from 1905 that, 'the world never tires of a worker...work...that's what people like to watch.' He argues 'work' is a significant tool in creating a sense of space, and that to the consumer work is not only something one does, but also something one imagines others doing. The common thread to these narratives is the promotion of capitalism at a local level but one which sanitises failure, conflict, depravation and suffering. The heritage industry serves a political function by seeking to caricature the olden days, but one which cannot easily silence the past.

Equally we might ask does modern imagery represent realistic interpretations of labour; does contemporary arts and visual media, and the narrative that informs the visual, provide insights into the integrity of work that would otherwise be absent? Does the imagery of labour today, form an integral part of modern capitalism's ideological hegemony and to what extent is it contested? The reviewer must admit a personal interest in this story. My grandfather, who was a skilled glass blower emigrated from England in the late nineteenth century to work in Pittsburgh. There, four of his children, including my Mother were born, returning to England just before the outbreak of World War One.

References

Schama, S. (1989) *Citizens – A critique of the French Revolution*, Vintage.