12-1991

Steeples and Stacks: Religion and Steel Crisis in Youngstown by Thomas G. Fuechtmann (Review)

Jacob Dorn
Wright State University - Main Campus, jacob.dorn@wright.edu

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The steel mill shutdown that struck the Youngstown area in the late 1970s well symbolizes the recent “deindustrialization” of the United States. Decisions made by outside corporations cost Youngstown approximately 10,000 steel jobs alone within three years and raised questions about corporate accountability to workers and communities, national urban and industrial policies, and the roles of other institutions in responding to such crises.

Youngstown’s story has been told before, but Thomas G. Fuechtmann takes a unique approach. Beginning with the announcement in September 1977 of the first closing, that of the Campbell Works of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company (acquired in 1969 by the Lykes Corporation), he analyzes the Ecumenical Coalition of the Mahoning Valley and its efforts to reopen those facilities under worker and community ownership, which culminated in March 1979 in the Carter Administration’s rejection of its proposal for financial support. A scholar with doctorates in theology and political science, Fuechtmann was a participant-observer with ties by marriage to Youngstown steelworkers.

Led by “a band of daring, quixotic preachers, tilting at the corporate powers on behalf of their people” (p. 135), the Ecumenical Coalition undertook a new role for religion in public affairs. Though one of its major contributions was to frame the shutdown in moral and human terms, it went beyond preachments—and social-service remedies—to improvise a model of community action looking toward re-employment of laid-off workers in a reopened mill under community control on a heretofore untested scale. Fuechtmann believes that this was a proper course for religion in economic affairs and that dismissing it as merely a failure would be wrong. The Coalition’s effort was “a kind of seminal event,” from which communities in similar situations might learn.

Fuechtmann excels at grounding his account in both historical and theoretical contexts. Besides recounting the coalition’s story, he examines the region’s economic, political, demographic, and religious life; factors behind the rapid decline of American steel in general and Youngstown Sheet and Tube in particular; the impact of the shutdown in comparison to that of a natural disaster; the ineffectual responses of the United Steelworkers of America, local business community and governments, and regional planning agencies; and the modern traditions of Protestant and Catholic urban social concern. Sharply focused though it is in time and topic, his work is wide-ranging and informative on many matters.

Despite his great sympathy for the project, Fuechtmann evenhandedly assesses the Coalition’s failure. He is interested in lessons, not scapegoats. For diverse and sometimes fortuitous reasons, the local business, political, and
union establishments failed to give needed support. Quite significantly, the unemployed workers were mostly passive and only belatedly mounted an organized drive in their own behalf. The response of the federal government, which would have to play a dominant financial role in facilitating the purchase and modernization of the Campbell Works, reflected bureaucratic competition and partisan concerns, as well as sound policy considerations; these factors led Washington to give mixed signals before finally killing all hopes for the project. Not least, Fuechtmann’s treatment of the Coalition’s personnel, structure, assumptions, and organizational alliances indicates that it bears some responsibility for its own defeat. He does not rank the causes of failure, but one might conclude that the Coalition’s inability to make a convincing business case for its plan—for reasons both within and beyond its control—was the single most important among many.

Engagingly written, committed yet analytical, and carefully researched, this work should interest those in both religious and academic circles who ponder the role of religion in contemporary public affairs.

Wright State University
Dayton, Ohio

Jacob H. Dorn


This volume on the Primitive Baptists of the Blue Ridge is published as part of the Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry. The editors of that series write that, “Ethnography as field work, analysis, and literary form is the distinguishing feature of modern anthropology” (p. xi). This work utilizes specific Primitive Baptist congregations as case studies in ethnographic analysis. Yet, the authors acknowledge that the Primitive Baptists are not merely the subject of investigation. Like ethnographers, the Primitive Baptists must also “translate theory into practice,” bringing their powerful doctrines to bear on the lives of the constituency. The authors are well-known scholars of anthropology and religious studies.

Peacock and Tyson begin by describing the setting for their study among the Mountain District Primitive Baptist Association, including rituals, geography, organization, and doctrine. They correctly suggest that the foundation of Primitive Baptist belief is their commitment to the doctrine of election and predestination. Particular attention is given to the “ethnohistory” of the Primitive Baptists, as evident in a book entitled, _History of the Work of God, from the creation to A.D. 1855; including especially the History of the Keihukee Primitive Baptist Association_. It sets forth the “primitive” roots of their tradition.