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The Changing Face of Work in the West: Some Introductory Comments

ABSTRACT

Between the 18th and 20th centuries, a variety of work communities sprang up as an outgrowth of the expanding global economy in what is now the western United States. These communities typically served as outposts of distant moneyed interests, providing living quarters for the workers who extracted raw materials or constructed the infrastructure needed to transport such materials to urban centers. Unlike communities with more permanent and diversified economic foundations, life in such temporary settlements had as its backdrop relations among workers, employers, and the resources they sought to exploit. Dialogs between workers and capitalists continued to evolve over time as the West became industrialized, class relations were transformed, and resources were depleted. The articles in this volume explore various facets of those transformations and their broader implications.

Introduction

The exponential growth of the global economy over the past few hundred years has much in common with black holes theorized in outer space. Suction is a defining characteristic of both phenomena. Urban centers, first in Europe and later in the eastern United States, developed voracious appetites for the raw materials of an ever expanding periphery (Wallerstein 1974, 1980; Licht 1995). In the region that eventually became the western United States, many settlements were established with the sole aim of exploiting particular natural resources or building the infrastructure required to transport those raw materials to urban centers. Starting in the 18th century, the acquisition of furs spurred some of the earliest western work settlements. Their ranks were later swelled by working communities devoted to mining and logging, water and transportation improvements, and a multitude of other pursuits as the premodern world economy was transformed by the industrial revolution. While some work settlements did become durable communities, most had fleeting existences. As the

articles in this volume reveal, archaeological investigations of such temporary work camps, company towns, and other related settlements can contribute significantly to our understanding of the industrialization process and social responses to it.

This special issue evolved from a symposium entitled “Communities Defined by Work: Life in Western Work Camps,” a session presented at the 1999 annual meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology in Salt Lake City. Brought together by our mutual interest in the lives, labor, and struggles of workers in peripheral work settlements of the western United States, we found many research themes linking our work. While the communities considered in this volume are diverse, they arose from common economic imperatives that influenced their longevity, development, and the nature of interactions among their inhabitants and between those residents and distant elites. Those shared circumstances not only serve to define peripheral work settlements, they also yield important reasons for examining life in such places. The following discussion first explores some of the common themes characterizing life in such communities. The dynamics responsible for the evolution of these peripheral work settlements are then considered as an introduction to the articles in this issue.

Common Themes

It is in some ways perhaps risky to apply the term *community* to many of the temporary work settlements considered in this volume. George Murdock (1949) defined community as a group of people living in the same place, interacting on a daily basis, and operating under a system of shared understandings. Globalization has stretched the concept to include social scales varying from households to the entire planet (McKechnie 1979). Yet even if we restrict our use of the term community to Murdock’s definition, settlements that owe their existence to a particular construction project or resource extraction venture clearly differ from more permanent communities.

One of the most obvious differences stems from the reasons prompting the creation of such peripheral work settlements. Unlike communities with more diversified and sustainable economic foundations such as agriculture, shipping, or industry, these settlements were typically created for a specific and often limited purpose. That *raison d'être*, in turn, dictated their development, duration, and demise. For communities dependent on a particular resource, variations in demand, combined with resource depletion or the impracticality of further extraction, prompted cycles of boom and bust. Other single-focus work communities such as construction camps for railroads, water projects, and highways lasted only as long as it took to complete a given project. While such task-specific temporary deployments are not unique to capitalistic social formations, their articulation with the global economy is a distinctive product of the modern world.

All of these specialized work communities that served as outliers of the world economic system are referred to here as *peripheral work settlements*. That use is specifically intended to encompass company towns, work camps, and villages formed by groups of entrepreneurs as well as enclaves of camp followers and strikers that sprang up within or near them. The defining attributes of these communities include their narrow economic focus, relative geographic isolation, impermanence, and dependence on the global economy. Each of those qualities influenced the trajectory of social relations. In some cases, peripheral work settlements developed into more permanent communities, and that process also holds significant interest.

The narrow economic focus of peripheral work settlements contributed to their impermanence and dependence on outside markets. The transience of construction camps is, of course, implicit. However, work communities tied to extractive ventures were also unstable because of their dependence on global markets. Although a philosophy of seemingly endless abundance and opportunity fueled western expansion, in actual practice even the most renewable resources often were depleted or found to have recognizable limits in local contexts. The vagaries of market fluctuations also contributed to the instability of peripheral work settlements.

The impermanence of such communities, in turn, limited the amount of investment made both in economic and social terms. Most peripheral settlements were never intended to be complete, full-service communities. The amount of development that took place in such communities was often contingent on their anticipated duration, size, and demographic composition. While the development of infrastructure varied considerably, most peripheral settlements remained inherently simple, if not intentionally incomplete. Settlements occupied for longer periods of time, particularly those with higher proportions of families, generally developed a wider array of amenities, social activities, and institutions than those settlements used for shorter periods and occupied largely or solely by men. Starting in the late-19th century, settlements controlled by corporations and government entities also attempted to quash certain activities such as alcohol consumption (Rogge et al. 1995). That trend mirrors the corporate paternalism documented in industrial centers such as Boott Mills in Massachusetts (Mrozowski et al. 1996). While intended to promote moral and efficient work habits (Gutman 1976), such prohibitions were often ineffective. Ancillary settlements frequently developed to provide services not allowed in such camps (Goddard in this volume).

Peripheral work settlements also commonly lacked more than just physical amenities. For example, their populations were often disproportionately male. Prior to World War I, women and children were uncommon or completely absent in many peripheral work communities (Hardesty 1994; Rogge et al. 1995; Van Bueren et al. 1999). Gender imbalances, in turn, created markets for camp followers such as prostitutes. As greater gender balance was achieved in some peripheral work settlements in the 20th century, more stability and social integration eventually took place. In the 1920s and 1930s, for example, many families returned year after year to the railroad logging camps of the Sugar Pine Railway in Tuolumne County, California, creating a rich network of relationships and continuity in social activities (Connors 1997).

The general atmosphere of impermanence, combined with the remoteness and crude amenities of many of these communities, succeeded in attracting mainly immigrant and disadvantaged

native-born men willing to put up with such conditions over the short haul. Like working populations in the industrial northeast where 50% of the workers remained with an employer for less than six months by the late-19th century (Thernstrom 1964; Katz et al. 1982), the residents of peripheral work settlements in the West were sojourners. They looked out for their own best interests by “voting with their feet,” like other workers at the bottom of the economic scale (Wurst 1999:15). The frequently multiethnic composition of peripheral work settlements also posed challenges for social cohesion. Differences in background were often compounded by the fact that many recent immigrants spoke little or no English.

Another defining characteristic of most peripheral communities was their remote location. Most were created in undeveloped areas, although some were also constructed at the margins of existing communities. That isolation had several important implications. First, it was often expensive simply getting people, equipment, and supplies in and out of such communities. In many cases, workers were expected to pay their own travel expenses, fees for employment agents, and room and board (Bradwin 1928). While relative real wages in the West averaged 20–25% more than national averages during the late-19th century (Atack and Passell 1994), disposable income was significantly reduced by travel and living expenses.

Gender imbalances, minimal amenities, and the remoteness of most peripheral work settlements contributed to the insularity of the experience. In camps with few or no families, the separation of work and family life was taken to an extreme. Work was the pervasive backdrop of life in such places, although efforts were clearly made to create separations between private and public spheres to the extent possible (Baxter in this volume).

Peripheral Work Settlements As Discourse

The archaeological remains of peripheral work communities provide particularly rich opportunities for research into the evolution of relations between workers and capitalists. Not only was life in such settlements defined by work, but many peripheral work communities were

occupied for very short periods, enabling fine-grained comparisons of living and working conditions over time. In the western United States, the nature of the dialog between workers and capitalists evolved from simple exchanges or compulsory exploitation during the initial Euroamerican settlement and entrepreneurial development period to the wage labor characterizing the industrial expansion of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The earliest peripheral settlements employed native peoples in resource-exploitation ventures such as fur trapping (Veltre and McCartney this volume) and gold mining (Rawls 1976). Native peoples were typically paid with goods such as glass beads, blankets, and other manufactured commodities that were worth much less in the global marketplace than the raw materials they produced (Ray and Freeman 1978; Van Bueren 1983). From those exchanges, European and American capitalists derived surplus value (profit). The settlements from this early historic period took a variety of forms, depending on the nature of relations between colonists and native populations. Many were clearly segregated, with Euroamericans often occupying fortified areas.

These initial economic forays were followed by small-scale entrepreneurial ventures that often rapidly gave way to large scale, heavily capitalized, corporate industrial ventures. Donald Hardesty (1988) has described that shift in the development of western hard-rock mining and the same trajectory pertains to many other western resource-extraction activities, including but not limited to placer mining, logging, and water control. Peripheral work communities developed by small-scale entrepreneurs tended to be less structured and more egalitarian, while settlements governed by corporations or the government were characterized by more formal arrangements that over time placed increasing emphasis on class distinctions.

The shift from barter and petty entrepreneurial ventures to wage labor describes a fundamental shift in the relations of production found in later peripheral work settlements. The advent of wage labor created a relationship where surplus value was derived directly from the work people performed, rather than indirectly through the exchange of commodities. The nature of the dialog between workers and capitalists thus

shifted from seeking fair exchange rates to improving wages and working conditions, and controlling the means of production. The dialogs that ensued among workers, their employers, and the larger society gradually brought about systemic changes in the quality of life at peripheral work settlements, although the fundamental structure of the economic system remained unchanged. Archaeological studies of work settlements thus can be used to examine and enrich understandings of working and living conditions, class relations, and resistance (Paynter 1988; Paynter and McGuire 1991).

An important dimension of the dialog between workers living in peripheral work settlements and those owning the means of production was the creation of increasing social and geographic distance. While certainly not unique to the era of industrial capitalism, the owners of many late-19th- and 20th-century western work settlements lived elsewhere and relied on managers and other middlemen to intercede for them. By distancing themselves from the inequities and poor living conditions in the peripheral work settlements they owned, elites could more easily ignore or deny responsibility for those conditions.

Those in control of the means of production also placed increasing stress on scientific management strategies predicated on dominant-group philosophical tenets of the Victorian era. These scientific management strategies emphasized efficiency, regularity, discipline, and temperate behavior (Gutman 1976). After ca. 1900, for example, there was a trend toward increasing formality in camp design (Foster et al. 1988). This was designed, in part, to impose greater discipline, segregate workers along occupational lines, and reinforce employer authority. Elaborate work-classification systems also compartmentalized tasks, emphasizing hierarchy and differential rewards as a way to thwart union organizers. Elites also attempted to influence the intemperate behavior of workers in some peripheral work settlements. While these types of scientific management strategies are best known from their expression in eastern industrial cities such as Lowell, Massachusetts (Mrozowski et al. 1996), the same principles were applied to

the management of many peripheral settlements in the West.

Workers in such communities responded to elite demands and poor working and living conditions in a variety of ways that included strikes, sabotage, and milder expressions of dissatisfaction or outright resistance. These challenges drew attention to the exploitative practices of capitalists and prompted a number of progressive reforms in the early-20th century. For example, the eight-hour workday was approved for working men in California in 1909, followed by compulsory workmen's compensation insurance and a minimum wage for women and children in 1913 (Rawls and Bean 1993:258). A riot at a hop farm in Wheatland, California, also prompted the creation of sanitation standards for work camps (California Commission on Immigration and Housing 1914)—a subject considered in some detail by Mary Maniery in this volume. The onset and scope of such changes varied by region, but working conditions did generally improve in the period following World War I in response to the demands of organized labor and progressives. In some cases, corporations even took active roles in making improvements as a means to retain qualified workers (Connors 1997). Those improvements included provisions for housing the families of workers in some peripheral work communities.

In all cases where wage labor characterized economic relations in peripheral work settlements, class relations have an important role to play in their interpretation. LouAnn Wurst and Robert Fitts (1999) have recently argued for the importance of viewing class as a relationship, not a mere descriptive category as it has been used in many studies of economic ranking and status. Relational views of class focus on "struggles among members of society over the exercise of social power" (Paynter and McGuire 1991:1). Wurst and Fitts suggest taking a carefully contextualized, situational approach to such relations to avoid reducing them to a simplistic duality. One way to do that is to examine how people manipulated artifacts, and indeed features and entire settlements, as symbols of their acceptance, rejection, or modification of class ideologies (Beaudry et al. 1991). In that regard, it may be

useful to examine the change from premodern work habits to the more disciplined approaches to work desired by capitalists (Gutman 1976). These and a variety of other topics are taken up in the diverse contributions of this volume.

Prospects

The articles in this volume deal with peripheral work settlements from different periods and geographic areas of the West. They reflect a variety of different perspectives that all shed light on the importance of such communities as vehicles for understanding the evolution of peripheries and the lives of the people who chose to or were conscripted to work and live in such places. With the exception of a contribution by Douglas Veltre and Allen McCartney, all of the articles explore western settlements occupied by workers in the early-20th century. As such, the volume focuses largely on communities from the Industrial era. Veltre and McCartney's article, in contrast, examines the exploitation of Aleutian Islanders and the fur trade carried out by the Russian American Company in the Pribilof Islands of Alaska. Their contribution reflects the prospects and research potential of such premodern and multiethnic peripheral work settlements, adding to a body of literature on such early special-purpose communities (Lightfoot et al. 1997).

Scott Baxter considers the role of separations between domestic and industrial spheres in an isolated California oil field, revealing how dominant group values were interpreted through the use of space by workers in a rugged rural setting in the 1910s and later. Thad Van Bueren considers the roles of class relations, gender, and ethnicity in the life of a work camp occupied in 1912 and 1913 during construction of the first Los Angeles Aqueduct. Maniery considers living conditions, foodways, and the impact of regulations governing camp sanitation at a California dam construction camp occupied during the 1920s. Mary Farrell and Bill Gillespie seek explanations for differences in the organization of settlements associated with two early-20th century, heavily capitalized, gold mining ventures in southeastern Arizona. A variety of factors

including the ethnic composition of their workforces, dispersion of auriferous deposits, and distance to other settlements may have influenced the choice to cluster one settlement and spread out the other.

Two articles also examine the role of settlements established outside of the margins of company towns. Richard Goddard examines the formation of a marginal neighborhood that developed in response to the social controls imposed in a company mining town in Nevada. Randall McGuire and Paul Reckner examine some of the broad issues of class and ideology as revealed in striker camps and coal mining towns near Ludlow, Colorado. The striker camp was the location of the most famous battle in the Colorado Coal Field War of 1913 and 1914 and investigation of that community has the potential to reveal how the strike affected relations within the multiethnic workforce when compared to relations at the company town of Berwind.

Finally, Donald Hardesty provides comments on the diverse contributions in this volume and offers a vision of the important directions that future studies of peripheral work settlements may take. Collectively, the articles in this volume reveal many important themes worthy of further investigation. They also highlight the importance of placing studies of peripheral settlements in the context of global developments and dialogs between those in control of production, workers, and the environment. The value of this research is not confined, of course, to the western United States. Investigations of peripheral work settlements in other regions and periods will further understandings of responses to globalization and the inherent inequalities associated with the development of capitalism (Amin 1976; Chilcote and Johnson 1983).

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