

The Remaking of Pittsburgh

SUNY Series in American Social History

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*The Remaking
of Pittsburgh*

CLASS AND CULTURE IN
AN INDUSTRIALIZING CITY,
1877–1919

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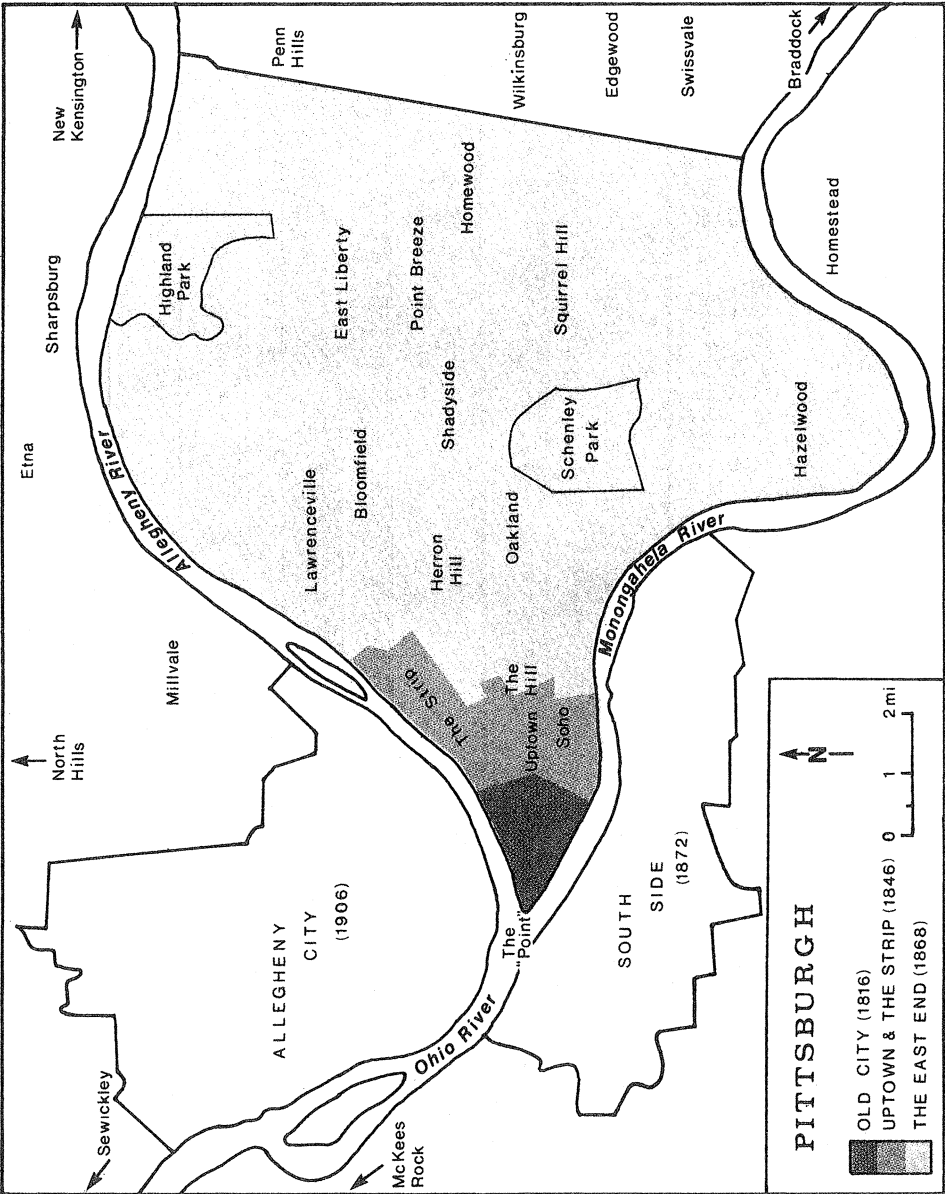
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Introduction

To know Pittsburg thoroughly is a liberal education in "the kind of culture demanded by modern times."

—James Parton, 1868

This study explores the cultural dimensions of industrialization in one American city. Pittsburgh recommends itself as the subject of such a study because, as Parton¹ and many subsequent observers noted, it was so preeminent and exemplary a site of industrialization in America, indeed, in the world. Surprisingly, however, it has received from historians little attention compared to other great cities such as Chicago and Philadelphia, and even compared to smaller industrial cities such as Lowell and Lynn. Given this historiographical oversight, I have in this study relied less on a body of secondary sources devoted to Pittsburgh itself than on the suggestive work of social historians engaged in the study of other times and places.

My study of Pittsburgh took shape initially in response to my observation of a sharp contrast between earlier and later stages in the history of that industrializing city, particularly of its working class. This contrast generated a question: How did the city that embraced the labor struggle of 1877 turn into the city which so fiercely repudiated the labor struggle of 1919? What forces transformed a plebeian community, in which industrial workers and other petty citizens exercised a real measure of power over their lives, into a grim metropolis whose inhabitants were decisively mastered by Big Steel?

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In pursuing the question I have assumed that an answer can best be approached along the lines of the “new social history,” which insists that the cultural and political dimensions of the industrializing process were as important as the economic ones. At the present time it is hardly necessary to delineate the pedigree of a study conducted along such lines. Other young historians—e.g., Paul Faler, Alan Dawley, Bruce Laurie, John Cumbler, Leon Fink—have already explored similar questions and, in so doing, have acknowledged their debt to two scholars, E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman.

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson revealed, with extraordinary detail, the profound links between class and culture in industrializing Britain and, in the process, released a generation of social historians from the grip of a narrowly economic analysis of social change. Taking a cue from Thompson, Gutman showed, in a series of articles published in the 1960s, the ways in which republican ideology, religion, popular culture, and local community shaped class consciousness and action in nineteenth-century America. His work made it possible for me to inquire into, among other things, the role of temperance, leisure, and local political culture in shaping the values and actions of plebeian Pittsburghers.

Another historian influenced by Thompson, Gareth Stedman Jones, suggested a way to extend the themes explored by Gutman into the early twentieth century. His “Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1900,” led me to explore the extent to which the emergence of mass culture remade, perhaps coopted, working-class consciousness and action in the twentieth century.

The work of other historians sensitive to the cultural dimensions of social change provided more general inspiration for my enterprise. Some, like Natalie Davis, William Sewell, Raymond Williams, Asa Briggs, Brian Harrison, and Peter Burke, in studies of European society and culture, were influenced to varying degrees by Marxist social theory and by the methods of cultural anthropology. Others, like John Higham, Thomas Bender, Robert Sklar, and John Kasson, worked within the more familiar historiographical context of American studies and intellectual history. All encouraged me to read in popular culture the imprint of class and other kinds of social experience and, conversely, to recognize the ways in which belief, custom, and ritual shape responses to the socioeconomic order.

Finally, several other historians influenced this study. David Brody and David Montgomery have gone beyond the old labor history’s “institutional” approach, with its focus on workplace and labor union, without repudiating its commitment to the study of the economic

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constituents of class power. Brody's pathbreaking *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* and Montgomery's essays in *Workers' Control in America* laid the groundwork for my interpretation of the "craftsmen's empire" and, more generally, for my analysis of the impact of work upon working-class culture. In a different, although related, way, the urban historian Sam Bass Warner alerted me to the ways in which the functional reorganization of urban space in the late nineteenth century reinforced the class differences generated by industrial capitalism. From these historians I hope I have learned to discipline my fascination with the milieu of working-class life, and to remain cognizant of the structural foundations of that milieu.

Given this historiographical context, I shaped my study of Pittsburgh around another, more specific question: What were the sources of conflict and solidarity within the working class and within the wider community? The first and larger part of the text addresses that question within the period between the 1860s and 1880s. It describes the craftsmen's empire in the mills and shows how plebeian culture and local politics reinforced working-class power and communal solidarity in Pittsburgh. It also reveals some of the tensions among different kinds of workers and between them and other social groups in the city, and investigates the way in which local politics and the temperance movement both reflected and sought to resolve those tensions. The second part shows how new immigration and the proletarianization of work in the steel mills combined with the reorganization of urban space to shatter that local community within which workers had exercised significant power. It also describes the emergence of a more assertive elite culture, and details the earnest, but unsuccessful, efforts of reformers to "civilize" the increasingly alien masses. And, finally, it outlines the emergence of a new mass culture which, on the one hand, confirmed the demise of the plebeian city, and on the other, laid the ground for a new cultural consolidation, which would be realized in the context of the industrial nation rather than the industrial city.

A final note. "Writing an introduction," quipped a colleague of mine recently, "is like trying to draw the bull's-eye around a dozen arrows you've just shot at a wall." I have tried here to offer a target for the chapters that follow. However, because my topical arrows have been drawn from several quivers—most obviously, from labor history, urban history, and the history of popular culture—the target is broader, perhaps more misshapen, and certainly less densely occupied than it might have been had I exploited a single quiver more

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systematically. Nevertheless, as a consequence both of personal inclination and of the limitations of primary and secondary sources, I have chosen to write a series of essays on discrete, although interrelated, topics. In so doing, I hope I have made a suggestive contribution to that community of discourse known as social history. At the very least, in any case, I will be satisfied if readers simply come away from the text with a richer knowledge of the life of a great city and of the struggle of its people to resist and accommodate to the experience of industrialization.

CHAPTER 1

1877

On July 19, 1877, trainmen in Pittsburgh unhooked their engines and went on strike. Four days later most of the property of the Pennsylvania Railroad within the city limits lay in smoking ruins; most industrial workers in the city and surrounding towns had also joined the protest in the streets of Pittsburgh; and most of the city's opinion-makers and respectable citizens concurred in ascribing responsibility for the violence and arson that accompanied the strike to the railroad and its allies and not to the working class of the Iron City.¹

These events were neither entirely unique nor unprecedented. In 1873, at the start of a severe economic depression, similarly spontaneous or loosely organized strikes had shaken the railroads and mobilized much public support. The latest trouble, occurring in the fourth year of that sustained slump, involved trainmen throughout the country. Events of the next few days in other town and cities in America resembled those in Pittsburgh. But Pittsburgh's upheaval surpassed all others in intensity and breadth. More than anywhere else, in the upheaval and in the response to it, Pittsburghers reaffirmed the sturdy, if not seamless, character of their community.

Within hours of the trainmen's walkout, thousands of Pittsburghers had come to embrace a protest not simply against an employer, but against "monopoly." Although they offered no systematic definition of the term, what they meant was clear. They meant the Pennsylvania Railroad, with its immense resources, its dominance of markets, its arrogant treatment of distant customers, its political influence, and

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its militarized command structure, which turned employees into mere foot soldiers and sometimes into mutineers.

In the years immediately preceding the strike, the railroad had won especially harsh criticism from Pittsburgh newspaper and politicians. William C. McCarthy, pressman, labor leader, and spokesman for small property owners in the old city, had been elected mayor a few years earlier on a platform denouncing the city's assumption of a huge railroad debt. As the small property owners of the old wards were taxed most heavily to pay off the city's bonded debt, McCarthy linked all the forces calling for the extension of city services to the suburbs with the forces of monopoly epitomized by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Supplementing the mayor's coalition of workers and small property holders was the influence of businessmen who resented the high-handed practices and discriminatory rate structure of the railroad and had for years tried to generate competition. Most recently, Pittsburgh men and money had reorganized the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad to compete for the seventy-mile run to Youngstown, Ohio. Editorials like that run by the *Pittsburgh Post* on July 6, entitled "Railroad Vultures," thus struck a common chord of indignation throughout the city.²

As soon as the strike began, other workers spontaneously associated their own grievances against employers with those of the trainmen. Before it became a riot, the strike had already begun to look like a general strike. Miners, hearing of the trouble, began heading for Pittsburgh on striker-run trains and on foot. At many iron plants, workers who had recently won strikes against wage reduction presented new demands. One special source of bitterness was the refusal of some managers to pay the "hot dollar" bonus for work during the traditional July-August break. At the Jones and Laughlin plant the effect was dramatic. Ironmaster B.F. Jones noted in his diary:

Today tuesday the 24th nearly all the day hands about the mill have been in a state of excitement since coming to work this morning and now at 2 P.M. after holding an excitable meeting they have all (some 350 men) marched out of the mill saying they must have 25 cents per day added to their wages. . . .

These were dollar-a-day men, laborers whose wages had sunk during the depression and who were trying to recover their losses. Having no intention of submitting to the laborers' demands, Jones put them off with meetings, but he had also to deal with "the forge hands" and the "cinder boys," and, more important, with the highly skilled

puddlers. Although bound by contract to stay at work, the puddlers made it clear they were "with the strikers."³

The general strike turned into a riot only after the railroad introduced outside force. Although strikers and their allies had already damaged some railroad property, for the most part their activities remained orderly. They concentrated on shutting down commercial operations while making an effort to deliver mail and provide some commuter service. However, the corporation convinced the governor of Pennsylvania to use state militia to reopen the line. After a Pittsburgh militia unit refused to oppose the strikers, a Philadelphia militia company arrived to a hostile reception. Met by a huge crowd of taunting men, women, and children, the nervous militiamen fired, killing and wounding dozens of people, and were furiously chased out of the city.

Even a flintly ironmaster like B.F. Jones lamented the killing of "citizens" and noted. "This started the riot and workingmen throughout the country and city took it up. . . ." ⁴ From that moment, the property of the Pennsylvania Railroad was doomed. Nearly every depot, rail, car, and engine within reach of the crowds went up in flames or was otherwise destroyed.

From their homes nearby, middle-class citizens looked upon the flames and anxiously hoped for order. But few possessed either the means or the clearly fashioned desire to crush a community in revolt. Few voices rose to defend the railroad or to elevate the crisis to the status of a revolution against property in general. Respectable citizens directed their indignation less toward the strikers and rioters than toward the unscrupulous policies of the railroad and its allies, who had gone over the head of the mayor in soliciting troops.

Thus, when Mayor McCarthy called on citizens to contain the violence and protect property, he insisted that his effort was not directed against the strike. Similarly, when steelmaster James Park, Jr. and banker John R. McCune rallied a crowd of people leaving church on Sunday, July 23, they made it clear they had no intention of opposing the strike, but only of returning the conflict to its local context. "We do not want any more military here, God knows!" In its first public statement, the committee of safety organized by McCarthy:

Resolved, that in making this effort, we pledge our faith to the workmen. We have no purpose to assist in the introduction of armed force from a distance but look solely to the protection of the rights and interests of all by amicable means.

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The committee enlisted labor leaders in the cause. Joseph Bishop of the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, John M. Davis of the Knights of Labor, Andrew Burt, local teacher and champion of labor, and Thomas A. Armstrong, editor of the *National Labor Tribune*, served on the committee along with businessmen, shopkeepers, clergymen, and others. The committee sought to protect residents and retailers from the spreading threats of fire and looting. John M. Davis coauthored the proclamation calling upon “industrious workmen” to oppose the “thieves and similar classes of population, with whom our working classes have no affiliation.” At the Oliver Brothers factory in Allegheny, members of the Amalgamated lodge took up the call and stood guard around the plant for the remainder of the disturbance. Miles Humphreys, the leader of the iron puddlers, who had just been nominated by the Republicans to succeed McCarthy as mayor, made a speech at the depot denouncing violence and looting.⁵

In all these efforts, however, no attempt was made to associate disorder with a specific occupational or ethnic group. As one student of the upheaval has shown,⁶ those arrested during the disturbances represented an almost perfect cross-section of Pittsburgh’s ethnic and occupational structure, including many skilled craftsmen. Although angered and frustrated by the excesses of the crowd, neither craftsmen, politicians, nor other respectable citizens anathematized the rioters as an alien or incomprehensible mob. On the contrary, they saw the rioters as fellow citizens driven to extremes by outsiders.

Why did a strike of unskilled trainmen turn into a community revolt against monopoly? The next several chapters will attempt to answer this question. Chapter Two will discuss the power of skilled craftsmen at the workplace and in the public life of the Iron City. Chapter Three will describe plebeian culture, which reinforced the values of craft autonomy, republican equality, and local solidarity. Chapters Four and Five will indicate the extent to which the ideological heritage of anti-monopoly republicanism and the loosely organized character of local politics permitted plebeian citizens to balance, and sometimes overmatch, the power of the industrial elite. In brief, these chapters will show that the events of 1877 represented not a sharp departure from the social norm in Pittsburgh, but rather a spectacular dramatization of that norm.

CHAPTER 2

The Craftsmen's Empire

In the years between 1860 and 1920 Pittsburgh was an industrial city. Until about 1890, however, methods and relations of work that might appear “pre-industrial”—and would be inconceivable in later years—emerged in that thoroughly industrial setting. In particular, in each factory a “craftsmen’s empire” limited the power of employers and set the stage for a broader labor movement that would contend with capital for the future of the industrial order.

Coal, iron, and glass laid the foundation of Pittsburgh’s economy. The entire southwestern Pennsylvania region was built, literally, on coal. Outcroppings six to fifteen feet thick stared from the sides of hills. Throughout the nineteenth century, inhabitants of the region took advantage of that cheap fuel to heat their homes and run their workshops. The immense “Pittsburgh seam” made a major contribution to the region’s economic growth, especially to the growth of the iron and steel industry in the latter decades of the century. But its impact was limited until the 1850s, when low-sulphur coking coal was discovered in Connelsville and other sites to the south and west of Pittsburgh. Well before then—when iron mills still relied on charcoal or on anthracite imported from eastern mines—Pittsburgh had already emerged as a manufacturing center.¹ What fueled its growth was not coal but location. Pittsburgh was perfectly placed to supply manufactured goods to the booming trans-Allegheny West.

By the 1830s, Pittsburgh had already begun to meet the growing western demand for glass, especially window glass. Because of its fragility, glass could not easily be transported across the mountains, and so, from its vantage at the head of the Ohio River, Pittsburgh

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quickly became the glass capital of America. Immediately following the Civil War, the demand upon glass works of every kind was so great that many ran "21 months without stopping," an unusual practice in the trade which customarily observed a two-month break in the heat of summer. By 1880 Allegheny County was producing nearly 27 percent of all glass manufactured in the United States. Its nearest rival, Philadelphia, turned out 7.7 percent. Throughout the period, glass making accounted for about one-tenth of all industrial employment in Allegheny County.²

The iron and steel industry was Pittsburgh's largest, and growing larger.³ The biggest employer, the producer of the greatest value, the most heavily capitalized—by every economic measure, iron and steel led the way. The early discovery of iron ore in western Pennsylvania, the unlimited supply of wood and later mineral fuel, the rivers which afforded ready transport for immense tonnages, all contributed to Pittsburgh's ascendance in the iron industry. Moreover, the Civil War lent massive impetus to that growth. The sudden, staggering demand for all manner of hardware, especially for rails, cars, ordnance, and textile machinery, presented Pittsburgh's ironmasters a challenge they met with relish. While industrial employment in Allegheny County doubled in the 1860s—as it did in coal and glass—it nearly tripled in iron and steel. While capital investment nearly tripled and value of product more than tripled in Allegheny County in these years, they rose in iron and steel by a staggering 330 percent and 532 percent, respectively.

By 1880, Allegheny County was producing about one-eighth of all iron and steel tonnage in the United States. The value of this product—more than \$46 million—represented fully one-sixth of the entire value of iron and steel production in the nation. Iron and steel dominated Allegheny County, accounting for nearly half of the industrial employment, investment, and productive value. If to the total of rolling mills, blast furnaces, and assorted nut, bolt, and pipe firms is added the host of smaller machine shops and foundries and the associated metal-working and hardware firms, the significance of iron and steel to the life of city and region becomes even more apparent.

The industrial boom generated great fortunes for manufacturers and investors in Pittsburgh, especially in the iron business. But despite their wealth, the iron barons did not exercise an iron grip upon their fellow citizens or their workers. The nature of the iron trade and the internal organization of the typical iron mill account for the limited power of the iron barons.