

City of Clerks: Office and Sales Workers in Philadelphia, 1870–1920. By Jerome P. Bjelopera. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005. ix + 208 pp. Photographs, maps, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$22.00. ISBN: cloth, 0-252-02977-1; paper, 0-252-07227-8.

Reviewed by Cindy Aron

Jerome P. Bjelopera explores the emergence of a white-collar world in his closely researched study, *City of Clerks: Office and Sales Workers in Philadelphia, 1870–1920*. Combining painstaking and careful examination of census returns with the records left by some of Philadelphia's big businesses, Bjelopera offers a comprehensive look at the men and women who comprised the city's clerical labor force. What is less certain, however, is exactly how these workers fit within the dynamic class structure of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Many of Bjelopera's findings reveal that Philadelphia was not unlike other places when it came to white-collar work. We learn that white-collar labor grew dramatically over the half-century after 1870; that it increasingly became an employment option for respectable women; that while the majority of white-collar clerks were native-born whites, those who were children of immigrants—some of whose parents labored at blue-collar jobs—looked to clerical work as an avenue of upward mobility; and that African Americans were almost entirely excluded from white-collar jobs. Bjelopera clearly delineates the variety that the term “white-collar work” encompassed. Selling in a department store was, for example, vastly different from working in a bank or operating as a telegrapher. He readily acknowledges and explores the important difference that gender made in the experience of white-collar labor. Not only the sorts of jobs for which they could be hired, but also the amount of money they were paid and the possibilities for advancement all hinged on whether the employee was male or female. But, in the end, Bjelopera maintains that what connected these workers—the process by which they found their jobs, the sorts of educations required of them, and, most important, their distinction from manual blue-collar laborers—was stronger than what separated them.

Clerical workers, he suggests, strongly identified with and hoped to make themselves part of the middle class. They imbibed the ideals that their employers promoted: honesty, frugality, hard work. As a result, white-collar employees shunned collective forms of protest, because they either saw themselves (if they were men) as potential managers or entrepreneurs or (if they were women) as short-term employees who would work only until they married. That did not mean that all clerks were happy, model employees. Many engaged in a variety of individual forms of rebellion—from bad-mouthing the boss behind his back to the occasional, and more serious, attempts to embezzle funds.

Bjelopera's book moves beyond work experiences to explore the leisure pursuits and home environments of these clerks—and here some of the evidence seems to point to white-collar clerks holding a more ambiguous class position, in some ways adhering to middle-class norms and in other ways falling short. "After hours" found clerks enjoying themselves in a variety of ways, often in mixed-gender groups composed of fellow workers. Male and female employees alike took long bicycle excursions, hiked and picnicked in local parks, and sang or played in various musical groups. Such amusements would have befitted people hoping to make their place within the middle class. But white-collar workers also engaged in the growing world of commercialized leisure, patronizing movie houses, vaudeville theaters, and amusement parks. Bjelopera's discussion of commercialized leisure concentrates primarily on the more acceptable of these pursuits—the increasingly legitimized variety theater and the vacation experience at company-run shore homes—and gives less attention to the amusement parks and urban dance halls that also apparently attracted their share of white-collar patrons. Bjelopera does not consider whether attending such amusements threatened or compromised these clerks' stake in the middle class.

Bjelopera's close and careful mapping of the residential patterns of Philadelphia's clerks similarly reveals that these workers, despite their claims to, or hopes for, middle-class status, did not always adhere to middle-class standards of behavior. Many clerks lived as dependents in the homes of parents, primarily in newly built middle-class residential neighborhoods on the periphery of the city. But other clerks eschewed such living arrangements and chose instead to rent rooms in the furnished-room district, a

neighborhood close to the center of the city. Removed from the watchful eye of parents, these young people apparently had not only the freedom but also the discretionary income to participate in a variety of forms of leisure that would not have met middle-class standards of propriety. Clerks not only enjoyed some of the seedier commercial entertainments available in the furnished-room district; they also attended “booze parties,” which were regularly planned and organized gatherings that Bjelopera characterizes as “generally quiet affairs.” But the fact that bottled beer remained the “drink of choice” at these parties, which included both men and women often “from the same occupational category,” would have meant that those in attendance were, if not flouting conventional middle-class morality, at least pushing the edge of the envelope (p. 156). That residents of the furnished-room district were also known for being even relatively “tolerant of unconventional sexual practices, such as premarital heterosexual intercourse, prostitution, and homosexuality,” would have likewise made their middle-class credentials suspect (p. 157).

Indeed, in some ways these clerks seem more like the young working-class men and women who labored not in offices and department stores but in factories and sweatshops. While Bjelopera argues that white-collar clerks were striving for upward mobility, and that many were hoping to identify with and become part of the middle class, he presents much tantalizing evidence to suggest that these young people may also have been redefining what it meant to be middle class.

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