Class and Culture among Unsettled Lives: Displaced Steelworkers’ Accountings for Job Loss

THESIS

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Abstract

While existing research suggests that changes in the U.S. economy have weakened the security and well-being of working-class men, little is known about how workers interpret the causes and consequences of these changes. Accordingly, we lack understandings of the cultural dynamics that may influence action among workers. The current study draws on recent work on symbolic boundaries and narrativity to examine the cultural work of individuals with coping with deindustrialization. Drawing upon interviews with 59 steelworkers whose plant had recently shut down, this research analyzes how displaced workers attribute their circumstances to two sets of actors: managers and government representatives. In contrast to claims that workers’ definitions of “us” and “them” are founded on moral rather than material criteria, the findings indicate that workers with unsettled lives make sense of their circumstances through counter-hegemonic narratives based on material concerns. These results demonstrate that attention to the exigencies of local contexts is necessary to explore working-class consciousness.
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# Table of Contents

Class and Culture among Unsettled Lives: Displaced Steelworkers’ Accountings for Job Loss..................................................................................................................................... 1

THESIS ....................................................................................................................................... 1

Abstract ....................................................................................................................................... ii

Vita........................................................................................................................................ iii

Fields of Study ................................................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents ............................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework and Literature Review ................................................ 3

BOUNDARY WORK AMONG WORKING MEN ....................................................... 3

Institutional Context ......................................................................................................... 4

Settled Lives ..................................................................................................................... 5

The Role of Culture ........................................................................................................ 6

EMBEDDED SOCIAL ACTORS .................................................................................. 7

UNSETTLED LIVES ................................................................................................... 10
Chapter 1: Introduction

A broad range of research demonstrates that cultural representations of the social world influence individual and collective action. For example, Sen’s (1990) discussion on gender inequality in India suggests that individuals may perceive problematic social arrangements as legitimate and therefore participate in their reproduction (see also Burawoy 1979). On the other hand, social movement scholars demonstrate that framing a state of affairs as unjust can motivate efforts for social change (Jasper 1997; McAdam 1982). Increasing research on the causes and consequences of economic change in the U.S. over the past four decades has substantially contributed to a deeper understanding of how the structural and institutional changes associated with deindustrialization, deunionization, and increased global trade affect American workers (see Kalleberg 1999; Uchietelle 2006; Mishel et. al. 2005; Fligstein and Shin 2004). Yet we know very little about how workers themselves interpret these phenomena. As a result we have a poor understanding of how contemporary economic change may translate into social and political responses among workers. Hence, an investigation of how individuals coping with economic change account for their circumstances can further our understanding of the cultural contexts that may influence workers’ actions.

A central component of interpreting social transitions and the events that constitute them is the cultural construction of collectivities of “us” and “them”
(Alexander et al. 2004). Recent research on boundary work has advanced our understanding of workers’ representations of similarities and differences between themselves and other groups (Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007), but offer little in terms of how social change and concrete events shape social and political identities. Adopting various tenets of narrative analysis, this research incorporates individuals’ accountings for social change and concrete events to study of “the world inhabited by working-class people…as they understand it” (Lamont 2000:2). Using a unique set of interviews with fifty-nine steelworkers whose plant had recently closed, the current study examines how displaced blue-collar workers attribute their job loss to the structural power and agency of two sets of actors: government officials and members of upper management. As extant research and the following analysis demonstrate, workers’ representations of these groups of actors are relevant for understanding political and social identities.

The results highlight the influence of immediate contexts in shaping meaning-making. Rather than highlight immaterial, moral criteria of self-worth as previous research demonstrates (Lamont 2000), the exigencies of making sense of changing circumstances lead workers with unsettled lives to conflate the moral and material sources of dignity. More specifically, the displaced steelworkers’ sense of collective identity draws upon culturally-constructed notions of common material interests. The steelworkers express these interests not in terms of advancing the position of their class per se, but in terms of achieving the “public good.” For workers with unsettled lives, self-worth and material concerns are intertwined.
BOUNDARY WORK AMONG WORKING MEN

In recent years boundary work, or the constructing of “similarities and differences between themselves and other groups” (Lamont 2000:3), has emerged as important tool for studying how individuals use culture in ways that establish collective identities (Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007). In Lamont’s study of symbolic boundaries among working-class men she finds workers’ collective identity centers on their struggles to maintain a sense of order despite the unpredictabilities of life and that workers use moral criteria to understand social hierarchies. When assessing people above them in the social structure, American workers often critique the moral character of the upper middle class (e.g., claiming that they lack respect for others, lack integrity, etc.). Hence, in the face of increasing economic security, globalization, and other trends that render the acquisition of the American Dream and positional goods (that is, zero-sum goods of income, employment, and power) increasingly unlikely, workers construct cultural communities of “people like us” that based on internal goods—goods available to all regardless of social status such as being hardworking, having a good family or being a good friend. While Lamont's analysis provides important tools with which one may assess the workers cultural work within the context of social change but her lack of
attention to institutional contexts, workers with “unsettled lives,” and individuals’ manipulation of public culture obscures how workers interpret economic dynamics.

**Institutional Context**

Lamont is careful to have workers’ criteria of worthy and unworthy types of people arise spontaneously without referring to specific actors or groups that might constitute relevant “others.” The result demonstrates how workers use culture to define “people like us” in their own terms. However, the interviews make finding how workers are connected to others’ in the social field in ways that position them as members of groups or who have interests that are antagonistic to other groups very difficult. “People like us” are people who share common values. In as much as comparable structural positions influence a sense of collective identity, it is largely because certain values—not interests—are more likely to be adopted within those positions. With regards to the “others” against whom the workers draw symbolic boundaries, the workers interpret class distinctions as differences in disposition or behavior that they cite in order assert cultural distance, even a sense of moral superiority. As such, Lamont finds that workers characterize “people above” them in the social hierarchy as occupying a cultural “world” quite distinct from that of their own.

However, most class scholars agree that class is a relational concept, such that even if workers seek to symbolically distance themselves from other classes, they inevitably occupy some kind of shared social space. As Wright (2000:963) argues, “[c]lass struggle and compromise do not occur within an amorphous ‘society’ but within
specific institutional contexts—firms, markets, states.” The power differentials within these institutional contexts may provide the basis for the generation of strategic interests, including class-based solidarity and conflict. Accordingly, attention to institutional contexts will elucidate how structure and culture shape representations “people above,” “people below,” and “people like us” based on (the construction of) common or antagonist interests.

Settled Lives

Conventional class analyses largely treat “class location” as a static position with which the analyst may impute rational interests. Accordingly, analysts generally exclude populations that fail to fit into established class maps (e.g., the unemployed) or place them into categories that do not appropriately reflect their market position (Breen and Rottman 1995; Fantasia 1995). Lamont circumvents this concern by limiting her analysis to workers who had been continuously employed for at least five years. The obvious byproduct of this strategy is that it obscures the voices of workers with unsettled lives. While Lamont claims that sociopolitical changes (e.g., increased unemployment for male workers with low levels of education, increased global competition, deindustrialization, etc.) shape workers’ mental maps, broader social contexts are given only cursory attention in her study. If, as Lamont argues, keeping the world in order despite its uncertainties is paramount for working-class men, we must take into account how this is achieved among persons coping with the deleterious consequences of market dynamics. As Swidler notes (1986:278,280), “in settled lives…culture and structural circumstance
seem to reinforce each other” whereas individuals with “unsettled lives” often involves “constructing entities that can act…, shaping the styles and skills with which they act, and modeling forms of authority and cooperation.” Thus, by focusing on employed workers, Lamont (and most class scholars) overlook the potentially unique uses of culture among those who not only need to makes sense of the economic change, but are likely to do so in ways that demarcate an “us” and “them” that suggest possibilities for group formation and social action.

The Role of Culture

Survey research linking structural position and attitudes largely treats ideology as monolithic and human beings as mere receptacles of public culture. Schlozman and Verba (1979), for example, claim that the unemployed view their plight as a personal rather than a social problem and fail to link the personal strain of joblessness with cynicism toward the “American Dream” or with a sense of class consciousness (see also Kluegel and Smith 1981). Similarly, Wright attributes workers failure to agree to “pro-worker” survey items to “some kind of mechanism” that “blocks” what a person “really wants.” According to these assumptions, individuals either embrace American Dream or are cynical of it, they either believe that personally responsible for coping with strain of economic misfortune or that they government should respond, etc. Thus, researchers often find “incoherent” or “anomalous” subjectivities, which are often explained by references to deterministic notions that, for example, an individualistic ideology obscures
the link between social position and objective interest (Somers and Gibson 1994; Vanneman and Cannon 1987).

Lamont’s inductive approach therefore provides an important contribution to the study of class-related consciousness as it allows consciousness to emerge according to individuals’ own ways of viewing the social world. Nevertheless she treats public culture as shaping the content of such worldviews and pays little attention to how individuals can manipulate such meanings to serve their purposes. For example, an “American republic culture” asserting that citizenship is “conditional on self-sufficient and production” (p.52) reinforces workers’ value of hard work. Similarly, she explains Black workers’ “caring self” to their exposure to progressive religions and to their higher rates of unionization. If we conceive of human beings as capable of using the cultural materials found in their social environments to articulate their interests, then the empirical task becomes one of investigating how workers negotiate their interests within the contexts of the meanings and position of their fields rather than whether workers adhere to a dominant ideology.

EMBEDDED SOCIAL ACTORS

Institutionalism has made great strides in elaborating how economic actors are embedded in meso-level social orders that shape the social construction of interests (e.g. Dobbin 1994, Powell and DiMaggio 1991). I use the term “fields” to refer these social orders in line with Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992) discussions on individuals (rather than organizations) within fields. Four aspects of fields are necessary for my present purposes (see Fligstein and McAdam 2008). First, individuals can occupy positions in several
fields. Fligstein and McAdam compare fields to a Russian dolls in that one field (e.g., a division within a firm) is nested in another (the firm) and another (a field of competing firms) etc. Second, fields involve an understanding that some actors are more powerful than others within the field. Third, fields involve a shared set of rules indicating what is possible and legitimate. Fourth, fields are embedded in national/state structures and the state has the power to attempt to stabilize an unsettled field.

Among the myriad fields that are relevant in understanding economic change, the sphere of politics and the sphere of production merit special attention. As many economic and political sociologists argue, the state plays an important role in stabilizing markets (i.e., economic “fields”) either through direct intervention or by changing the rules that govern economic activities (Evans 1995; Fligstein 1996; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Of course, the form of intervention and the rules that states implement are political by nature: some firms in a field (and by implication their workers) benefit more than others. If the working class looks to the state to realize their interests of securing their material welfare in the face of market instability (see Bowles and Gintis 1985; Przeworski 1985; Skocpol 1980), then explicit attention to the political interests of workers can further elucidate the nature of symbolic boundaries and the construction of cultural communities.

However, a large body of literature suggests that collective identity among workers in the political sphere is quite complex. As Lamont (p.9) puts it, the contemporary era is “a time when … principles of solidarity seem to apply to an increasingly small number of ‘people like us.’” In other words, the working class is increasingly fragmented, which individualizes social problems and limits the possibility
of the establishment of collectivities with common political or economic interests (Grusky and Sorensen 1998; Form 1995). Furthermore, research largely portrays U.S. workers as enduring unemployment as a personal rather than a social problem (Schlozman and Verba 1979). These trends toward the fragmentation of class struggle and the individualization of economic misfortune may be partly explained by understandings of what is possible and legitimate as economic actors. Recently, several scholars have argued that broader ideological and institutional trends since the 1970s contribute to the depoliticizing of economic misfortune, including the increased routinization of relief programs, and the rise of the notion that unemployment is self-inflicted, that social protection exacerbates unemployment levels, and that unemployment is an acceptable cost of maintaining competitiveness in a global economy (Somers and Block 2005; Baxandall 2002).

While the literature claims that cross-occupational solidarity within the political sphere is complex, extant literature suggests that solidarity and interest-formation often occurs at the site of production (Fantasia 1995). The conventional employment contract in capitalist economies entails the transaction of the productive assets between owners of capital and the owners of labor power so that both parties enhance material welfare (see Sorensen 2000). Nevertheless, both parties retain a substantial amount of control over their respective assets. Much of industrial sociology and organizational behavior scholarship address “worker citizenship” in terms of the employees’ submission of their residual control over labor power to the interests of capital but has generally overlooked worker attitudes regarding managers’ control over organizational assets, or “managerial
citizenship” (Hodson 2001). An investigation of workers’ representations of citizenship requires attention to firm-based normative order (Hodson 2001). While such orders may be specific to each organization, they are also influence by broader institutional trends, including the transition from stakeholder to shareholder regimes (Fligstein and Shin 2004).

UNSETTLED LIVES

Marx argued that the perennial bankruptcies endemic to the capitalist system would lead workers to challenge the competence and efficacy of the capitalist class, intensify working-class consciousness, and ultimately result in a politically organized proletariat (Harvey 1989). Although most contemporary analysts reject this teleological reading of class formation, much of contemporary class research also lacks an engagement with the concrete problems of social life. Even though his approach to class research overlooks how class positions are affected by broader social changes (see Carchedi 1987), Wright’s (1996:706) affirmation that class shapes subjectivities refers to workers coping with an event rather than a structural position:

One would be hard pressed to convince a group of newly unemployed workers from a factory that has closed because the owner moved production abroad that their lack of ownership of capitalist assets has no significant consequences for their lives. If the workers themselves owned the firm as a cooperative, or if it were owned by the local community, then different choices would be made. The same international pressures would
have different consequences on the lives of workers if the distribution of capital assets—i.e., in the class relations within which they lived—were different.

Wright thus lays out an empirical task, one that calls for attention to how workers interpret destabilizing events. Although sociological research examining events is limited, scholars highlight how events are social constructions and the result of cultural work (see Wagner-Pacifici 2010).

NARRATIVITY

Narrative analysis presents an important tool with which sociologists may bypass the shortcomings of extant survey methods and even existing approaches to boundary work. Narrative shifts the focus from examining the distribution or content of attitudes among members of social categories to that of exploring how these parts construct a coherent configuration of dynamic relations over time. According to the narrativity approach, human consciousness is related to spatially- and temporally-contingent self-concepts and images of society that emerge from the cognitive arrangement and evaluation of events (Polkinghorne 1988). As Somers (1994:614) explains, narrative analyses demonstrate that:

- people construct identities…by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories … ; people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or …
- integrate these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people
are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.

Thus, identities or cultural schemas do not necessarily correspond with categorical attributes (i.e. unemployed) or isolated events (i.e. job loss); rather, individuals and groups make sense of their circumstances by connecting disparate events into causal accounts. Publicly available cultural narratives provide the discursive tools and the shared mode of communication with which individuals can create causal accounts. However, they do not determine the form these accountings take: individuals arrange and prioritize the myriad events and relations they confront in order to create an account of discrete happenings (e.g. a plant closure) in ways that legitimize their strategies of action and ascribe self-worth (see Snow and Anderson 1993; Swidler 2001).

Jacobs’ (1996) research on the construction of a social crisis by newspapers further demonstrates the tension between “progressive” and “tragic” narratives and their respective implications for action. Progressive narratives explain harmful events as “pains of transition” that will lead to an improved future. Tragic narratives, on the other hand, explain harmful events in terms of their incompatibility with the public good and imply that such conditions will result in an undesirable future. These two narrative forms accompany divergent typifications of “perpetrators” and “victims” that do more than establish symbolic boundaries, they carry implications for the establishment of “people like us” and groups to whom individuals should direct strategic action. The progressive
form minimizes the “unworthiness” of hardship and associates the disruptions of change with social progress while the tragic form frames the events and those responsible for them as threatening to the collectivity.

Whereas the tension between the progressive and tragic narrative forms often take place in the public realm among media organizations and interests groups (Griswold 2004), individuals coping with problematic conditions of existence create accounts that diagnose the situation and identify its causes before any such claims reach the public arena (if they ever do). Even though these “hidden transcripts” develop outside the surveillance of powerful others (Scott 1990), they nevertheless constitute “public performances” utilizing common cultural codes to indicate what individuals “believe to be socially acceptable and desirable” to others (Wuthnow 1996: 95). Although he does not explicitly acknowledge the role of narratives, Vallas’ (2005) investigation of boundary work among workers experiencing organizational restructuring demonstrates the utility of cross-temporal evaluations in workers’ attempts to separate “us” and “them.” In his interviews with paper mill employees adjusting to automated production systems workers problematize the past when legitimizing change or criticize notions of “progress” to delegitimize change.

FRUITS OF THE PRESENT FRAMEWORK

The framework that I present here—that of assessing workers’ use of culture in terms of constructing narratives that trace events to the roles of other actors in a social field—offers scholars a way to investigate how individuals coping with the consequences of
economic change interpret social hierarchies and structural forces in ways that overcome inadequacies of existing approaches to class subjectivities. Workers rely on field-specific norms to make sense of their situations. Deviations from these norms do more than result in symbolic boundaries that classify and rank-order “what it is right to be” (Bourdieu 1984:228) or “what is truly important in life” (Lamont 2000:110): they ascribe blameworthiness for collective outcomes. That is, the workers desire that other individuals in the social field not possess the traits or perform the actions that they identify as infringing upon their own life strategies and material welfare. Furthermore, I find that when creating accounts for the happenings of the social world, individuals with unsettled lives do not rely on overarching models of how the world operates (see Kluegel and Smith 1984; Wright 1984). Instead, they appropriate elements from such models to construct a sense of “thick” morality (Walzer 1994) in which they situate themselves and others as occupying positions in a shared social space (e.g., the polity and a firm) and identify others’ in this social space according to whether they have compatible or antagonistic interests. This framework therefore points to a novel way of linking culture to group formation and interest construction.
Chapter 3: Deindustrialization and the Case of Geneva Steel

The technological advances and trade policies that have emerged since the 1970s, coupled with the decline of Fordism, have destabilized many skills, jobs, and firms that were once considered indispensable. Meanwhile, the economic crises during this period have accompanied the restructuring of capitalism in ways that undermine the accord established between labor and capital established during the Great Depression and the post-World War II expansion (see Arrighi and Silver 1999; Bowles and Gintis 1982). Workers in the economic field of industrial manufacturing whose careers spanned the final decades of the 20th century witnessed dramatic changes in terms of waning economic protections, increased modernization, and an overall general decline of the blue-collar workforce. By the 1970s increasing global competition tipped the class struggle in employers’ favor, weakening public support for government or union intervention on the behalf of workers (Blau 1999; Jacoby 1997; Mischel et al. 2005) as well as contributing to the manufacturing sectors’ steady decline in employment levels (Brady and Denniston 2006). Moreover, the ascendancy of market fundamentalism and the shift from stakeholder to shareholder regimes posed considerable threats to the well-being of blue-collar workers (Fligstein and Shin 2004; Somers and Block 1994; see also Kalleberg 2008).
The closure of the Geneva Steel plant in Vineyard, Utah offers a unique opportunity to investigate how industrial workers interpret these trends. Utah is a right-to-work state that has experienced sharp declines in manufacturing employment. Along with several steel plants in the East that shut down during the 1980s, the USX plant in Utah closed in 1986. Local businessmen purchased the plant and reopened it in 1987 under the moniker Geneva Steel, saving a substantial number of manufacturing jobs in the state and becoming multi-millionaires (Stewart 2004). The United States’ steel industry experienced a crisis during the late 1990s and early 2000s as the price of steel plummeted and the dumping of foreign metals increased. Employment in the steel industry dropped from almost 235,000 to about 191,000 between January 1998 and March 2002. Between March 2000 and March 2002 over 50 steel plants and steel-related firms closed their doors (Metal Center News 2002). Geneva Steel filed for bankruptcy in 1999 and borrowed a $110 million government-secured loan to reorganize operations. Although the plant emerged from bankruptcy in January 2001, management began shutting down operations and laying off employees by November 2001, and ultimately filed for bankruptcy protection again in January 2002. Geneva Steel dismissed approximately 1400 employees between January 2001 and March 2002 (Oberbeck 2002; 2001). After failed attempts to secure additional funding, the plant’s management sold the company’s remaining assets and what was left of the structure was demolished in 2005.

Despite the limitations of the generalizability of case studies, exploring the causal accounts of a specific occupational group facilitates the examination of ideational patterns related to temporally- and spatially-contingent relations that a representative
sample would likely obscure (cf. Fantasia 1995). Furthermore, the data I present below suggest that these steelworkers face various issues that characterize the economic crises of late capitalism including the state’s attention to foreign concerns and the related consequences on the domestic economy, public disapproval of executive wealth during times of organizational downsizing, and the potential disruption that the failure of a firm or industry present to a local or national community (see Przeworski and Meseguer Y. 2005; Murphy 1995; Wright 1978).
Chapter 4: Data and Methods

This study utilizes the interview data from the Geneva Steelworkers Study collected by Marie Cornwall. This data set is advantageous for studying unsettled narratives since the interviews were performed soon after the workers were laid off. Furthermore, the interview data (as opposed to other methods such as surveys) it allows for the in depth analysis how individuals take into account occurrences in the social world when constructing personal and collective identities.

In June 2002 Dr. Cornwall and her colleagues initially sent surveys to each of the 1177 members of the United Steel Workers’ Union Local 2701. The final sample size of this 622 (53.6 percent valid response rate). Between November 2002 and January 2003, interviewers met with 66 of the 385 respondents who indicated on the survey that they were willing to participate in an interview. Interviewees were randomly selected from each of nine categories segregated by age (44 years and younger, 45-54 years, 55 years and older) and self-reported level of financial strain (low, moderate, high). This paper utilizes the data from the 57 transcriptions of these interviews. Two of the interviews were conducted as small focus groups with two former workers, yielding a total sample of 59 interviewees. Only two of the interviewees are women.

Interviewers met the former steelworkers in their homes, wore casual attire, and avoided excessive note-taking or drawing attention to the tape recorder. The duration of
the interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, during which the interviewers made an effort to allow the workers to produce their own accounts using their own experiences and evaluations. Although the use of the interview guide likely resulted in the omission of topics of particular salience to the individual and/or prompted accountings that would not have emerged independently, the interview guide ensured that each interview followed comparable lines of inquiry (Patton 2002). These included accountings for the closure of the plant and investigating the workers’ attitudes towards the role of the government and management in the plant closure. At the conclusion of the interview each interviewee received a thirty-five dollar gift certificate to a local grocery store.

The use of interviews presents a number of challenges and benefits. Interview data depends on what is discursively available to the respondent, thus inhibiting the chance to view culture in action (see Fantasia 1989). Nevertheless interviews provide the advantage of ascertaining how accounts of the self and the social world across a variety of contexts (e.g., pre- and post-layoff) among populations that are difficult to capture using other methods. Moreover, interviews provide the opportunity to examine the workers’ social worlds and identities according to their own narrative reality. In contrast to more impersonal data collection methods, face-to-face interviews run the risk of gathering responses that the respondents deem socially acceptable. Nevertheless, this shortcoming is in keeping with the present objective of examining the ways in which the narrative accountings of class relations and personal identities are inter-personal performances rather than a collection of subjective meanings (see Wuthnow 1996).
To analyze the data I created a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel with the cases occupying the rows and fact sheet information (e.g., tenure at the plant, age); causal attributions for the plant closure; and representations of self, workers, and managers occupying the columns. This comprehensive case record (Patton 2006) organized the data in ways that facilitates the interpretation of accounts both within and across cases. By grounding the analysis in the workers’ own accounts (see Glaser and Strauss 1967) I formulated additional thematic categories according to the patterns that emerged in the interviews. This included differentiating different production-related norms (those related to the labor process versus those related to compensation) and differentiating norms related to national politics (i.e., protecting the interests of American workers/consumers versus protecting the nation from foreign threats). The focus of the analysis, however, is the steelworkers’ own evaluations and causal accountings. Accordingly, I include a number of excerpts from the interviews in order to allow the reader to evaluate the utility of theses concepts for interpreting the data.
Chapter 5: Results

ACCOUNTINGS REFERENCING THE STATE

When considering the role of government actors in accounting for the plant closure, the Geneva steelworkers’ boundaries between themselves and others are both narrower and broader than extant research would suggest. Whereas Lamont’s examination of mental maps yields cultural communities of “people like us” that are delineated by moral criteria (e.g., honest, hardworking, etc.), displaced steelworkers draw boundaries around groups with a common fate (see Alexander et al. 2004). Two salient “victims” emerge in these narratives: steelworkers and the American citizenry. The antagonists to this community are state officials who the workers frame as violating the normative expectations of their roles by appeasing foreign governments and domestic steel-consuming businesses rather than American workers. Thus, the Geneva workers broaden the circle of the “we” (Alexander et al. 2004) to include all workers and indeed all citizens. The tragedy of deindustrialization, they argue, weakens the nation and therefore affects everyone in it. The others in this case are not people with specific moral qualities; instead they are the “empty spaces” of service jobs, which they frame as not contributing to the strength of the nation. This adds a new, more structural, dimension to the study of symbolic boundaries as boundaries can be applied not just to people and how they use their agency, but also to structural changes within a field.
Interestingly, when asked directly whether the government did all that it could do to help the plant or the individual employees, the interviewees generally exculpate political figures and highlight managerial irresponsibility and/or their own responsibilities to continue providing for their families. Thus, the workers maintain their commitment to a “disciplined self” (Lamont 2000). As scholars including (Ellewood 1988) and Starr (1992) argue, policy often has the effect of stigmatizing certain groups as fundamentally distinct from the rest of society. A policy that helps the unemployed, for example, may label the unemployed as unable to survive according to mainstream expectations. However, when discussing the government’s role in causing the shutdown, the interviewees hold the government representatives accountable and highlight their responsibilities to the citizens they represent. The interviewees assert that trade policy, not the qualities of the steelworkers or even the steel industry, deviates from established expectations.

The workers view themselves within a cross-firm field of steelworkers sharing in the consequences of state actors who are apathetic to their well-being. The perpetrators and the victims in such narratives are government officials and American steelworkers respectively. For example, Charlie Jones characterizes the federal government as negligent and duplicitous toward the steelworkers in order to maintain relations with other countries: “They did not support us. They gave the appearance of doing something for the steelworkers, but they were very slow. They dragged their feet on purpose because they didn’t want to upset the world applecart: it was world politics.”
The steelworkers appear well-aware that deindustrialization is compatible with a number of desirable ends (e.g., importing “cheap goods,” appeasing potential “enemies overseas,” reducing pollution, promoting “bigger profits” among American corporations, etc.). The steelworkers delegitimize these progressive narratives by constructing tragic narratives in which they associate the injuries of change with a future that is worse-off for steelworkers and non-steelworkers alike. This is perhaps most salient in workers’ representations of the consequences of deindustrialization on national security and fiscal autonomy, to which David Lesuer alluded when he mentions that the U.S. imports steel from “previous foes.” When asked to share his understandings of what caused the shutdown, David replied:

Just the market operating the way the market operates. And, the Republicans are not going to stand in the way of anything that slows business down in the country, so you get the promise from President Bush: “Here, I’m going to put tariffs on all of these [imports],” and then as soon as you let your guard down, he lifts the tariffs on two hundred of those products. And our competition was all of our previous foes, I guess, that are subsidized by the government: Korea, China, the Ukraine…places like that. […] And they’re also subsidized by the government, but yet our government will not equalize the playing field. So there’s a lot of people, I think, that are aggravated over that, but not enough to do anything about it. Because we want cheap goods. I mean, that’s what rules. […] But it’s basically, in my opinion, it’s just the market at work […] where there’s no
protection for American jobs anymore […]. So, rather than bring them up to our level, they’re just gonna, I think they just let the rug get pulled out from under whoever, so whoever’s making the money can make the money.

The subtext in these comments is that the benefits of deindustrialization and “free trade” do not outweigh the costs. The workers buttress this position by claiming that the costs are shared by all Americans. The “people like us,” therefore, includes individuals in other fields, including the much larger field of American politics. By locating the reasons for their downward mobility in public officials’ failure to fulfill the expectations of their office, the workers convey their interests in goals that apply to the national community rather than a single occupational group. In contrast to research suggesting that rational political interests should reflect the immediate benefits related to one’s market position (e.g. Kluegel and Smith 1986; Schlozman and Verba 1979), the Geneva steelworkers avoid framing their interests according to particularistic needs and instead articulate their interests in terms of the public good. Consider Al Blakely’s comments on how steel tariffs buttress national defense and “the backbone of America.” Al frames government intervention on behalf of the steel industry not in terms of preserving his material welfare but in terms of preserving the strength of the nation. In this way Al, like many other Geneva workers, frames the causes of the steelworkers’ plight as a social problem worthy of other social groups’ efforts to address it:

We asked President Bush--the nation as a steel industry--to put tariffs on this unfair dumping. I mean, they’re dumping steel at prices less than we
can even manufacture it for. And so he said “Yeah, we’ll do this…we’ll put this much on this product…” I mean he picked and chose, “…except Canada and Mexico, we’ll still let them do what they want…” And so all these people that buy the steel say, “Oh, that’s a bunch of bologna; you’re going to run us out of business.” So they took it back off, most of it. […] So, we’re supposed to just let everything go to heck I guess and then buy steel from our enemies. “We need to build some tanks so we can shoot you guys. Will you send us some steel?” I mean I’m just kidding around, [but] the steel industry has always been the backbone of America and they’re just breaking the back.

In constructing socially-acceptable narratives that expand the notion of the “victims” beyond structural boundaries, the workers employ institutionalized meanings related to the political and economic fields. For example, when the workers suggest that the government should protect industry from the maladies of global trade they generally do so in ways that suggest that intervention would merely create conditions that more adequately resemble that of a perfectly competitive market, oftentimes appealing to norms of providing an “equal playing field” in which firms can compete. Thus, they frame government intervention on the behalf of domestic steel producers as compatible with the tenets of American capitalism. Joseph Phelps said that “[o]ther governments […] subsidize their steel mills […] and they’ll dump their prices just to keep everybody working and you just can’t compete with that.” By failing to take aggressive action to help domestic steel mills “compete with the foreigners on level ground,” Joseph claims
that “the [U.S.] Government allowed the foreigners to cut the domestic producer’s throat.”

The workers also refer to the state’s previous commitments to industry as a symbolic reference point against which the workers evaluate the worthiness of government’s “negligence” to the national community. Many workers’ comments draw upon the norms found in the post-war public narrative legitimizing the state’s promotion of large-scale industry in order to ensure long-term prosperity and national security (see Baxandall 2002). For example, Elliot Smith appropriates elements of this “collective memory” (see Halbwachs 1992) associating the stability of the national community with the country’s capacity to produce steel in order to reaffirm an image of a strong manufacturing sector as integral to national progress:

When I was younger and growing up, […] they was always kind of saying [that] the strength of the nation was directly related to the strength of the industry, you know, and now they’ve kind of exported that through the years overseas. So, yeah, I’m pretty disgusted with it. […] I do think that it’s a shame that the government is just letting the industry just totally die. […] Just in the last three years there’s been, it’s probably up toward 40 companies now that’s went into bankruptcy. And probably 20 of those is liquidated. […] So it’s pretty sad to let the government see this go. And I can’t understand them, can’t understand it. You can’t have a strong country and run it all on service jobs.
Thus, the “scary” and anger-inducing aspects of deindustrialization are not relegated to a specific group that in many ways does not represent the rest of the country; rather, the circle of the “we” threatened by the country’s reduced capacity to produce steel and “a lot of [other] things” includes the citizens of entire nation. Since a “strong country” requires a strong industrial sector, the victims of deindustrialization include non-steel workers who should “be outraged:”

And the old Homestead steel mill back East, it made a lot of the steel plates that helped defeat Japan, and they totally tore that down ten years ago. […] A year and a half ago, the United States did not have the capacity to produce the steel they would need. It was under 90 percent [capacity] two years ago. […] But it’s scary. People don’t know about it, but they ought to, and they ought to be outraged at what’s happening. And it’s not just the steel, it’s a lot of things.

Just as the “new rules” in emerging organizational fields are born from the old rules (Dobbin 1994), workers’ new interests are born from the contexts of old rules. This highlights how individuals are not the receptacles of public culture, but are agents who use existing “rules,” or cultural materials applicable to a field, to makes sense of their circumstances in ways that maintain a sense of dignity, establish symbolic boundaries, and express their material interests. For example, Michael Gondry appropriates the social meanings from public debates on the U.S.’s reliance on foreign oil to elucidate the dangers of relying on foreign steel:
It’s part of our national security, part of—it only makes sense that you have your own integrated steel mills and stuff like that in your own country. You can’t rely—it, it’s like the oil thing. We’ve relied for so many years on these places like Iraq and Iran and all that for oil. But then you have disturbances or problems or whatever, or whatever causes those situations over there to become whatever, and then once you do that, it’s, if they shut the oil off to us, or if they decide to whatever, we’re pretty much—you know, sitting here with egg on our face. Well, it would be the same way as far as steel goes, as far as I’m concerned. And it only makes sense that if you’re going to try to keep a country strong and, and the people working, and the economy good and whatever, that you ought to be able to do it within the walls of your own country.

One may read these workers’ comments as consistent with Fligstein’s (1996) hypothesis that market actors will appeal to the state to maintain the status quo, but by examining the micro-level meaning-making among workers reveals that this appeal involves cultural work defining the social group for whom the status quo is beneficial. In contrast to research arguing that an individualist ideology depoliticizes unemployment or low socioeconomic status (Schlozman and Verba 1979), unemployment and downward mobility are very political issues among the Geneva steelworkers. While they may not support redistributive policies, the Geneva steelworkers’ call for government involvement implies the redistribution of benefits and burdens by advocating for policies that they interpret as advantageous for strengthening the nation as a whole rather than a specific
population. In telling stories to themselves and other people, these workers articulate their interests in terms that resonate with established ideas and institutions, not necessarily rational self-interest (Wuthnow 1996). In fact, the steelworkers are generally silent on government actions that address their particularistic needs or otherwise run the risk of creating a boundary between themselves and mainstream society. Instead, they express their political goals in terms that broaden the circle of the “we” sharing a common fate by framing their particularistic goals (such as protecting industrial jobs) in terms that reflect the public interest (such as sustaining national defense). In other words, these workers do not advocate government actions that would contradict the prevailing discourses of market fundamentalism and personal responsibility (see Somers and Block 2005) nor do they suggest that the state’s relationship to the economy deviate from the established pattern of restoring stability to the capital accumulation process (see Wright 1978; Bowels and Gintis 1982); instead they appropriate elements of these discourses to advance their claims that tariffs would create conditions more congruent with that of a perfectly competitive system and that deindustrialization threatens a strong and stable nation.

ACCOUNTINGS REFERENCING MANAGEMENT

In contrast to research reporting that blue-collar workers view their work in instrumental terms and find dignity in activities outside of the realm of production (e.g., Goldthorpe et al. 1969; Halle 1984; Lamont 2000; Nichols and Benyon 1977), the Geneva workers’ comments suggest that they seek non-alienating work in which they use
their time, knowledge and skills to contribute to the viability of the organization. Perhaps reconciling the daily submission to exploitative work relations with the themes and plots that convey a dignified life is less imperative for unemployed workers, who instead trace their circumstances to the nature of these relations. Thus, employed workers (understandably) favor detached or instrumental attitudes toward the delivery of their labor power and a greater emphasis the realms of family, friendship, and consumption as the source of dignity. These interviews with displaced steelworkers, on the other hand, suggest that when giving an account of unfavorable personal or organizational outcomes the supposed distinction between instrumental and ideal spheres of life becomes blurred.

According to these narratives, power and income are not potential badges of status or worth; rather, they are the function of structural positions in the field and are accompanied by institutionalized meanings regarding their legitimate distribution. Also, legitimate power involves upholding norms of managerial citizenship (Hodson 2001) including respecting their skills and autonomy. Likewise, they view income as an organizational resource that is legitimately earned when one contributes to the survival of the firm. Deviations from these norms do more than result in symbolic boundaries that classify and rank-order “what it is right to be” (Bourdieu 1984:228) or “what is truly important in life” (Lamont 2000:110): they ascribe “blameworthiness” (Sher 2006) for collective outcomes. That is, the steelworkers do not simply disapprove of managers’ “styles of life,” they desire that managers not possess the traits or perform the actions that they identify as infringing upon their own life strategies and material welfare.
While the workers admit that exogenous forces including foreign competition and shifts in demand play important roles in inducing industry-wide crisis, they also recognize that “there’s still companies out there making steel” and characterize the sustained viability of those plants as the result of proper management. Thus, while they acknowledge that the field was in decline, they frame the firms within that field as able to survive if managed properly. Kevin Tucker draws on his family’s experience in both the steel and the automotive industries to illustrate his view that economic conditions—specifically, foreign competition—do not wholly determine a firm’s success:

We’ve lived through foreign imports, it be from Australia and Canada.
We’ve lived through Japanese cars coming in and taking the market.
When it gets down to [it], if you manage your business right, you stay in business. If you don’t manage your business right, you go broke. There’s no sense in tying to blame it on foreign economics or steel dumping from Timbuktu. Them boys at the top mismanaged the plant dramatically, and that’s why it’s in the position it’s in.

Such attributions of mismanagement frame the plant closure in ways that place accountability on the activities over which management retained exclusive control. Since the workers lacked control over investments and other management-related duties, they refer to their respective roles and institutionalized understandings of how those roles should interact to make sense of the firm's decline: “I don’t know that you can blame it on the workers. The workers were there and did their job, made the money, [the] money disappeared.”
**Power and Authority**

A negotiated prior order (Hallet 2010) that was rational for the workers provides an idealized point of reference with which the workers criticize managers. The workers characterize the re-opening of the plant in 1987 as a time when high levels of worker autonomy was conducive with profitability. The workers did not oppose the position of the manager and many even appreciate their roles; their opposition is focused toward deviations from the normative expectations of those roles, including infringing on workers’ autonomy or failing to value their knowledge. Such deviations created not only psychological effects such as low feelings of self-efficacy, but also disorder and the decline of the plant’s viability. John Nolan, who started working at the plant when it re-opened under the new executive management in 1987, explains how the organization was successful when the new managers stayed out of the workers’ way:

That first year they made 40 million dollars profit--40 million dollar profit! [...] Well, upper management stayed completely out of the picture because they didn’t know what was going on. They had no clue. They didn’t even know where to turn the power on to that place.

The plant “started going downhill,” he claims, when upper managers “start[ed] getting their noses in it” and interfering with workers’ expertise. John argues that the plant would have run “just as smooth as glass” if management had limited their involvement to non-productive activities such as those pertaining to “all the legal ins-and-
outs of selling steel or moving steel or shipping it.” Otherwise, managers should have remained
out of the picture entirely and let the management – the lower
management that’s right with the men, just let them run the plant. […] Every time they come out of that plant and start poking their nose in, all
they do is mess things up for a week to 10 days. […] It just frustrated you.
Just wanted to say, “You guys go back up to your nice padded cell or
whatever you’ve got up there in the front office and just stay there. Don’t
come down here and bother us. Just let us do our job and you guys take
care of selling the steel.”

John’s “reactive attitudes” (Strawson 1974) reflect a view of managers as
responsible agents capable of limiting the workers’ misfortune by adhering to normative
expectations related to their respective roles: upper management should “take care of
selling the steel,” lower management should “run the plant,” and the workers should be
granted the autonomy to “do our job.”

In keeping with Hughes’ (1958) assertion that employees derive a sense of dignity
by interpreting their work in terms of saving those with greater power and prestige from
their own mistakes, the Geneva workers assert their superior knowledge and skill
compared to the abilities of managers, whose involvement in the production process
would often “mess things up.” John even claimed that the workers’ efforts (often outside
of managerial surveillance) made the plant run “in spite of management” over the years.
However, the salient themes in the Geneva workers’ causal accounts reflect a tragic
narrative emphasizing the insuperability of managerial mistakes emanating from their exclusive control over the labor process. In this way, the workers account for organizational failure while maintaining their moral commitments to self-actualization. For example, Ian Scallen describes how he was committed to giving the company “an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay” for the twenty-eight years in which he worked at the plant (two years shy of becoming eligible for a full retirement), sometimes working “twenty, twenty-four hours before I’d come home” in order to “put in some money to my 401k and get a better social security.” Despite his dedication and discipline, the actions of individuals over which he had no control caused the plant to go bankrupt: “I gave 110 percent, you know? I was really working. […] I don’t think it’s any of my fault that they went under, I’ll tell you that.”

Despite the personal consequences of job loss, the workers often express discontent with management by associating their actions with organizational outcomes such as profitability. Hence, even though workers may prefer increased autonomy at the site of production in order to enhance their sense of self-worth, the rationale for their “wrongness” was more often expressed in terms of inhibiting the success of the company. For example, Shawn MacKaye frames the failure of the “high-up bosses that didn’t know anything about the company” in terms of economic efficiency: “they didn’t allow my managers, the workers’ managers [i.e., low-level managers] to manage the way they needed to be productive.”

The workers are not averse to role distinctions—including managerial roles—within the firm; they are, however, concerned with how people behave in those roles. The
workers expect that the incumbent of the managerial office possesses the appropriate qualifications and they demand that the position remain free of negligent self-seeking. Derek Ross’s comments demonstrate that the ideal incumbent of the managerial office be an individual with steel-making experience, exhibit a commitment to producing a product of high quality, demonstrate a disinclination to use the position to enhance their personal wealth at the expense of keeping the plant viable, and act within the bounds of his/her duties and qualifications:

My feelings toward the whole things is, is that someone who is actually in steel and worried more about making steel than lining their pockets with money, would come in and take this out, buy it out and start it back up. We could make a profitable steel mill out of it. But let the hourly steel people do the steel making. And let the other people, […] the ones who bring the money, they should be the ones staying out of it and letting the hourly people do it.

Not only do the Geneva steelworkers maintain a sense of self-worth by drawing moral boundaries between themselves and management and attributing their joblessness on the behaviors of managers, they also represent managers as having violated widely-accepted norms that are conducive to a predictable and cooperative social order. James Holmes explained that the Geneva managers did not inspect their steel, which he asserts drove customers to other steelmakers and resulted in “thousands and millions of dollars of claims to companies that had bought [Geneva] steel.” He denounces managers’ interests in earning short-term profits not because they are opposed to his own interest in
the long-term viability of the plant, but because these interests are antithetical to widely-accepted norms of management citizenship. According to him, management’s indifference, conceit and avarice presents risks for customers (and by implication, the employees) and therefore violate a predictable and cooperative social order both within the organization and within the marketplace:

They had the idea that just get out the door and things will take care of itself. And I wrote a letter to [the owner] when they first started up and said, “You know, you really should inspect the steel,” you know, I was just a peon so to speak, so they didn't listen to me. […] And so I knew they wouldn't be in business very long because of the really poor managers. They were a bunch of lawyers that knew how to manipulate things, but when it come to running a business, these guys could care less. […] And you couldn't tell them nothing. These guys knew it all, so they thought. […] All they wanted was those big dollars, you know “management dollars,” and it was really a sad situation.

The workers’ representations of appropriate labor-management interactions as characterized by cooperation, respect, and reason resembles Durkheim’s (1972) discussions of organic solidarity within an organization, in which the individuals occupying complimentary social roles adopt a shared vision of the moral order and cooperate to achieve common objectives. It is important to note, however, that the workers’ generally portray these ideal typifications of order at the site of production in terms of the subordination of the interests of management to the interests of labor. These
typifications often coincide with the meaning-system dictating a (contestable) notion of legitimate distributions of authority. Will Linklater’s notion of worker and manager citizenship--in which workers “use the manager” rather than vice versa--is congruent with the traditional meritocratic ideology supporting the market system and division of labor in which the worker and manager roles are awarded to individuals “that know how to do the job” and cooperate with each other in order for the firm to operate effectively. Will delegitimizes management’s interference with shopfloor activities, refusal to cooperate with the workers, and lack of respect for worker’s skills and knowledge not by challenging a dominant meaning system with a subversive ideology, but by appropriating publicly available norms and cultural codes to extol a more egalitarian arrangement:

From my point of view, you can’t manage any company from the front office. [With] everything that goes on in the company, it’s simply impossible. So you have to let the people use the manager. Find the people that know how to do the job, and then let them do their job. Know what I mean? They take care of it for you. But they [management] interfered too much. They wouldn’t listen to the people that did know what they were doing [...] and they simply didn’t understand the business at all.

_Ambition_

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the Geneva workers have an interest in investments that strengthen the plant’s viability and their job security; however, since these decisions are relegated to managers, the consequences of investments that fail to
enhance productivity are placed upon the workers involuntarily. Since “the hourly people
never had a voice in it” when management “overspent, over-budgeted and they also
didn’t plan right” and otherwise “didn’t put their money where they should’ve been,” the
workers tend to place the control and accountability of failed investments on
management. As John Nolan’s criticisms of managerial ambition demonstrate, the
blameworthiness of management’s domination is founded on their polluting behaviors
and motivations as “order givers:”

  They tried to be on the cutting edge of technology all the time. They tried
stuff even though the advisors that they’d hired to come in had told them
‘No, it won’t work.’ All of the previous research on what they was
wanting to try was against it. It didn’t matter how much negative it was
against whatever they wanted to do; well, they’d go ahead and try it
anyway.

The workers’ inability to assert their own will reflects Collins’ (1975) contention
that class at the micro level is enacted through power relations within an organization as
“order takers” experience domination from “order givers.” Whereas American workers
with “settled lives” equate ambition among the wealthy with either intelligence and
legitimacy or with dishonesty and illegitimacy (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Lamont 2000),
these interviews with displaced steelworkers suggest that workers coping with
involuntary unemployment associate ambition among “order givers” with obstinacy and
imprudence, and frame the consequences of their ambition in terms of how they affect the
well-being of the “order takers.” For example, when describing how management “spent
money when they shouldn’t have done, and on things they shouldn’t have done,” Michael Gondry complains that “they spent millions and millions of dollars” on “equipment out there that’s never ever used” despite having been told by the people that actually knew how to make steel, which is the workers, that it wouldn’t work. And it didn’t. It didn’t work. I don’t know, but that’s bad that so many people’s lives got affected by just a small portion of the people’s decisions that were greedy.

Income

Lamont’s findings agree with survey data demonstrating that most Americans agree that income inequality is legitimate (see Kluegel and Smith 1986). The present study allows me to take an additional step further away from overarching attitudes toward distributive justice or the desert of “the rich” or “the poor” to examine the “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of remuneration among individuals located in the same field (i.e., firm) in productive relationships with each other. As with their representations of authority, the displaced steelworkers represent management in terms of a negotiated prior order that they portray as rational. Against this normative frame of reference they delegitimate the incomes of managers by claiming that they are “milking the plant dry” rather than contributing to its survival.

When the plant re-opened in 1987 Geneva had a profit-sharing program in which workers received a portion of the company’s surplus. The workers idealize this prior order, claiming that as co-shareholders in the organization the company was more
profitable and plant relations were harmonious. The external pressures of deindustrialization and modernization rendered declines in remuneration rational to the workers. Many of the interviewees characterize reductions in their compensation package (including the revocation of profit sharing) as a necessary concession in order “to put the money back into the company to make it more of a competitive steel mill, therefore ensuring our jobs in the future.” This was compatible with their understanding that they are stakeholders in the firm. Many argue that management’s claim that they would transform the workers’ decreased compensation into increased productive potential was disingenuous and/or a means by which the managers could sustain their welfare at the expense of the workers. The workers describe the social psychological consequences of the dissonance between the negotiated understandings of workers-as-stakeholders and workers-as-commodities with terms such as “hard feelings,” a decline in “morale,” “havoc” and so forth. Furthermore, as James Holmes illustrates, they began to view their efforts in terms of subordinating their time and energy to the will of rapacious managers and became disinclined to maintain the same levels of toil they exhibited during “the first few years:”

[While profit-sharing was in place] we were working along about 16 hours, you know, and actually working 23 hours one night, and then the next night work 16 hours, and really it was all getting around to 20 hours in the stressful jobs and stuff, but it felt pretty good because they paid us pretty good. And then, something happened, they got some new managers come in […] and they] didn't want to give us the extra money. […] And
from that time on, we didn't get profit share like we used to. And everybody--from then on the morale so to speak went down the tube. [...] And these guys [i.e., managers] are so overpaid and under worked, but they cut our wages. They give it all to them and cut our wages. So people really get hard feelings about that. Anybody would, you know? [...] So these guys felt like they were “family,” so to speak, like we did for the first couple years. But not anymore, these guys are taking the cream off the top and giving us, you know, what they want to give us. And so that was a hard thing too, people didn't feel like working like we worked the first few years because they just felt like they were “cutting your throat,” so to speak.

Although the workers are not privy to much of the information regarding profits or capital within the firm, “social facts” including the disconnection between managers’ claim that “they weren’t making enough money” and the workers’ observations that “upper management seemed to come out with the money that they sought” provide the narrative resources that provide a plausible account that the plant was mismanaged.

Given the tight connection between the plant’s survival and their own welfare, the decline of rights as stakeholders translates into a lack of power to direct one’s own life. The workers understand this alienation relationally since the managers, who they view as educated men whose careers are only perfunctorily tied to the survival of the plant, do not hold much of stake in the plant’s survival. Thus, their view that management was able to maintain high compensation lacked rationality. By framing managers as “not helping the
product go out the door” but still earning “millions of dollars” from the fruits of the steelworkers’ labors, the workers suggest that the inequitable decline of the workers’ compensation package in relation to that of management renders the managers undeserving of their material rewards.

Notions resembling that of a “social contract” pervade the interviews, suggesting that normative expectations constitute a fundamental component of workers’ perspectives on the labor-management relationship. Oftentimes the workers articulate these expectations by referring to actual contracts (e.g., the agreement with the union to pay health insurance premiums for qualifying employees up to six months after a lay off), but more often these expectations take the form of implicit economic norms. For example, many interviewees describe how the workers conceded to the relinquishment of profit-sharing under the auspices that management would use the profit to ensure the vitality of the plant and enhance job security through investments in physical capital. Since the workers sacrificed immediate claims on the company’s surplus in exchange for long-term security, they expect management fulfill their obligation to keep the plant viable. Many cite their failure to do so to characterize managers as violating widely-held organizational norms:

I think that they cheated us in certain ways, and in certain times and places. And they used some deceptive practices with us when it came to contracts and the way they set things up. And I say deceptions, not illegal, but they’re deceptive; and they took advantage of us in certain ways. […] For example, they…when they were negotiating the contract, they got us
to say that part of the pay that they were giving us--part of the incentive pay that they were giving us--could be reduced if they would do certain things to make capital improvements. And, of course, that went a lot farther than we expected. […] That value went to their pockets, not ours.

A $110 million government-secured loan Geneva Steel received around the time they filed for bankruptcy provides an often-cited example of money capital that should have gone towards revitalizing the plant but ultimately found “its way into upper managements’ pockets.” These workers frame the bonus pay outs as the illegitimate use of the managerial office to gain advantages at the expense of the longevity of the plant and the welfare of the employees. Many workers echo Mel Luhrmann’s claim that management “squandered away” the loan and “didn’t spend it where they was supposed to.” Instead, “all the big wigs down there got their bonuses. I mean, that was more important to them then keeping the plant running apparently.” Some workers, including Victor Bergman, explicitly frame these bonuses relationally, highlighting the violation of the expectations of the manager role. Victor explains that while the company was in bankruptcy, the company revoked the paid time-off that workers had already accrued and discontinued paying their health insurance premiums; that management could pay themselves a bonus while “taking our vacation and our health care away” demonstrates a violation of workplace norms: “I mean, what a slap in the face. I believe if any of the bosses were sincere and wanted to make this thing go, every one of them would’ve turned down that bonus and put it into operating capital to keep the place going.”
Not only do the workers frame their own circumstances as the consequence of involuntary risks imposed on them by the actions of management, they also represent managers as using their strategic positions to evade (or at least postpone) bearing the consequences of their own risks. At the time of our interviews, Geneva Steel was still not officially closed and interviewees reported that dozens of managers were still on the company’s payroll. Most workers challenged the rationality of how managers’ continued employment and income is justified given the obvious decline in managerial labor power:

I was out there, and there were eight of us hourly still out there, and sixty two total. The others were all upper management. They have yet to take a cut in pay. They are still drawing, lost of them, hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, and there’s nobody to manage. How do you justify that?

[…] That’s the type of managers they are.

The workers draw strong moral boundaries against these managers and delegitimize their income by characterizing them as not working and paying themselves despite the imminent failure of the organization. For Richard Oldham the fact that so many managers are on the payroll just selling the company’s assets is an example of management’s tendency to do things that “don’t seem quite ethically right” and views it as “a matter of legal maneuvering to make sure that those who worked out there ended up with as little as possible, and that upper management came out with as much as possible.”

Likewise, for Frank Jennings the fact that the current CEO is paid “30,000 dollars a month to sit out there on his duff” is evidence that the executive and management only wanted to “fatten their wallets” and “milk it dry.”
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This paper pursues the objective set out by Lamont (2001:2) of examining “the world as [blue-collar workers] understand it.” Building on Lamont’s investigation of working men’s cultural construction of symbolic boundaries, I examine how workers with unsettled lives integrate understandings of “us” and “them” into their accountings for their material circumstances. To accomplish this I advance a conceptual framework that allows for the investigation of how individuals strategically manipulate public culture, construct cultural representations of relations within meso-level social orders (namely, firms and national politics), and link those relationships to concrete events (e.g., a plant closure).

In my analysis of workers’ narratives of government responsibility for their job loss I find that conceptions of “people like us” oscillate between “steelworkers” and “Americans.” In either case, the workers are able to construct of cultural community sharing a common fate. This cross-temporal notion of collective identity provides and important compliment to research claiming that boundaries between “us” and “them” revolve around values or praiseworthy attributes (e.g., Lamont 2000, Sherman 2005). These findings challenge the notion that workers’ subjectivities reflect available ideologies. For example, rather than expressing a structural versus an individualistic ideology the workers appropriate elements of widely-shared political culture to articulate
their particularistic interest. Thus, as residents of a conservative, right-to-work state, they
do not reflect public culture but rather appropriate elements of it (e.g., the notion of a free
market and an emphasis on rewards based on desert) to advocate for government
intervention on the behalf of steelworkers. Granted, they do not advocate for socialism or
even redistributive policies, but they do articulate socially acceptable accounts that
connect their interests in maintaining the position of steelworkers with widely-accepted
norms and institutions. Instead, unemployed workers appropriate notions of what is
possible and what is legitimate within the sphere of politics to associate their interests
with those of the broader public.

My analysis of the Geneva workers’ attributions for job loss that involve
management highlight the importance of examining culture with attention to the context
of social relationships. The workers moralize positional goods, such that power and
income play important roles in distinguishing “us” from “them,” but mostly in terms of
how these goods are obtained or used giving the expectations of the managerial role.
Normative violations are blame-worthy not because they do not resonate with “what is
truly valuable in life” but because they create disorder. Thus, the workers’ trace their
situations to the quality of worker-management relations.
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