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The Collar Line: Clerical Workers in America at the Turn of the Century *)

Olivier Zunz

The growth of corporate capitalism and the dynamic organizational revolution that swept the American industrial belt in the few decades preceding the First World War profoundly and irreversibly altered such areas as work culture, education, family life, and consumption. Since that time, large corporations have enjoyed increasing economic, social and cultural influence, have absorbed a growing proportion of the working population, and have employed an ever larger percentage of these workers in clerical occupations. The emergence of a large, corporate white-collar work force in the period from the 1870s to the 1920s had a profound affect on class structure in America. In this paper, I will focus on an important aspect of this change, on the development of the line – real or imaginary – which separated blue-collar from white-collar workers in American society. The reader will undoubtedly notice a discrepancy between the large comparative framework that I set up and the narrow data base which I use to test some of the propositions raised. This is in part the consequence of the incompleteness of work in progress, in part of the dearth of historical literature of the subject.

Understanding the extent to which the "collar line" was a significant social and mental boundary at the time of the first great expansion of the white-collar sector will illuminate the realities of lower-middle class life as well as the rigidities of the social system. Studies of several communities at the turn of the century show that between 22 % and 43 % of the sons of blue-collar workers attained white-collar status 1). Such studies are part of large body of scholarship on inequality and mobility which has helped us reach a balanced view of social reality, free from the oversimplifications of the rags-to-riches myth 2).

*) I wish to thank Roberta Senechal and Charles Feigenoff for their assistance in preparing this paper.

1) Stephan Thernstrom, The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880 - 1970 (Cambridge, Mass, 1973), 246.

2) See Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert, American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History (New York; 1980), 62 - 63; Peter R. Shergold, Working-Class Life: The "American Standard" in Comparative Perspective (Pittsburgh, 1982); and for a recent debate on inequality, Robert E. Gallman, "Professor Pessen on the Egalitarian Myth," Social Science History 2 (Winter 1978): 194 - 207; Edward Pessen, "On a Recent Cliometric Attempt to Resurrect the Myth of Antebellum Egalitarianism," SSH 3 (Winter 1979): 207 - 27; Gallman, "The 'Egalitarian Myth,' Once Again," SSH 5 (Spring 1981): 223 - 34; Pessen, "The Beleaguered Myth of Antebellum Egalitarianism: Cliometrics and Surmise to the Rescue," SSH 6 (Winter 1982): 111 - 28; Stuart M. Blumin, "Age and Inequality in Antebellum America: The Case of Kingston, New

Most historians are in agreement that nineteenth-century economic, technological, and environmental change produced enough opportunities to benefit the majority of individuals. These studies, however, also point to significant inequality, a fluid social system, and an element of the arbitrary which affects the course of mobility. They give substance to those interpretations of Horatio Alger's stories which stress luck as a mode of advancement and to the depiction of downward mobility found in the novels of Theodore Dreiser and William Dean Howells. The mere fact that a significant movement into white-collar occupations existed – a movement greatly facilitated by the large number of openings in clerical occupations in the economy – does not reveal much, however, about the actual mingling between the blue-collar and white-collar environments. Were the sons entering a new world with a new set of rules and thereby breaking with their parents? Or were the two universes intimately tied by the unceasing upward and downward movement across the "collar line?" Although it would be simplistic to equate the achievement of white-collar employment with arrival in the middle class, it is reasonable to see the shift from manual to non-manual labor as an important event which should be examined to determine whether it indicates a larger change, a move away from the working class.

For the purposes of this preliminary exploration, I am knowingly leaving aside or touching briefly on an embarrassing long list of sources. Numerous pamphlets, books of etiquette, newspapers and magazines articles, books of advice, contemporary reports on education, when taken together, combine to give a rich description of the white-collar world at the turn of the century. I am currently examining this literature with some excitement but will sacrifice comprehensiveness for the time being in order to give myself the opportunity to address a more theoretical problem. Similarly, this paper knowingly leaves aside large segments of the lower middle-class such as small independent entrepreneurs, retailers, government workers, and teachers to concentrate on those clerical workers hired by large bureaucratic corporations, those organizations which were most responsible for changing the work culture. In lieu of the synthesis which I hope will be forthcoming in the not-too-distant future, I attempt here to explicate the meaning of the "collar line" only in the context of a single American experience, the growth of the American railroad industry in the late 19th century, and to set up this experience in a broader comparative perspective.

York," SSH 6 (Summer 1982): 369 - 79; Gallman, "Professor Blumin on Age and Inequality: Antebellum America," SSH 6 (Summer 1982): 381 - 84.

A comparative framework: The German and British models

Early European social scientists such as Werner Sombart stressed the exceptionalism of the American pattern of inequality in comparison to his own Germany. In his classic work, *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?* (1906). Sombart focused almost exclusively on what he thought were characteristics of the American worker who, as he put it, "mixes with everyone – in reality and not only in theory – as an equal" [3]. But Sombart, writing in 1906, paid little attention to the lower-middle class in his comparative thinking. A new perspective has emerged as a result of the researches of German historians into the origins of national socialism. Jürgen Kocka, in particular, finds its roots in a related series of events: the rise of big business, the subsequent creation of a large white-collar sector, and the attempt by the state to protect (through special legislation) that sector from infiltration by the labor movement [4]. In his innovative study, Kocka contrasts the situation in Germany, where the State had, in effect, artificially solidified the collar line, pitting blue-collar and white-collar workers against each other, with the fluid movement between the blue-collar and white-collar worlds which characterized American society. He argues that it is this very fluidity which distinguished the United States from Germany.

In Germany, Kocka posits, "older patterns of social perception and behavior" led the middle class to define the emerging industrial working class as "inferiors subject to discrimination and rule [5]." "The wish not to be a worker", he continues, "was a central part of many white-collar employees' self image – something they shared in spite of many differences in other respects [6]." In its anti-socialist stance, the state bureaucracy consolidated this feeling and provided a model for the growing class of white-collar workers. The process perhaps culminated in 1911 when "the Imperial government conceded white-collar demands and enacted a law giving a special social security status to non-manual employees [7]." In Germany, where the blue-collar workers voted communist or socialist, the white-collar workers reacted by joining the ranks of the NSDAP [8].

In the US, instead, the loose social structure which allowed passage from white to blue-collar work made it difficult for white-collar workers to feel

3) American edition with an introductory essay by C. T. Husbands and a foreword by Michael Harrington (White Plains, N. Y.), 110.

4) Jürgen Kocka, White-Collar Workers in America, 1890 - 1940: A Social-Political History in International Perspective (Beverly Hills, 1980).

5) Ibid., 138.

6) Ibid., 139.

7) Ibid.

8) Ibid., 30.

disadvantaged even during times of economic duress. The few studies available on Klan membership seem to confirm Kocka's point [9]. American white-collar workers played only a small role in the renaissance of the Invisible Empire in the twenties. Even though it is true the Ku Klux Klan gained some support among the lower-middle class, primarily from its independent sectors but also from white-collar employees, the lower middle class never represented more than a "substantial minority", a minority which declined rapidly as the Klan grew. The Klan of the 1920s recruited the bulk of its members mostly among status anxious blue-collar workers who found a refuge for their disappointments in one-hundred-percent Americanism.

In both the United States and Germany the national government intervened in response to tensions created by the organization of the economy by large firms. But in the United States, Kocka argues, "professionalization," especially in certain fields (engineers, managers, lawyers, and teachers) mitigated the effects of state intervention [10]. In short, in the United States, professional organizations and professionals themselves provided models for the growing army of white-collar workers, a function that in Germany fell into the hands of bureaucrats.

England offers another perspective for comparison. In England as in Germany and America, the standard of living of clerical workers varied from relative ease to near poverty. With this diversity in mind, British historians have recently tried to define the main characteristics of this heterogeneous group and in doing so have raised the issue of the collar line. Geoffrey Crossick, for example, approaches the question from the standpoint of the workers: "How does one distinguish the majority of ... skilled men ... who found apprenticeships for their sons in the same or some other skilled trades, from those others whose sons frequently became clerks and who saw it as a social advance? Was there something exceptional within the working class that made certain parents or children desire white-collar work [11]?" Eric Hobsbawm, in turn, argues that the emergence of a new and mainly white-collar lower middle class, "which wedged itself into the intermediate position between the old labour aristocracy and the middle classes, is one main reason for the growing incorporation of the labour aristocracy into a wider proletarian culture and movement" during the Edwardian period [12]. Hobsbawm recognizes the ambiguity of the collar line when he cites examples of

9) The best synthesis remains Kenneth T. Jackson, The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915 - 1930 (New York, 1967).

10) Kocka, 53.

11) Geoffrey Crossick, "The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion," in The Lower Middle Class in Britain ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London, 1977),37.

12) Eric Hobsbawm, Workers: Worlds of Labor (New York, 1984), 219.

tradesmen who wore stiff collars in the workshop but his main contention is that the labor aristocracy's fate was tied to the increasing proletariat, not with *embourgeoisement* as the Leninists would have it [13].

By contrast, British clerks saw themselves firmly tied to the middle class. The British clerks even shared some features with their German colleagues. They felt the same "sense of honorable status" which makes them "emphatically not working class and stridently conscious of that fact [14]." In all other respects, however, the British lower white-collar workers hardly resembled their German counterparts. Their lives were unaffected by the intrusion of a state bureaucracy, and they were not drawn by the forms of association that flourished in Germany. The British clerical worker, believing firmly in the tradition of individual mobility within a laissez faire society, did not emulate the bureaucrat as did his German counterpart but instead took the gentleman of the traditional mercantile world as his model. When George Bernard Shaw was a clerical worker in the 1870's, he refused even to contemplate joining a trade union, for joining would "have been considered a most ungentlemanly thing to do – almost as outrageous as coming to the office in corduroy trousers, with a belcher handkerchief round my neck – but snobbery apart, it would have been stupid, because I should not have intended to remain a clerk. I should have taken the employer's point of view from the first [15]."

Many British "blackcoated" workers of the late nineteenth century had very modest means of living, but they clung to an ideology of a previous era, where in the counting house, the relationship between clerk and employer was often a personal and particular one, when clerks "mixed" with the sons of gentlemen, and when they were expected to behave accordingly. As a contemporaneous account of the 1870s puts it, "Clerks are, as a rule, of decent address and gentlemanly habits, patient and long-suffering, not given to noisily 'insisting upon their rights' and are possessed of some delicacy when requesting an advance of salary [16]". Other witnesses concur: "The clerks in established and well known merchants' offices yield to no one in gentlemanly deportment, cultivated proficiency and self-respect; and in appearance there is but little difference between many of them and the employers they serve [17]." Even though such testimonies must be read with skepticism (the second one reads like puffery to me!) and a thorough assessment of the clerks' class consciousness must await a new set of

13) Ibid., 237.

14) Crossick, 13.

15) Cited in Crossick, 24.

16) Charles Edward Parsons, Clerks: Their Position and Advancement, 1876, p. 2.

17) B. G. Orchard, The Clerks of Liverpool, 1871, p. 33. This text and the previous one are cited in David Lockwood, The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness (London), 1966), 29 - 30.

studies, historians have generally concluded that, politically, clerical workers drifted toward Toryism, "emphatically the party of property and stability [18]".

The American case

British and German historians have begun to document this great transformation which accompanied the rise of a white-collar work force and to assess the class position of clerical workers [19]. What do we know about the American case? At mid-century, the fortunes of clerks were still intimately tied to that of their employers. *A Practical Treatise on Business* published in Philadelphia in 1853 insists first that "the chief qualifications to be sought for in a clerk, next to ability are honesty and politeness" only to add that "serenity of temper is a virtue of which all men cannot boast – and probably without serious derogation of their character or abilities; but it is a fundamental constituent in the character of a clerk *and* (my emphasis) a business man." Clerks are further encouraged to show initiative by performing tasks "for which we receive no direct remuneration" while employers are encouraged to follow the example of a bank manager who installed a library in the bank for the use of clerks, "for their superior knowledge is always useful [20]." The American "ideal type" is also well expressed in this extract from an 1841 publication, "Familiar Scenes in the Life of a Clerk" published in *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine:* "The majority of clerks are young men who have hopes and prospects of business before them . . . A good clerk feels that he has an interest in the credit and success of his employer beyond the amount of his salary; and with the close of every successful year, he feels that he too, by his assiduity and fidelity has added something to his capital – something to his future prospects, and something to his support if overtaken with adversity; and a good merchant encourages and reciprocates all these feelings [21]."

These two texts embody some of the characteristics often invoked to contrast the American scene with that of the Continent: initiative; hope of mobility, and simultaneously recognition of a possibility of downward mobility ("if overtaken with adversity"). Nippers, a clerk in a Wall Street lawyer's office described in Hermann Melville's *Bartleby The Scrivener,* was no gentleman but frankly in the camp of the upwardly mobile. His employer complains of his "diseased ambition", which was "evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copy-

18) Crossick, 40.

19) Too little work has been done on France to attempt a synthesis here. See nonetheless the chapter by Yves Lequin in volume 4 of Histoire de la France Urbaine, ed. Maurice Agulhon (Paris, 1983).

20) Edwin T. Freedley, A Practical Treatise on Business: Or how to Get, Save, Spend, Give, Lend, and Bequeath Money with an Inquiry into the Chances of Success and Causes of Failure in Business (Philadelphia, 1853), 119 - 20.

21) This testimony is cited in Margery W. Davies, Woman's Place is at the Typewriter: Office Work and Office Workers, 1870 - 1930 (Philadelphia; 1982), 21.

ist, and unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the drawing up of legal documents." He was also "considerable of a ward politican, (and) occasionally did a little business at the Justices' court [22]." Although Bartleby himself was a gentleman who ends incarcerated in the Tombs, the scrivener's message is one of independence as he relentlessly utters his motto, "I prefer not to", whether he refuses to examine his copy, perform other duties, and in the end leave the office.

In America in the middle of the 19th century, clerks were few in number and expected to become themselves businessmen. The particular situation of clerks at mid-century, close to their employers while exhibiting a significant degree of independence led Michael Katz and his collaborators to include them in the business class, not in the working class in the two-class model they presented in their *Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism.* As they put it, "sons of men in the business class often began their working lives in clerical occupations, and the mobility of men out of clerical work and into proprietorship was quite high. For many men clerical work was the initial phase of a career in commerce. Clerks were paid a salary, not a wage; this was a critical distinction at the time. It indicated that they could expect to work throughout an entire year and did not experience the seasonal fluctuation to which men paid daily wages were subjected [23]." Katz does qualify his classification. He is well aware that he describes the American social structure of the mid-nineteenth century at a unique and short-lived turning point, after artisans had lost their autonomy and before white-collar workers had grown in numbers. He concedes that there is difficulty "interpreting the class position of the great army of white-collar workers and salaried professionals who first appear in the late nineteenth century... . Here, bureaucracy takes the place of the factory as the paradigmatic form of organization [24]."

With growth, American clerical workers still stood apart. Critical observers of the time were clearly conscious of the change. One wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1904 that while "for generations the small business, that is, the business house as it was before the advent of the Great Corporation and the Trust, was a school of character second in importance only to the Church", in the new world of corporations "there are thousands of all grades of capacity who now have no other feeling than that of the clerk, or the servant [25]." His prediction that "men who have grown up simply as clerks ... will become more and more men of

22) Cited in Davies, 9 - 10.

23) Michael B. Katz, Michael J. Doucet, and Mark J. Stern, The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 45.

24) Katz's contribution to AHR forum on Edward Pessen's "Social Structure and Politics in American History," American Historical Review 87 (1982), 1334.

25) Henry A. Stimson, "The Small Business as a School of Manhood" Atlantic Monthly 93 (March 1904): 337 - 40.

detail" preceded by some fifty years C. Wright Mills' analysis of the white-collar man. Nonetheless in America, as in England and Germany, for the young men and women who sought to work for the large corporations, the previous era of partnership in the counting house served as a reference point. If in Germany, state intervention had prompted clerks to emulate the bureaucrat, and if in England, tradition led them to assume the manner of gentlemen, in America, late-nineteenth clerks continued to model themselves after businessmen and to adopt the criteria of a business culture.

This situation leads me to question Kocka's suggestive comparative analysis that "without a relatively united proletariat, the line of division between blue-collar worker and white-collar employee remained relatively diffuse in most areas of life" in the United States [26]. Kocka contrasted the American sales clerks' union, which "allied (itself) with organized labor and shared the fundamental positions of the labor movement", to the conservative German mercantile employee associations which were decidedly middle class [27]. He also points out that "objective criteria" in America, the low salaries and absence of social protection by corporations brought white-collar and blue-collar workers together [28]. At the same time, corporate training programs created to promote the best manual workers to supervisory positions contributed to a society in which objective criteria and mobility combined to blur the "collar line." Similar arguments have been made by American historians who have analyzed the contradiction between work rules and middle-class ideals and argued, in particular, that the position of the saleswoman hired by department stores represents "an extreme case of the dilemma of all workers under consumer capitalism–driven by the social relations of the workplace to see themselves as members of the working class, cajoled by the rewards of mass consumption to see themselves as middle-class [29]." In this instance, the reasoning of these historians is based exclusively on salesclerks – the lowliest category of Clerks – and applied to the entire white-collar work force. It is misleading, however, to consider these mostly young and single women independently of the family context in which they lived. Treating them as creations of the workplace hardly gives a realistic picture of their lives and aspirations. And it is similarly misleading to take the stance adopted by the American sales clerks' union as representative of clerical workers in general.

26) Kocka, 139.
27) Ibid., 75.
28) Ibid., 116.
29) Susan Porter Benson, "The Customers Ain't God," in Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society ed. Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz (Urbana, 1983), 205.

The Office Workers of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad

The data base for this paper is admittedly limited to one group of clerical workers, those who applied to work for the Burlington railroad in the late 1800s and those who were actually employed in the Chicago office as of June 1880. Although this data base is limited, it is, I would argue, highly symbolic. The railroads were the first big bureaucracies in America, several decades ahead of the other sectors in instituting a new hierarchical work culture. The men who ran the CBQ, James Murray Forbes, Charles Perkins, and later James J. Hill, are among the leading figures in the history of American business. It is not their careers which are at issue here, however, but those of the hundreds of white-collar employees who worked unter the close supervision of middle-level managers. If, as Walter Licht recently demonstrated, the elite of skilled railroad workers, conductors and engineers, could not be bound by all the rules designed for them because the realities of railroading forced them to confront many unknown situations and make on-the-job decisions, clerical workers, tightly controlled by a new breed of executives (whose profile I'll draw elsewhere), had to go by the book [30].

The hundreds of letters of application sent to the CBQ office indicate little affinity with the blue-collar perspective but instead clearly express an ideal of conduct modeled after that of their prospective employers [31]. It may very well be that applicants designed their letters to appeal to their employers' prejudices, but their expression of business values is too strong and too pervasive to be dismissed. The objective socio-economic and demographic characteristics of these clerical employees combine with the form and content of these letters to reinforce our vision of a distinct, homogeneous clerical culture.

First of all, most applicants were young, native-born Americans below 25 years of age. They attended school in the 1880s and 1890s, where white-collar work was put forward as the appropriate reward of an education. Indeed promoters of vocational education during the period lodged strong protests against this trend: "Throughout the second half of the 19th century", as Joseph Kett has remarked "educators voiced abundant complaints that native American boys seemed to prefer the lowliest clerkships to honest manual labor ... These educators argued that, among other benefits, vocational education would reduce American dependence on foreign labor ... and attract native-born youth to manual labor [32]."

30) Walter Licht, Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton, 1983).

31) The archives of the CBQ are in the Newberry Library in Chicago.

32) Joseph F. Kett, "The Adolescence of Vocational Education," in Work, Youth, and Schooling: Historical Perspectives on Vocationalism in American Education ed. Harvey Kantor and David B. Tyack (Stanford, 1982), 91.

The letters these young men and women wrote (the latter making up a small although sizable fraction of applicants) emphasized common themes. They believed in their own potential for upward mobility, in the individual's quest for bettering himself, and they especially believed that joining a large business organization was an appropriate means to realize their goals. They viewed a clerkship as an occasion to perfect their skills and as a prelude to further job opportunities and promotion. Many mention that they are willing to accept a low salary to start, not only to limit the risk to the employer but also because they are confident that their talent will lead to rapid promotion.

The applicants also directly and indirectly stressed their know-how and experience. Many point to an education in a small business college. Most handwritten notes which make up about half of the letters show a fine hand, the sign of a good education, while the typewritten ones have a very professional look. All show a sense of the proper etiquette and good working knowledge of standardized formulae, a knowledge that was practiced as a form of art.

Along with proper etiquette, the applicants guarantee their good character. Lester Taylor, a former stenographic and typewriter instructor from Milwaukee, who proclaims himself a master of "phonology", who is able to "write blindfolded on Remington typewriting machine", and who had worked for Deering Harvester in Kansas, assures CBQ officials of his "character and ability." Another applicant, a young man of 19 living with his parents, points to his previous experience as book keeper and bill clerk, but also emphasizes that he does not smoke cigarettes. He gives several references for his "character, habits, and ability." Another applicant of about the same age says: "I have no bad habits such as smoking, chewing, drinking or swearing", the latter an annoying habit of telephone operators that contributed much to the early feminization of this occupation.

There are a few exceptions to the general pattern. Two formerly well-paid executives of the railroad who had fallen from their managerial positions--sobering reminders of the possibility of downward mobility--wrote to their former colleagues in the hope of obtaining low-level clerical positions for which they were clearly overqualified. There is a single instance of a veteran of the Spanish-American war among the applicants, the kind of applicant who persistently searched for jobs in the federal government but who was rare in the business world. There is only one instance of an applicant stressing family poverty. Of the handful of letters from immigrants, all were fluent in English and evinced socialization into the white-collar world. One of them reminded the railroad of the usefulness of bilingualism for writing instructions for foreign labor. And finally, there are a few rearguard applications from scriveners who complained that "typewriters" (i. e. young female typists) had displaced them from their jobs.

These letters show some traffic between firms. One applicant worked for the Chicago and Alton railroad Co. in the auditor's office when a change of ownership, leading to restructuring, forced him to look for another position. Others had positions in insurance companies, banks, or other large employers of white-collar workers when they applied. This sort of horizontal exchange characterizes an already well-established class of workers.

We can study the socio-economic characteristics of actual workers busy in the Chicago office in June, 1880 as well as their families by combining information contained in the CBQ payroll, which gives a detailed description of their positions and salaries, with that of the U.S. census taken that same month, which lists these workers and their households. These two sources enable us to understand their social status and demographic strategies within the context of the family economy. The payroll books of the CBQ line listed a total of 271 clerical workers employed in the Chicago office as of June 1880, with their positions, departments, and salaries. We were able to identify addresses from other sources for 147 CBQ workers and successfully located 117 of them in the census. To study these people in the context of their living environment – other family members, fellow boarders in boarding houses, other non kin-related members of their households – we assembled the socio-economic characteristics of 824 Chicago residents in the city or its immediate suburbs.

Male heads of households working in the Chicago office of the CBQ (a total of 38) were among the older clerks (that is, they were above 25), were generally native-born Americans (or immigrants from Great Britain), and clearly exhibited a middle-class life style. Most of these heads of households working for the railroad had been married only recently, were making $67 a month on the average, and were supporting small nuclear families. By comparison, unskilled workers in 1880 usually made less than $300 per year and few skilled workers brought home $500.

Only rarely did any of these men mingle residentially with blue-collar workers. About half of this group of clerks heads of households lived in Chicago, the other half in the newly-created suburbs. Of the suburbanites, only three lived in north side Chicago: one lived in Waukegan, off the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad while two lived in Evanston. Most located their households along the CBQ line, between Chicago and Aurora, that is, toward the west, in Clyde, Riverside, Western Spring, Hinsdale, and Downers Grove. Only one of them lived in Riverside, the exclusive suburb created by Federick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, whose CBQ railroad station and adjoining Water Tower are landmarks of American suburban architecture. Eight families headed by a CBQ clerical worker had located further down the line in Downers Grove, a quiet commuting suburb incorporated seven years earlier in 1873, with streets shaded by the growing maple trees the settlers had planted in hope of obtaining

a sugar supply [33].

The better paid among them often employed servants in their homes. Thomas Jackson, for example, was a claim clerk in the general freight department. Thirty years old, he was making over $100 a month and lived in Evanston with his wife (also native born) and four children. Mrs. Jackson, who stayed home, was helped by a cook. Seven other clerks who were heads of households also employed servants. In other families, despite the relatively high salaries of these clerks, the family economy was practiced. Jacob Wilson, a passenger agent making $90 a month, lived with his wife and five children. His oldest daughter, who was 19, was employed as a school teacher, These families, however, did not practice the complex pooling of incomes from several skilled and unskilled occupations that characterized the immigrant working class family at the same period. Occupations usually pursued by other members of the household, whether family members or boarders, were clerkships (in stores, or for the board of trade), law, medicine, and teaching. Only in one case did members of a CBQ employee's household (a daughter and a boarder) practice dressmaking, a typically immigrant occupation. Not surprisingly, this lone case was found in the household of one of the few immigrants in the office.

Other clerks at CBQ had not yet established a household of their own. Twenty-six whom I could locate with certainty in the 1880 census were young men only beginning their careers and still living with their parents. Practically all these households show a distinct white-collar lifestyle. These CBQ employees were themselves the sons of clerical workers, dealers, or manufacturers. In eight instances, their families earnings were comfortable enough to allow them to employ a servant, like in the family of CBQ clerk Delbert Rodgers, the son of Theodore Rodgers, a lumber and hardware dealer who lived in Downers Grove. In four families, one or two sons working for the CBQ supported a widowed mother; in a few instances, both fathers and sons were clerking in the same office. Of these clerks, only two had working sisters. In one household where the two brothers worked for the CBQ and supported their mothers as well as several younger brothers and sisters, one of the sisters also worked as a railroad clerk (although not a CBQ). In one other household the father was also a CBQ clerical worker, one sister a school teacher and the other employed in a book bindery. Altogether only six of the twenty-six sons clerking at CBQ came from blue-collar families, where the father was a carpenter, or a piano tuner, and in a unique case of intra-railroad/intra-familial crossing of the collar line, a railroad fireman.

Unfortunately, we have been able to locate very few daughters in the Census among CBQ workers. Of the initial sixteen women listed in the payroll, in 1880,

33) The WPA Guide to Illinois, 1939 (New edition with an introduction by Neil Harris and Michael Conzen (New York, 1983), 543.

a time when a clerical job was still a man's purview, and the base company payroll providing no residential clue, we were able to find only two young women who, we can say with certainty, worked for the CBQ in the 1880 census. In both cases, these two native-born women lived with their Irish parents, and their family combined blue- and white-collar workers. It is, however, impossible to generalize on the basis of such small numbers.

Except for a few odd cases (sons-in-law, grandsons, etc.), the remaining clerical workers were all boarders. They were a part of the large urban population that had left their families, but had not yet established their own. We traced forty-one boarders and lodgers altogether, roughly divided into two groups, either boarding in families or in boarding houses. Boarders sharing space with a family usually chose to live with other white-collar workers and members of the middle class. As we know, it was quite common for American middle-class families to rent rooms to young men. In one case, a Riverside doctor housed a CBQ worker; in another case, also in Riverside, the only head household/CBQ clerk living there rented a room to a fellow office worker. A similar arrangement in Chicago proper comprised three CBQ clerks. Sometimes a widow rented rooms to her son's CBQ colleagues. In yet another instance of four housemates, one was an executive of the CBQ and his brother a clerk in the same department while the other two were respectively a merchant and an architect. Boarders usually lived in families headed by someone of the same or of a superior occupational status. Out of fifteen "familial" arrangements, only in three instances do we find a clerical employee boarding in the home of a blue-collar worker.

As for the slightly smaller half (13 cases) in the boarding houses near their offices in the city center, the situation is somewhat more complex. Only among the residents of boarding houses do we find more prominent examples of residential mixtures of blue- and white-collar workers. In one instance of a large boarding house with twenty-six residents, railroad brakemen, railroad machinists, telegraph operators, engineers, conductors, and CBQ clerks all lived together. This association by industry reflects the specialization so well described for an earlier era by Thomas Butler Gunn in his *Physiology of New York Boarding Houses*[34]. Yet other boarding houses in the city were occupied by people of the same occupation – namely clerks in a variety of industries and commercial ventures as well as members of the teaching profession, a new ordering reflecting the changing times.

On the basis of this evidence and on work in progress on their neighborhoods and family life, I would conclude that CBQ clerical workers were part of a white-collar world. They lived in daily contact with middle-level executives, businessmen, and professionals and were well separated from the working class. It is hard to imagine a better drawn "collar-line" than at CBQ. Even though the

34) Thomas Butler Gunn, The Physiology of New York Boarding Houses (New York, 1875).

railroad had been in operation long enough for the offsprings of their blue-collar workers to have reached working age, none of the clerical employees were sons or daughters of that elite blue-collar group – the engineers – and only one was the son of a railroad fireman.

Work in progress on Ford Motor company will provide a second case study 30 to 40 years later (between 1908 and 1920), a case study that will have the advantage of including many more young women and be centered on an essentially blue-collar city. Whereas the railroad represents a prototypical bureaucracy, the quixotic Henry Ford was legendary for cursing bureaucratic complications.

Georgia E. Boyer, one of the first women clerks recalls a day at the Piquette plant when "during lunch hour, Mr. Ford went into the Accounting Department and picking up all the ledgers and other books pertaining to bookkeeping, he threw them out of the window onto the street. When the accountants returned from lunch they were amazed to find their books gone. Mr. Ford told them that he saw no reason for keeping a set of books. He said, 'Put all the money we take in in a big barrel, and when a shipment of material comes in, reach into the barrel and take out enough money to pay for it [35)]'." But for all the legendary stories about his antipathy to bureaucracy, Ford and James Couzens actively created a large pool of clerical employees subdivided into a variety of departments to process the ever increasing paperwork the booming automobile industry generated. According to my preliminary count, they hired over 1200 clerical workers between 1908 and 1912 in their efforts to maintain a constant pool of about 500 workers. In 1910, 446 white-collar employees were on Ford's payroll. We were able to trace over half of them (250) in the 1910 census, 180 men and 70 women; 82 heads of households, 57 sons, 46 daughters, 43 boarders. What was their class position in the blue-collar city of the automobile industry? The Detroit-Dearborn complex will be a critical test case of the thesis that I advance.

In the meantime, I must conclude (provisionally) that the absence of an institutional separation between blue- and white-collar workers, a separation reinforced in Germany by the State, and the absence of the British gentlemanly tradition did not mean that blue and white-collar workers mingled easily in America. There is some evidence of fluidity, but overwhelmingly the white-collar world seemed well separated, whether one looks at the organization of neighborhoods, family organization, intergenerational career patterns, schooling, noral codes, and technical culture. Fluidity was indeed an important part of American society but its effects were largely mitigated by well engrained socio-cul-

35) "The Reminiscences of Miss Georgia E. Boyer," Ford Motor Company Archives, Oral History Section, January 1954, 9.

tural divisions that maintained rigid hierarchies in the evolving social structure 36).

36) Two years have passed since the 1985 Stuttgart conference where I read this paper. I have now completed my study of several other large corporate offices in the 1910s – not only the Ford headquarters in Detroit but also Dupont in Wilmington and Metropolitan Life Insurance Co. in New York. These clerical workers' collective biography confirms the existence of a distinct collar line albeit with significant shifts in the clerks' socio-economic characteristics. The results will be reported in my forthcoming book, "The Social Contours of Corporate America".