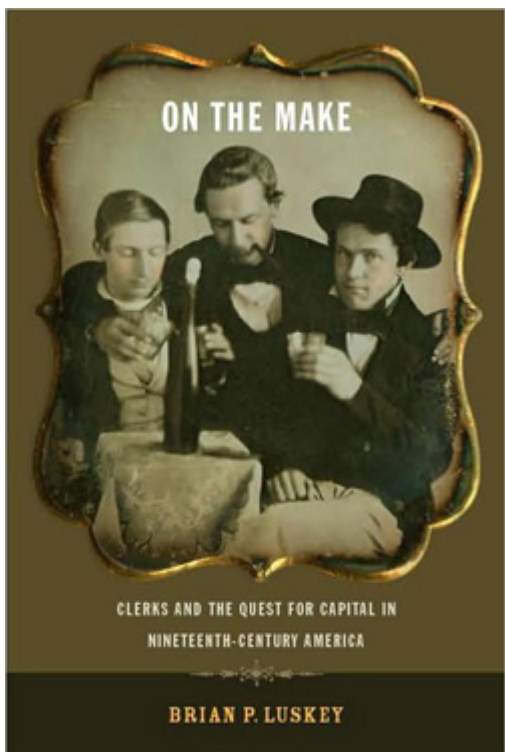


Misadventures of the Counter Jumper



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In recent years scholars of cultural history have focused significant attention on a seemingly unlikely protagonist: the nineteenth-century clerk. Readers unfamiliar with this literature might be forgiven for wondering what could be

so interesting. After all, the occupational category of clerking evokes neither the swashbuckling boardroom excesses of Gilded Age robber barons nor the heroic physical sufferings of industrial laborers. Yet clerks of the nineteenth century are intriguing not so much for what they did on the job as for the space they occupied in their contemporaries' thoughts and writings. At the vanguard of social change, the nineteenth-century clerk, like today's hipster, was a figure equally maligned and emulated.

Brian Luskey adds fresh insight to the existing literature in *On the Make*, which explores the lives of New York City's clerks in the mid-1800s. As Luskey nicely puts it in the introduction, it is easy to understand contemporary interest in the figure of the clerk when one recalls that—whether retailing to fashionable ladies or wholesaling to country merchants, frequenting oyster bars or promenading in broadcloth finery—"clerks truly were the faces of capitalist transformation" (2). Contemporaries, therefore, came to describe clerks in a number of ways—mostly negative: as indulgent consumers of fashionable clothing, rowdies frequenting bars and brothels, and obsequious salesmen derided as "counter jumpers."

The bulk of Luskey's study concerns the antebellum era, though he reaches back into the 1700s and concludes with intriguing thoughts about the transformation of clerkship after the Civil War. In the years between, the United States experienced rapid urbanization and what many historians designate as a "market revolution," that is, the transition from small communities defined by networks of personal obligation to a sprawling mass society governed by the impersonal forces of supply and demand. In this often disorienting change, the very visible job of clerking became a focal point of aspiration and disappointment, hope and fear.

Luskey combines the methods of cultural and social history to accomplish a tricky feat: he maps out, on the one hand, the structural impediments to clerks' quest for "economic capital," and on the other hand, the hazardous discursive field in which they pursued "cultural capital." Making use of diaries, credit reports, manuscript census schedules, and a variety of print media, he skillfully documents the clerk's many travails.

The book presents the basic structural dilemma early on. Encouraged by ideological constructions of clerking as an apprenticeship leading to mercantile proprietorship, clerks often found their hopes frustrated by obstinate realities. Luskey shows that even in the eighteenth century, the apprenticeship model was no longer a sure pathway to economic independence. As a result of the period's consumer revolution, expanding educational opportunities, and general economic growth, demand for positions in mercantile houses rose rapidly. Indeed, according to Luskey's figures, New York City's clerks numbered nearly 14,000 at midcentury, constituting the city's third largest occupational group. Yet despite the "crumbling edifice" of traditional apprenticeship, those who aspired to mercantile "power and prestige" had little choice but to grasp at apprenticeship's still "vital ideals" (31). The diary

entries of the young William Hoffman, for example, clearly show that he had internalized many of these ideals even as he, in common with his colleagues, struggled through long days that often included physical labor. The basic structural reality, then, was that clerks, ostensibly in training to be independent merchants, were in fact increasingly difficult to distinguish from the emerging proletariat.

Central to the “contradictory messages” clerks encountered was the notion of “character.” Advice manuals urged clerks to cultivate virtues such as diligence, sincerity and humility. For their parts, young clerks understood that character, or rather representations of character, formed the only capital they could muster “in an urban society populated by unknown persons and an economy defined by both thrilling boom times and enervating hard times” (22). Yet character was a concept shot through with ambiguity. Supposedly an inner light illuminating the path to wealth and independence, it paradoxically called for willing submission to low pay and unpleasant work. A similar paradox afflicted clerks whenever they sought employment. On the one hand they had to conform to a vocabulary of generic tropes they shared with employers, while on the other they desired to stand out from the multitudes.

Having thus introduced the basic trajectory of the labor market and the fundamental discourse of character, Luskey constructs the rest of his book as a series of dilemmas. Again and again his clerks attempt to cast themselves as people of consequence, only to fail because their pretensions go unsupported by actual wealth and influence. In chapters covering topics such as race, gender, fashion, leisure, work and citizenship, Luskey explores the tensions between expectation and reality, and the ways in which interested actors bridged the gap in writings both public and private. Newspaper editors, ministers, and other pundits appear on the scene to make weighty public pronouncements, while the clerks themselves offer mostly private reflections in their diaries.

Luskey is particularly compelling in his depiction of how clerks clung to the symbol of the white collar in order to distinguish themselves from both blacks and working-class whites. He notes that whereas white male laborers were increasingly able to demarcate clear racial boundaries simply by excluding blacks from their workplaces, clerks worked side-by-side with their firm’s black porters. In a fascinating discussion, Luskey shows how clerks sometimes joined their white working-class compatriots in asserting their whiteness by attending minstrel shows, yet at other times refined and even domesticated minstrelsy in order to keep themselves apart from and above white laborers. Thus they preferred Edwin Christy’s supposedly more urbane minstrel productions, performed in a theater where the rowdy “pit” had been replaced by comfortable arm chairs. At least one clerk noted in his diary that he had forsaken the theater altogether one evening in order to entertain friends with minstrel sheet music played at home on his piano, perhaps the ultimate symbol of middle-class respectability. Yet if clerks seemed to score a symbolic victory here, they soon found the cultural waters more perilous and complex than they had imagined. In a “producer’s republic,” their attempts to obscure

the manual labor that might soil their white collars worked against them in the realm of gender distinctions, opening them up to charges of effeminacy and dandyism.

The book's final chapter makes some ambitious claims about the transformation of clerkship in the latter nineteenth century. Luskey gets ahead of his evidence here, but his thoughts are intriguing. He argues that as the plausibility of advancement to the status of a merchant faded, many clerks chose to trade in their dreams of independent proprietorship for job security as salaried managers in the emerging bureaucracies of Big Business. In the process, they redefined "what it meant to be a free, respectable, white man" (210). This is a potentially important contribution to our understanding of the consolidation of the middle class. Other significant recent studies of the nineteenth century have illuminated this process for the upper reaches of the industrial bourgeoisie (Sven Beckert's *Monied Metropolis*) or the intellectual realm of social theorists (Jeffrey Sklansky's *The Soul's Economy*). Luskey, however, focuses our attention squarely on the lived experiences of respectability's lower strata.

One important aspect of that experience, Luskey makes clear, was the attempt to acquire and deploy "cultural capital," a term that he returns to repeatedly. The idea originates, as far as I know, with Pierre Bourdieu, and is sufficiently well established to make explicit discussion of its meaning unnecessary, perhaps. But I still found it an elusive metaphor, and I think that scholars could usefully explicate it more fully. At one point, for example, Luskey refers to the "markers of cultural capital" (179). But I would tend to think that "cultural capital" is itself a marker, presumably of actual capital, or perhaps of "character," taste or some other quality. In any case, discussion of what precisely is clarified by equating certain visible cultural accomplishments with control of economic resources might be helpful to readers who are not familiar with Bourdieu's body of work.

Such questions aside, *On the Make* deserves a wide readership. It is now the go-to work on clerks in the nineteenth century and a good example of how to integrate social and cultural history.