The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877-1919. By Francis G. Couvares.


Travelers and other observers of nineteenth-century Pittsburgh frequently noted the city's uniqueness. Not only was the city especially smoky and gritty, but its people seemed peculiarly well integrated into the city's working-class environment. Pittsburgh reminded visitors of an American Manchester or a reflection of England's Birmingham. Not coincidentally, those English industrial cities lent their names to communities that became a part of Pittsburgh.

In his book, The Remaking of Pittsburgh, Francis G. Couvares captures this "specialness," and moreover, offers an interpretation connecting the city's economic life and spatial form to the creation of a craftsmen's empire in Pittsburgh and the shaping of a plebeian culture.

Couvares argues that nineteenth-century Pittsburgh mirrored the strategic social and economic position of the city's skilled craftsmen. The city's plebeian culture reflected not only the key social role of its elite iron puddlers and glassblowers, but also — until the arrival of the cable car in the 1880s — the fact of Pittsburgh's hilly topography which physically contained a socially and economically integrated society. Thus, the social and cultural homogeneity of the "walking city" persisted in Pittsburgh long after it had disappeared from industrializing Philadelphia, Boston, and other post-Civil War manufacturing cities. Because of Pittsburgh's economy and its unique social and spatial form, argues Couvares, between 1877 and 1890 craftsmen exerted a powerful reformist effect on city politics and shaped the city's theater, music, sports, and other cultural forms.

It is Couvares's thesis that Pittsburgh's plebeian culture disintegrated in the 1890s. Unlike traditional glassmaking and iron production, steelmaking and the modern glass industry excluded skilled puddlers and glassblowers, the backbone of the plebeian culture. The 1892 Homestead Strike, which crushed the craftsmen-controlled Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, marked the denouement of the craftsmen empire.

Borrowing from classical sociological theory, Couvares sees modernization fracturing the socially cohesive plebeian culture, sharpening
class cleavages, and proletarianizing the Pittsburgh working class. Such political bosses as Christopher Magee appealed to particular neighborhood and labor constituencies and robbed the union movement of its traditional use of third parties (that is, the Knights of Labor and the Greenback party) to accomplish its reformist agenda. More seriously, modern industrialism spawned a corps of engineers, technical specialists, and bureaucrats, the bone and sinew of the new middle class, who rebuffed the craftsmen’s cultural hegemony. Availing themselves of the new cable car and streetcar technology, they chose a segregated life style in the city’s suburbs.

Like the historian Robert Wiebe, Couvares sees the new middle class motivated by concern for efficiency and social order and determined to use government authority to control nonconforming behavior. Indeed, argues Couvares, more cosmopolitan members of the craftsmen community had also deplored plebeian drinking habits which jeopardized work performance, but they supported voluntary temperance as the remedy, not the use of government to control social custom. According to Couvares, Pittsburgh’s large and increasingly new ethnic nineteenth- and early twentieth-century working class rejected the efforts of the Progressives to replace the outworn plebeian with the streamlined middle-class culture. Ultimately, contends Couvares, it was the mass culture purveyed by the political boss and the media that won the acceptance of Pittsburgh’s new ethnic working class.

Couvares has provided a highly readable and insightful, albeit brief, social history of the cultural forces shaping Pittsburgh in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a clearly organized and richly interpretative book. Couvares’s case, however, frequently rests on a thin, conjectural historical foundation. For example, descriptions of Pittsburgh’s nineteenth-century Fourth of July celebrations, a canvass of working-class taste for theater, and vignettes of sporting events substantiate much of Couvares’s argument for a plebeian culture. He uses mainly the temperance crusade to gauge the weaknesses in the plebeian’s cultural hegemony, and he leans heavily on the Pittsburgh Survey to document the emergence of a proletarianized working-class culture.

Although begging a more elaborate and thorough treatment, Couvares’s arguments are both intriguing and useful. More important, his book fills a void in Pittsburgh history, complementing Leland Baldwin’s work on antebellum Pittsburgh and Roy Lubove’s history of the twentieth-century city. It is therefore a welcome addition to the
literature on Pittsburgh, as well as a contribution to the study of working-class culture.

John F. Bauman  Department of History and Urban Affairs  
California University of Pennsylvania  
California, Pennsylvania


These additions to Wilkinson’s _Bibliography of Pennsylvania_, published in 1957, bring this work up to 1979. Wilkinson’s original work covered writings through 1952, and Carol Wall’s supplement covered the years 1953 through 1965. Trussell’s Supplements I and II cover the years through 1970 and 1973 respectively.  
Books, articles, and dissertations are arranged chronologically from 1682 through 1979. Section I is Bibliography and Research Aids, Section II, Background Factors. Subject headings under each time period are: economics; social; politics and government; biography; and special events. A section under Special Studies leads one to such local history sources as county histories, church histories, minorities, and ethnic groups. Each entry is numbered. The index is to entry number and not page number. It includes author and subject. A list of periodicals used is included.  
In Supplement IV there is a table showing the coverage of the chronological eras and topics for the period 1966-1979. This shows the coverage during those fourteen years is not as comprehensive as it might be believed. This table would be of use to an author selecting fresh topics to write about or a student selecting a dissertation topic.