Mattie Armstrong-Price
Fordham History

Laboring in Public:
Disciplining Uniformed Workers in Victorian Britain

In the contemporary United States, workers are disciplined in part by consumers' feedback. Ratings offered by members of the public are used to evaluate those laboring in various public-facing roles, whether as drivers or delivery people, nurses or food service workers. And judging by the pronounced cultural salience of such jobs, we can say that the face of labor is coming to be composed of those working in public-facing roles. When we encounter drivers or food service workers then, we are encouraged to help discipline those whom we understand to be exemplars of labor. In Victorian Britain, the situation was dramatically different. There, textile and other factory workers who labored in Marx's "hidden abode" of production generally were taken to exemplify labor, while consumers' encounters with public-facing workers – railway guards and reformed nurses, say – were not as central to the disciplining of such workers, many of whom labored according to the rules and regulations of complex bureaucracies. *Laboring in Public*, my planned second book, attends to the history of railway workers, nurses, and other public-facing workers in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, considering how such workers were disciplined in ways that generally did not rely on the agency of consumers, and how encounters between such workers and broader publics affected popular perceptions of labor and of social relations more generally. The book shows how publicly visible, bureaucratized workplaces – sites of structured, cross-class interaction – figured in mid-nineteenth-century cultural works, social inquiries, and political debates, and thus how these workplaces were made to matter despite not being exemplary sites of labor.

The book makes two central historical arguments. First, *Laboring in Public* engages with the historiography of management, showing how railway and healthcare industries helped modernize managerial practices over the long nineteenth century. Directors and managers in these industries – which either emerged or were reformed during the mid-nineteenth century – drew upon pre-existing managerial practices from various sectors, reworking these practices in the process of ordering their workforces. Their innovations then influenced managerial practices in other sectors down through the turn of the century. What particularly interests me is how, in the railway industry for example, innovative forms of workplace surveillance were established in the 1840s, and how these forms of surveillance shaped workers' experience of their employers. Workers were surveilled by inspectors, by police, and even by other grades of railway employees, and information gathered through these sources tended to be directed not to workers' immediate supervisors but to superintendents and other middle managers. Thus, a new set of surveillance techniques enabled middle managers to learn from various sources about rank-and-file workers and in this way to act relatively independently of line managers in matters of discipline and promotion, creating a characteristically "modern" situation wherein workers experienced themselves as being managed by a distributed corporate agency rather than by a single supervisor. In part, such multi-sided surveillance occurred in and through the distribution of housing and other social benefits – railway police could enter company housing, for example – meaning that company paternalism, which enjoyed a broad revival in 1840s Britain, helped mediate managerial modernization along the lines. The book thus helps frame in a new way the so-called managerial revolution of the late nineteenth century, demonstrating how a particular

blend of paternalistic and bureaucratic managerial techniques helped bring about a historically consequential modernization of managerial practices in Britain.

New forms of surveillance in the railway industry did not simply affect how workers experienced the company, they also helped ensure that public-facing workers would interface with the riding public in approved ways: calming passengers' nerves in emergencies or politely declining to take tips from wealthy passengers, for example. In both railway and healthcare industries, uniformed workers interfaced with members of the public who hailed from a wide range of class backgrounds. During such interactions, members of the public faced heightened levels of vulnerability, whether to accidental injury or because of ailments or injuries that had brought them to the hospital. Guards and nurses thus occupied positions of responsibility vis-à-vis vulnerable members of the public, and often their labors were framed as the "natural" expression of a gendered, familial sort of care. We can speak in this regard of the "sisterly nurse" or of the "paternal railwayman." But for as much as interactions between workers and members of the public could be made to seem akin to domestic interactions, they nevertheless generally remained interactions between strangers. Here we arrive at the second key historical argument of the book: namely, that people's everyday encounters with bureaucratically disciplined, public-facing workers had complex pedagogical effects, teaching members of the public certain rules of etiquette for a new, more bureaucratized world, and showing these same members of the public how working-class women and men might be "reformed" by being embedded in moralizing bureaucracies.

Laboring in Public thus considers the history of public-facing labor in Victorian Britain along two different temporal registers, showing, on the one hand, how the mid-century ordering of such labor fits within a longer arc of managerial modernization, and, on the other hand, how people's experiences of public-facing labor helped teach them how to interact with and understand uniformed workers at the mid-century. The book thus helps recast the longer-term story of the managerial revolution, even as it also offers a fine-grained, conjunctural account of the reshaping of cultural practices and political outlooks in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. In taking on the latter task, the book engages with a longstanding historiographical conversation about the stabilization of social and political relations in mid-century Britain. The approach I take to this topic is novel and potentially timely in that it brings questions of labor back to the center of the story but not in a way that echoes an older social historical approach. What interests me in this project is less how labor was stratified and made politically quiescent and more how labor was encountered through the written word and interpersonally in particular socio-technical contexts. I am interested in reconstructing what members of the public were learning, through a combination of written works and everyday interactions, about public-facing labor. For one, they learned how to interact with uniformed workers and thus cultivated for themselves new habits of public comportment. But they also learned, or internalized as a new common sense, something of political import at the time – namely, that the spread of moralizing bureaucracies could help reform and improve the condition of working-class populations and thus serve as an antidote to the social conflicts that had defined the 1830s and 1840s.

The sources upon which this study will be built consist of a combination of published works and archival holdings. In addition to railway company and hospital records held at various sites including The National Archives of the United Kingdom, I want to consult journalistic writings about nursing reform efforts and railway company practices. I will also read literary works, social inquiries, and parliamentary debates that have something to say about the railway and healthcare industries, particularly about labor in these industries. Reconstructing the

everyday interactions between members of the public and workers in these industries will require a certain amount of creativity. For instance, reading company regulations will give a sense of what sorts of interactions managers were seeking to curb. Early regulations in the railway industry sought to prevent workers from accepting tips and even from allowing passengers to ride on the footplate. Novelistic representations of such interactions often had a pedagogical orientation, depicting passengers or patients making mistakes in how they interacted with workers. Read together, sources such as these suggest that for a period of time, workers and members of the public alike had to be trained to follow certain scripts while interacting. I am interested as well in canvassing a range of sources from the 1830s through the 1870s that depict public-facing labor in workplaces other than railways and hospitals, not in order to attempt a comprehensive study of public-facing labor in Victorian Britain but rather to help me answer questions of representativeness. Which features of railway and nursing labor set them apart from other public-facing roles at the time, and which features were shared with these other roles? Were experiences and representations of labor in these other sectors moving in concert with those of nursing and railway labor or were they moving contrapuntally? I also want to be able to approach in a wider frame the history of bureaucratization in mid-century Britain and the question of how bureaucratization was made to matter politically.