Introduction

This book explores the contours of working-class cultures in antebellum Philadelphia. It is a contribution to what has been called the "new labor history," and like previous works in this genre, it leans heavily on the concepts of class and culture. Such terms have evoked some confusion and it is helpful at the start to define how they are used in this context.

The most basic and for years the prevailing definition of class in Marxian terms implied a set of structural or objective relationships. Classes thus consist of individuals sharing a common relationship to the means of production, and typically are designated as workers, on the one hand, and employers, on the other. Most practitioners of the new labor history employ this Marxian notion and it informs this study as well. More to the point, this analysis assumes that, in purely structural terms, recognizably modern classes of workers and employers took shape with the emergence of industrial capitalism in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, although, as we shall see, wage earners performed their jobs in vastly different settings and their employers were differentiated according to the scale of their enterprises.

The key word here is structural. In this sense, class refers strictly to the objective conditions in which individuals found themselves and it is to be distinguished from the subjective dimension of class, or class consciousness. Class, or class consciousness, is the way human actors interpret and give meaning to their own experiences and circumstances, and as E. P. Thompson argues, it may be understood as a "social and cultural formulation." Or, in Thompson's unforgettable
contention, "Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms," and culture itself is reflected "traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms."

In applying this conceptual frame to early nineteenth-century England, Thompson uncovered a single cultural expression which was self-consciously radical. His *Making of the English Working Class* set off a flurry of scholarship in America and countless efforts to reproduce his magisterial work. Among the most successful of these were Paul Faler and Alan Dawley’s studies of the shoeworkers of Lynn, Massachusetts; and their work reveals a more complex cultural landscape. They uncovered not one but three forms of working-class culture—loyalists, rebels, and traditionalists—with unique organizational matrices, recreational interests, and values.

My debt to Faler and Dawley should be obvious to anyone casually familiar with their seminal work. This study also posits the existence of distinctive worker cultures, but differs from their treatment in several respects. First, having been influenced by recent investigations of the ethnocultural basis of voter loyalty, it identifies religion as a major component of worker culture. Rationalism, evangelical Protestantism and, to a lesser extent, orthodox Protestantism and Catholicism are seen as critical forces in the shaping of worker values and practice. Second, it seeks to disclose the back-grounds and urban experiences, both cultural and material, of the workers comprising each cultural category. Third, it examines how such cultures changed over time under the impact of demographic and industrial change.

A few caveats are in order before we begin. I had the option of treating the cultures under analysis in terms of tendencies or as ideal types. There are advantages and liabilities to each approach, and after weighing the alternatives, I chose the latter—in part for reasons of convenience and in part because it permits rendering each culture in more vivid form. History, of course, is not always so neat. It does not come wrapped in tiny bundles, and scholars who package the data in this way run the dual risk of distorting the record and of ignoring individuals and groups that do not conform to the categories. My response to the first peril is that I have done my best not to reduce the cultures to caricatures. As for the second, I can only plead that one cannot do everything, even in a concerted effort to be
thorough. At least two groups—women and Blacks—do not figure systematically in what follows. Their omission stems not from bias but from the limitations of the record. Documentary evidence on the cultural lives of women and Blacks is painfully thin. Smatterings of what is available suggest that both groups may be subsumed under one or more of the categories used in this study, but, alas, the record is insufficiently compelling. Consequently, the exploration of the cultural lives of antebellum Philadelphia’s working-class women and Blacks has been left to other scholars.

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