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Book review: protest and participation: the new working class in Italy. by John R. Low-Beer

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Protest and Participation: The New Working Class in Italy. by John R. Low-Beer

Review by: Craig J. Calhoun

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only a very few countries and why even these countries show strong differences in the nature of their incorporation into the world system (e.g., the export profiles of South Korea and Taiwan suggest a very different portfolio of production than do those of Brazil or Mexico). Similarly, the authors assume that the advanced countries are purely passive actors in this process (e.g., pp. 180–81). They ignore the possible impact of certain policies, such as recent ones increasing trade protection, on the development of the NIDL. Thus, even if they have correctly described the long-run destiny of international capitalism, the authors have done remarkably little in exploring the various paths by which different countries may arrive at it. But despite this shortcoming, the extensive detail about the impact of international capitalism on both AICs and LDCs, and the discussion of the logic underlying the NIDL, will make this volume a useful reference for those interested in processes of national economic development in the context of a global economy.

Protest and Participation: The New Working Class in Italy. By John R. Low-Beer. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Pp. xviii+285. \$16.95 (cloth); \$4.95 (paper).

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During the 1960s, social scientists in the advanced capitalist countries began to notice the rapidly rising importance of technicians and other white-collar but still dependent workers. Serge Mallet and Andre Gorz, among the most influential thinkers on the subject, interpreted unprecedented participation in strikes and political mobilizations as an indication that the new class of white-collar workers was destined to revitalize militancy rather than end class struggle. Mallet and Gorz held that technicians especially were placed in a contradictory position, caught between the rational ideals of science and oppressive, irrational, and nonparticipatory workplace organization. Efforts to resolve this contradiction would lead, they thought, to class-conscious mobilization. While the new working class would not seek instantaneous transformation of all of society, it would pursue a program of “nonreformist reforms” which would be no less revolutionary in its ultimate consequences. Daniel Bell and Alain Touraine, on the other hand, argued that the organization of work was no longer the primary determinant of political allegiance or opinion, let alone of self-identity. John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood stressed the affluence of the new working class as the primary source of its orientations toward social life and political action. Gorz and Mallet deprecated the role of pay and stuck to an emphasis on the work itself and the workplace. Into this set of disputes John Low-Beer has introduced a solid and pointed empirical study.

Protest and Participation is set in Italy, which Low-Beer holds to be sim-

ilar enough to the other advanced capitalist countries to permit generalization. He finds evidence of the same rising importance and militancy of white-collar workers which prompted Gorz and Mallet to rethink theories of working-class political action. Low-Beer's aim is somewhat narrower, though; he focuses the bulk of his attention on the hypothesis that a contradiction between the structure of tasks and that of organizations is central to the activity of the new working class. To test this hypothesis, Low-Beer drew a sample of technical workers and work settings from two large electrical concerns in the Milan area. This sample had the advantage over a number of other studies in the field that it permitted attention to specific workplaces, rather than generalizations about whole firms or all white-collar technical workers. Even more important, one of Low-Beer's companies had introduced a highly participatory management scheme in some of its operations, while the other was more conventionally hierarchical.

Low-Beer's research indicates that incongruence between characteristics of tasks and of organizational settings is indeed important in predicting discontent. However, in contrast to Gorz and Mallet, Low-Beer finds this incongruence to be important whether the organization is participatory and the job not involving, or the job involving and the organization bureaucratic. In the latter case the incongruence leads to the sort of creative, work-oriented militancy described by the new working-class theorists. The former sort of incongruence—participatory organization and noninvolving work—leads to more straightforward, less creative demands for freedom from close supervision, demands unaccompanied by any claim to do the job better. In fact, the introduction of participatory organizational schemes is likely to exacerbate tensions between employers and those workers in relatively uninvolved, closely controlled jobs.

Perhaps more important, Low-Beer argues that Gorz and Mallet overestimated the importance of work and workplace issues and underestimated the importance of "preconditions" for militancy. In particular, Low-Beer finds changes in the structures of opportunity for technical workers crucial as university degrees become essential for promotion or industrial or national economic deterioration threatens job security. Characteristics of workers' lives outside their jobs are also significant, with marital status and family background differentiating among workers in similar jobs. For example, married workers in Low-Beer's sample are much more likely to fit the Goldthorpe/Lockwood model of privatization and narrowing of involvement in class-based aspirations and actions. Political socialization exerts a further significant influence, with workers showing a high degree of continuity across generations in their political attitudes and orientations toward collective action. Some 60% of the technicians in Low-Beer's sample were of working-class or peasant origins. He suggests that this is a major determinant both of their propensity to see basic disjunctures between workers and management and of their willingness to engage in collective rather than just individual struggles.

Low-Beer uses a variety of methods to address questions of attitudes toward jobs, satisfaction with work conditions, ambitions in careers, and

other important issues. Nonetheless, *Protest and Participation* is very definitely a monograph; indeed, it reads more like a very long journal article than like a book. Despite opening and closing chapters on the new working-class debates, the book does not attempt to advance theory. Certain propositions are tested, and a number of theories and ideas are brought into play to support the tests or explain their results. Instead of developing an overall argument, however, the middle five chapters which form the meat of the book consist of a series of more or less discrete observations and comments. Low-Beer's book is about protest and participation only as factors in a fairly narrow debate within industrial sociology; he differs from other writers who wish to set the new working class in a much broader analytic context. Indeed, although Low-Beer uses as points of departure certain Marxist arguments of the 1960s, he makes no effort to follow developments in Marxist thought into the 1970s. Low-Beer's disinclination to go beyond his immediate research project can be forgiven, though, since the major aim of *Protest and Participation* seems to be simply to refine the empirical basis of arguments about the new working class and the affluent worker and to extend the discussion to Italy. If one asks of the book no more than this one will not be disappointed, for it accomplishes its task in a careful, capable way.

Women, Work, and Family. Edited by Frank L. Mott. Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath & Co., 1978. Pp. xii+153. \$15.95.

Working Women: A Study of Women in Paid Jobs. Edited by Ann Seidman. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1978. Pp. xix+217. \$15.00.

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These books have one thing in common—a focus on women's experiences in the labor force—but they differ considerably in style, methodological approach, content, and quality. *Women, Work, and Family*, edited by Frank Mott, is a compilation of six articles about the interrelationships of socioeconomic background, education, family events, and work among a sample of women entering adulthood. The chapters were prepared by a group of economists at the Center for Human Resources Research (Ohio State University) and are basically geared toward an academic audience. However, policy-minded readers may find a smattering of useful information in chapter 8, which is only four pages long and is titled, "Highlights of the Volume and Some Policy Implications."

Though much less sophisticated technically than Mott's book, *Working Women*, edited by Ann Seidman, is a cumbersome piece to plow through. The first part reads like a glorified census report, chock full of tedious facts from published volumes. Few readers are likely to move beyond the first