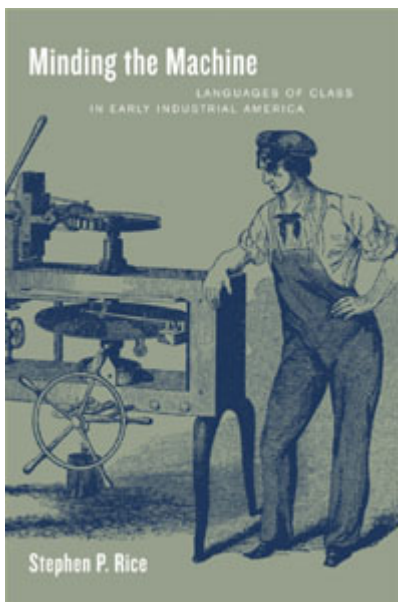
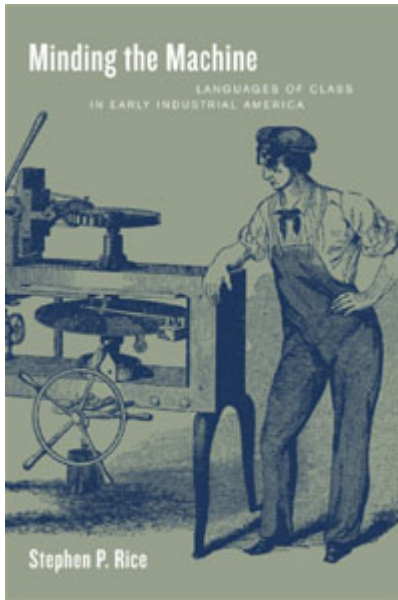


Mechanized Language and Class Formation



Stephen P. Rice, *Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

As Stephen P. Rice's subtitle suggests, *Minding the Machine* investigates the role of language and the discourse of mechanization in the formation of class in antebellum America. Rather than exploring social conditions and the way that new types of machinery helped propel workers and managers toward particularized and often oppositional class consciousness, this creative study focuses on the role that popular discussions about the relationship between manual labor and mental labor played in fostering class. Through chapters on mechanics' institutes, manual labor schools, popular health reforms, and the drive to prevent steam boiler explosions, Rice demonstrates how linguistic choices helped create a ripe environment for the conceptual side of middle-class

formation.

Unlike other studies of mid-nineteenth class formation that give primacy to local or regional material conditions, Rice opens his purview to broad popular discourse that includes newspapers, pamphlets, and journals in cities from New Orleans and Cincinnati to Philadelphia and New York. Most of his sources, however, hail from a small number of northern industrial areas and the inclusion of a handful from the South do not really make a case for a true national dialogue on mechanization and class. Likewise, many of the mechanics' institutes and manual labor schools detailed in the work seemed to be located in the Northeast and industrializing Midwest.

Critical to Rice's analysis is his belief that the "social experience of class" has both material and discursive components that constantly inform one another. However, instead of employing this understanding to demonstrate such an interplay in the way that mechanization affected class formation, Rice jettisons the material component almost completely. He explicitly writes little about the politics or social lives of those who created the national discourse that he interrogates and chooses not to investigate the individuals who read the newspapers and journals or "gathered to listen to lectures, attended mechanics' fairs, or enlisted in health reform movements" (9).

Instead, the study scrutinizes the two sets of intellectual relationships created by new steam- and water-powered machinery in the antebellum age: ones between "humans and production machines" and ones "between managers and mechanized workers" (14). If the advent of machinery tended to degrade the status of manual laborers or "hands" who no longer needed craft proficiency to perform their jobs, it also tended to elevate the position of managerial workers or "heads" who performed mental work to direct business operations. This division sowed the seeds of new class separation.

However, Rice argues that those responsible for crafting middle-class authority "worked to mitigate class tensions by promoting a series of conceptual frameworks that effectively undermined oppositional notions of class" (146). Chapters 2 and 3 most effectively tease out these frameworks by focusing on how the movement to build mechanics' institutes and manual-labor schools reflected an ongoing debate about the relationship between manual labor and mental labor. Taken together, such institutions showed the interdependence between "heads" and "hands" and provided a metaphorical guide for the relationship between workers and managers in the mechanical world.

The Mechanics' Institute of the City of New-York and similar institutions helped at best to repair or attempted at worst to obfuscate the divisions between "hands" and "heads" by offering popular educational programs that provided mental content for manual workers. Lecture series on natural philosophy, chemistry, and mechanics and publications such as the *Mechanics' Magazine* and *Journal of the Franklin Institute* helped reinforce the notion that an informed head should guide skilled hands. Such materials, Rice argues, also

tried to reinforce an analogous and harmonious relationship between manual and mental labor. Similarly, manual labor schools such as Lafayette College trained a new managerial class by marrying "classical educations" with manual labor in "workshops, gardens, and farm fields" as a way of blunting the inevitable separation of "headwork" from "handwork" (70-72). By repeating the interdependence of mental health and physical health, such schools reinforced the harmonious relationship of "heads" and "hands."

The issue of physical health and the body's relationship to machinery informs chapter 4 of the book. Through figures like Sylvester Graham and William A. Alcott, Rice argues that contemporary debates about popular physiology utilized a metaphor that bodies acted as machines and therefore created the notion that all people were natural machine operators. Such a conceptualization also naturalized the ascendancy of the mind over the body and, by extension and analogy, the manager (head) over the worker (hands). However, it is in this discussion that Rice's decision not to fully engage the social lives of those who used the machinery in question or explore the effects that machinery had on the lives of workers exposes the limitations of his study. The insistence on a completely discursive approach here prevents Rice from fully dealing with the relationship between the mind and the body.

As part of his discussion on popular attempts to mute class tension, Rice cites Robert Dale Owen's 1835 announcement to create a manual labor school in New Harmony, Indiana, and the school's egalitarian potential to teach men from all walks of life to respect others' occupations (72). However, he does not mention a prolonged debate Owen, as a leader of the New York Working Men's Party, carried on five years earlier with William Jackson Jr., a leader of the Delaware Working Men's Party, over the result of new machinery on the labor market and the subsequent relationship between labor-saving machinery, family size, and population growth. The debate eventually resulted in Owen's publication of *Moral Physiology*, the first birth control tract in American history. Such an inclusion would provide much-needed social context for Rice's discursive study.

As a whole, Rice's study is not equal to the sum of its parts. While individual chapters offer engaging portraits of important and under-studied aspects of American society, like mechanics' institutes and manual labor schools, the decision to focus solely on languages of class hampers the bigger argument about class formation. Without more context, we do not know whether these examples of popular discourse were merely peripheral aspects of class formation or particularly instrumental intellectual moments. These criticisms aside, Stephen P. Rice's *Minding the Machine: Languages of Class in Early Industrial America* offers a well-written exploration of the public discussion about mental and manual work in the nineteenth century.

Further Reading:

For other views on the antebellum debate between mental labor and manual labor see Jonathan A. Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America* (New Haven, 1991); Norman Ware, *The Industrial Worker, 1840-1860* (Chicago, 1990); Nicholas K. Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago, 1993); and Paul G. Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Albany Press, 1981). On antebellum technology see John F. Kasson, *Civilizing the Machine: Technology and Republican Values in America, 1776-1900* (New York, 1976); David A. Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties: New England Workers and the Mechanized Factory System, 1815-1850* (New York, 1992); and Judith A. McGaw, *Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change in Berkshire Paper Making, 1801-1885* (Princeton, 1987). For a discussion of class and language in England, see Gareth Stedmen Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983). For the debate between Robert Dale Owen and William Jackson Jr., see *New York Free Enquirer*, June 12 and September 25, 1830.

This article originally appeared in issue 5.4 (July, 2005).

Joshua R. Greenberg is assistant professor of history at Bridgewater State College. His book, *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Household in New York, 1800-1840*, will be published as part of the Gutenberg-e project at Columbia University Press in 2006.