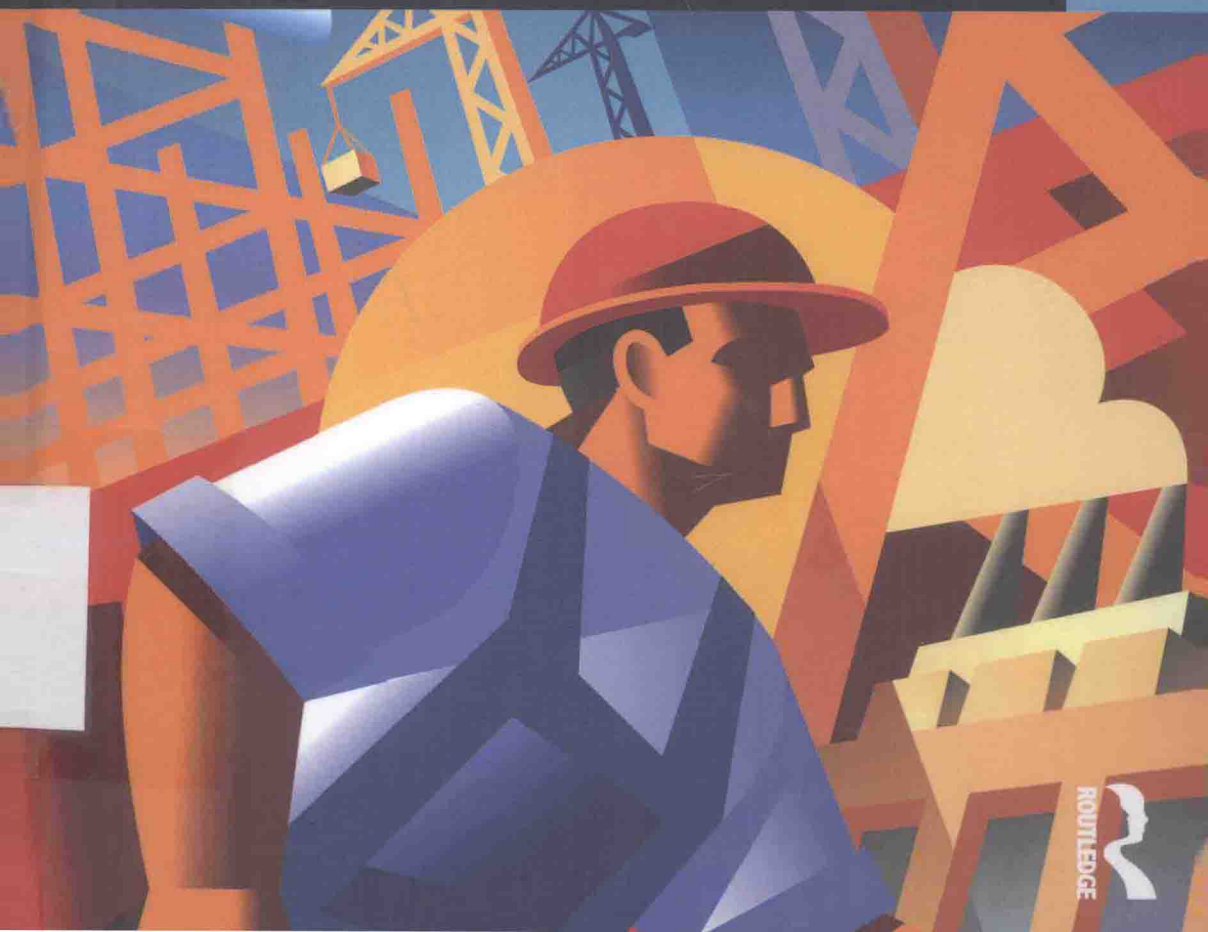


Builders

Class, gender and ethnicity in
the construction industry

Darren Thiel



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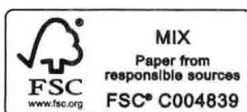
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Builders

Building workers constitute between 5 and 10 per cent of the total labour market in almost every country of the world. They construct, repair and maintain the vital physical infrastructure of our societies, and we rely upon and trust their achievements every day. Yet we know surprisingly little about builders, their cultures, the organization of their work or the business relations that constitute their industry. This book, based on one-year's participant observation on a London construction site, redresses this gap in our knowledge by taking a close-up look at a section of building workers and businessmen.

By examining the organizational features of the building project and describing the skill, sweat, malingering, humour and humanity of the building workers, Thiel illustrates how the builders were mostly autonomous from formal managerial control, regulating their own outputs and labour markets. This meant that the men's ethnic, class- and gender-bound cultural activities fundamentally underpinned the organization of their work and the broader construction economy, and thereby highlights the continuing centrality of class-bound culture and social stratification in a post-industrial, late-modern world. Thiel outlines the ongoing connections and intersections between economy, state, class and culture, ultimately showing how these factors interrelate to produce the building industry, its builders and its buildings.

Based predominantly on cultural and economic sociology, this book will also be of interest to those working in the fields of gender and organizational studies; social class and inequality; migration and ethnicity; urban studies; and social identities.

Darren Thiel is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Essex. Before taking up this position, he worked in a number of different occupations including the agricultural, construction, service and military sectors. After completing his PhD in 2006 he also worked as a researcher at the Home Office and the Police Foundation, and taught sociology at the University of East Anglia, UK.

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8 Builders

Class, gender and ethnicity in the construction industry

Darren Thiel

'I'm digging the hole because of my workmen'

'Your army? I thought you were the general!'

'Sometimes the army does the leading'

William Golding, *The Spire*, 1964: 39

Preface

Building workers constitute between 5 and 10 per cent of the total labour market in almost every country of the world. They construct, repair and maintain the vital physical infrastructure of our societies, and we rely upon and trust their achievements every day. Yet we know surprisingly little about builders, their cultures, the organization of their work or the business relations that constitute their industry. This book, based on one-year's participant observation on a London construction site in 2003/4, redresses this gap in our knowledge by taking a close-up look at a section of building workers and businessmen.

The book describes the organizational features of the building project, illustrating the skill, sweat, malingering, humour and humanity of the building workers, and showing how the project was organized, managed and built. In doing so, I illuminate the builders' ethnic, class- and gender-bound cultural activities which underpinned the organization of their work and the broader construction economy. I show how the builders were highly skilled and were mostly autonomous from managerial control, regulating their own outputs and labour markets. The obverse of their autonomy, however, was that they were subject to a highly deregulated employment market whereby they were a hyper-flexible, sub-contracted workforce with very few employment rights and no unionization. The building world I observed was not governed primarily by managerial, union or state regulation but, rather, it was underpinned by the informal cultural activities and norms of the builders.

Cultural relations were consequently vital to understanding how this section of the construction industry operated. Gifts, favours, loyalties, identities, recreation and violence were part of the glue of the building marketplace and a fundamental basis of the organization of its work and labour. Long-standing traditions, framed by the builders' class-bound working bodies and community networks, had both replaced and blocked formal regulation of their work and economy. These practices, while being pragmatic in terms of the builders' immediate lives, had, however, contributed to determining patterns of advantage and disadvantage, locking the builders into particular lives and lifestyles, and thereby reproducing an aspect of the broader stratification system.

This book explores the interrelationships between class, ethnicity and gender in the builders' lives, examining the continuing persistence of class-bound culture and social stratification in a post-industrial, late-modern world, highlighting the ongoing connections and intersections between economy, state, class and culture, and ultimately showing how these factors interrelate to produce the building industry, its builders and its buildings.

Acknowledgements

The PhD thesis on which this book is based was generously funded by a studentship from the Economic and Social Research Council (R42200134486) that enabled the work to be done. Parts of the book have been previously published in two journal articles (Thiel, 2007, 2010) and I extend my gratitude to the publishers for allowing me to reproduce aspects of those papers.

I have many individuals to thank for their help and input into the project – far too many to name. Some had a more direct influence than others, and many of them unwittingly. In this respect, I thank all my family for lots of things, and a big shout out to the East Ham posse who taught me more about migration and ethnicity than a million books, in particular, the late Gilly Mundy – our sadly missed comrade. Thanks and utmost respect also to my PhD supervisors, Paul Rock and Janet Foster, whose encouragement, guidance and insight throughout and beyond the project have been invaluable. Their patience and enthusiasm prevented me wandering off the tracks on many dark occasions. I am also grateful to Miriam Glucksmann for providing helpful comments on a late draft, and to Dick Hobbs and Richard Sennett for their help and comments at various stages of the project.

Finally, of course, my deepest appreciation goes out to all the lads at ‘Topbuild’ for their humour, co-operation and cordiality – most of the time – and for generally accepting my hanging around and asking inane questions all day long. Without them there could be no book.

Unfortunately, I cannot blame any of the subsequent shortcomings on any of the above. They are entirely my fault.

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Introduction

When I first conceived the research project upon which this book is based, the building industry was not unfamiliar to me. Many of my family worked as builders, as I had done sporadically throughout my youth. I had also worked more or less permanently as a painter and decorator in London for seven years leading up to 2002 when, armed with a research proposal, I enrolled on a doctoral programme to write a thesis about building workers. Like most others who had worked 'in the building' in London, I had laboured on numerous building sites, large and small, for many different building contractors and subcontractors, and I had been employed all over London under a variety of forms of employment relationship. Despite this, I, like most others, had initially taken builders and their industry for granted.

Although builders construct, repair and maintain the physical infrastructure of our societies, work in the most private spaces of our homes and workplaces, and while we rely on and trust their achievements in almost every moment of social life, the academic world has tended to notice only buildings, their designs and design technologies but not the labour of the builders themselves (Pink et al., 2010). It is, of course, the builders' skill and sweat that makes the building, and builders have been doing this almost since the very beginnings of the division of labour. Contemporarily, they continue to constitute between 5 and 10 per cent of the total labour market across the world (Bosch and Phillips, 2003), and, for the foreseeable future, builders will remain with us in much the same way as they are today and were yesterday. If we are to effectively comprehend contemporary work, economy and social life, builders' lives, labour and industry require some exposition.

The relative neglect of building workers within the study of work, workers and economy may have been to the detriment of that study. In relation to the numbers of studies of, for instance, service workers or factory operatives, building workers have received little attention. There are a small number of older studies of British building workers (Coleman, 1965; Foster, 1969; Higgin and Jessop, 1965; Sykes, 1969a, 1969b), and there has been some recent interest in aspects of UK construction worker culture (see Mars, 2005; Pink et al., 2010; Rooke and Clarke, 2005; Rooke et al., 2004). More information has come from the small

but regular flow of books about building workers in the USA (Applebaum, 1981; Cherry, 1974; Eisenberg, 1998; Paap, 2006; Reimer, 1979; Silver, 1986), yet, these North American studies examine unionized construction work – predominantly on large new construction projects, which accounts for only a small proportion of building work.

In 1970, unionized construction made up 39 per cent of US building work but, by 1999, this had shrunk to 19 per cent (Lipset and Katchanovski, 2001). In the UK, despite worker unions having their genesis in the late nineteenth century building trades (Postgate, 1923), unionization has never had much hold (Austrian, 1980). In 2010, it was estimated that members of unions constituted just 14.5 per cent of British builders (Achur, 2011). The few books published about building work and workers have largely described US building workers and, within that, the minority unionized sector. However, the basis for this book is a section of the majority, non-unionized construction industry in the UK. In this type of building market worker relationships with the political economy are quite distinct from the more formalized union sector.

Ethnography

Despite my previous experience of construction work, it was with some trepidation that I began to try to gain research access to a London building site. I did not want to be an overt researcher with a building company that I had worked for previously, so I wrote letters to a number of major UK construction companies asking for research access – but I never received a reply. As a consequence, I networked through an architect employed at the university where I was enrolled, who, on my behalf, spoke to some UK building contractors. Eventually, I was contacted by a director of a large building contracting company, who put me in touch with another representative of another building contractor, which I have called ‘Topbuild’. After a short telephone conversation, I arranged to meet Topbuild’s representative at a building site office where he quite reluctantly granted me access to some of the projects under his jurisdiction – if I promised to not ‘hold up production’. Initially he wanted me to tour a number of separate sites, but I stubbornly remained for 51 weeks at one interrelated collection of building jobs situated in central London. It is my overt participant observation conducted over 51 weeks at Topbuild’s repair, renovation and refurbishment project at ‘Keyworker House’ that this book describes.

A detailed analysis of my fieldwork and the epistemological issues generated by it can be found in another publication (Thiel, forthcoming). Here, I offer only a brief description of the various phases of my fieldwork. I began by working on the site at Keyworker House full-time as a labourer for three months. This was done to allow me to merge into the daily life of the site, see what was going on, contribute to production and hopefully gain some trust and respect from my fellow workers. Indeed, through my work, I quickly blended into the world of the

labourers, who, in keeping with London's labour migration and building industry traditions, were mostly Irish. I felt accepted by them broadly and, despite my saying otherwise, was labelled a student who was working on the site for some extra cash. Working as a labourer did, however, obscure my view of the overall building project and it blocked my contact with many of the other work groups on the site. As a result, I moved to observing the building site office for ten weeks, followed by a period of approximately 15 weeks where I hung around at the site in no particular role, helping out with production, talking to the various workers and developing my relationships with them.

It was during these 15 weeks that I conducted most of the 31 interviews that I recorded. Foremen, managers, consultants and quantity surveyors were interviewed during work time at various locations on site, and the building tradesmen and labourers were interviewed after work in local public houses. Most of the builders did not consent to being interviewed, and my asking for interviews often generated significant suspicion among some of them. I also repeatedly badgered the Irish-born labourers to agree to be interviewed but, for the few that did accede, all of those interviews were rather awkward and stunted. Conversely, however, most of the British Indian carpenters whom I had got to know but never worked with agreed to interviews and were generally very lucid. I also filled 27 notepads and countless sheets of paper with observations, ideas and conversations that I had overheard or had with the builders; and I also spent a number of evenings and two weekends engaged in inebriated leisure with some of them.

I ended the fieldwork by spending seven weeks working alongside the painters in my previous trade, followed by a few more weeks in which I gradually exited the field; my visits becoming progressively less frequent. The transient nature of many of the building trade groups on the site meant that I focused predominately on the seven distinct groups who were more or less permanently involved throughout the duration of my fieldwork: the building consultants, site managers and quantity surveyors; and a larger number of the subcontracted workers: labourers, carpenters, painters, and mechanical and electrical workers – plumbers and electricians.

My initial approach to the fieldwork was simply to observe and record the everyday life of the building site and the words of the builders in order to freeze a slice of social history into the text of a doctoral thesis. I had also intended, through the ethnographic tradition of inductive methodology, to try to identify forms and patterns in my data that might provide clues about social organization (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I had held a vague notion that I would investigate gender and informal economic activity but, otherwise, I would simply work on and hang around a building site and wait to see 'what came up'. Indeed, many more issues, forms and patterns arose than I had considered beforehand and, while my initial notions to study gender and informal economic activity do fill a considerable number of pages in this book, the details of my case study forced me to broaden the focus.

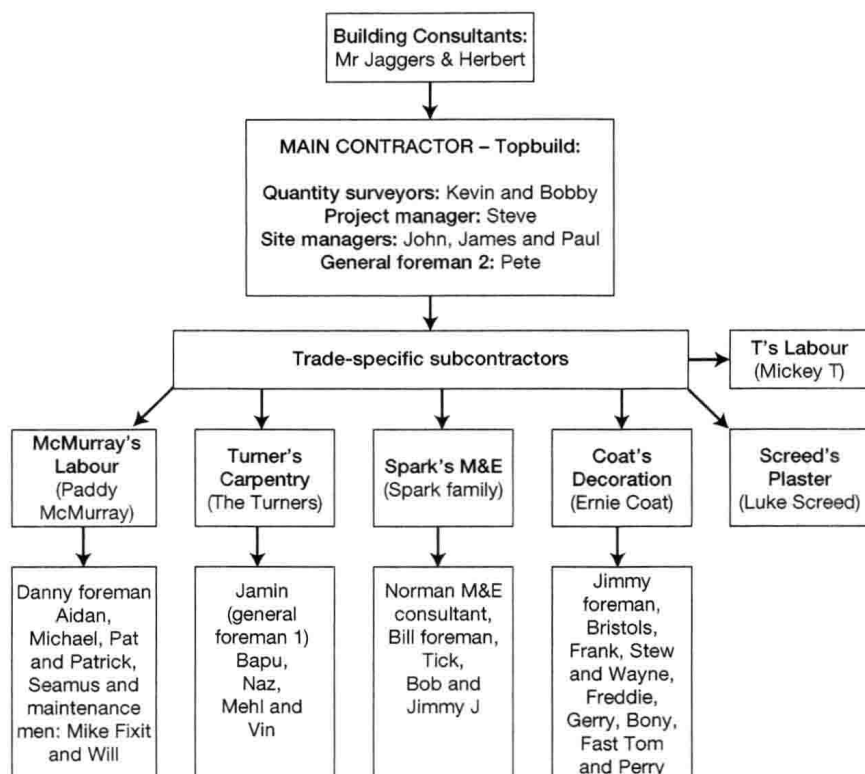


Figure 0.1 Main participant groups involved in the fieldwork.

Sociology

Throughout my research and analysis, what became striking was how the cultural practices and normative worlds of the building site and builders showed considerable, indeed surprising, continuity with descriptions of manual workers' culture of the past. This was partly a result of the archaic nature of building work – a number of the building processes and hand tasks required had existed largely unchanged for millennia (Kidder, 1985; Satoh, 1995; Woodward, 1995). Yet such continuity was also an outcome of the perpetuation of traditional class-bound working practices, norms and habits that the builders utilized to manage the effects of political and economic forces and changes on their lives.

Unlike the industrial factory operatives or post-industrial service workers who have been so regularly studied, the builders had largely retained their craft skills, were highly autonomous of managerial control and largely immune to formal management regimes. The concomitant of that autonomy, however, was that the builders were subject to a highly deregulated and despotic employment market whereby they were part of a hyper-flexible, subcontracted workforce with

very few employment rights, and none of them held any union protection. The building world at Topbuild was primarily governed by neither managerial nor state regulation, but rather was framed by the pragmatic cultural practices that the builders themselves employed informally to manage their work, economy and labour market. These practices, based on reciprocity, community, loyalty and corporeal ability, were bound to the builders' gendered and class-bound lives and social backgrounds, and they operated to both fill and manage the void of formal regulation of their work and economy.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990) suggests, different socio-economic groups live in particular relationships to hierarchical social, political and economic systems, which determine the groups' tastes, habits and practices. These relationships to broader society offer social groups varying levels of security, reward and status, and thus frame the development of specific cultural responses to best manage that security, reward and status. The builders practised an embodied form of class-bound masculinity tied to their physical skills and abilities, which, in combination with their community networks, constituted the major sources of power and 'capital' that they could utilize to negotiate and manage their lives (see Bourdieu, 1986; Wacquant, 1995; Wolkowitz, 2006). As a consequence, I highlight the process and structure of community networks and the embodied cultures of the builders, illustrating the centrality of these features to building work organization, labour markets and class reproduction.

The hierarchical social world that Bourdieu describes is frequently perceived, understood and felt as a class system, particularly in the UK (Cannadine, 1999; Skeggs, 2004). Class is something that the builders lived, did and were subject to, and it intersected their gender and ethnic identities, physical dispositions, and the organization of their work and industry. As they were lived-out, these class-bound practices engendered broader social relations and structures (cf. Giddens, 1984), including significant aspects of those relations that constitute what we call economy. While the broader building economy did, of course, frame the ways in which the builders lived, their activities also contributed to determining how the economy operated. The economy was then something enacted by the builders and, rather than being primarily underpinned by formal regulation or abstract laws of supply and demand, it was anchored by informal cultural agreements and activities (cf. Granovetter, 1985) which served to manage the worst effects of market despotism and caprice. Yet these practices placed the builders in attenuated and often antagonistic relationships with formal authority and the political economy; and this antagonism further augmented their informal practices, solidifying patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

This book grapples with some traditional sociological questions following the now classic ethnographic works of, for example, Paul Willis (1977) and Michael Burawoy (1979), which explored how informal cultural relations, in interaction with the broader political economy, reproduce existing social strata and class divisions. These classic works, however, tie class-based culture largely into a relationship with industrial economic organization, neglecting the much older

pre-industrial history of worker culture, and underplaying the salient relationships between class-bound culture and the modern state system. In the light of more recent works that focus on the intersections of class, gender and ethnicity, growing largely from academic feminism (see, for example, Glucksmann, 1982; McDowell et al., 2007), I also examine the roles played by migration, ethnicity and gender – something left largely unexplored or implicit in classic studies.

Through a detailed and close-up description of the work and lives of a group of London builders, this book demonstrates how class-bound cultural continuity persisted in a post-industrial, late-modern world. It examines how the builders, as a section of the working class, stayed working class, how some groups of migrants joined them there, the outcomes of this, and its implications for our understanding of building work and economy.

Terminology

Throughout the book, all company and personal names have been changed, but not the dates, places and the specificities of the build. I describe the world of the building site chiefly through the vocabulary that the builders themselves used to order, construct and make sense of it. In this respect, the term ‘builders’ is an overarching one used to describe all the people involved in the collective production of building. This term is bifurcated into those working in ‘the office’: site management and quantity surveyors; and those working ‘on the tools’: labourers, tradesmen and trade foremen. These groups are further divided into particular trades and positions, and further still into named individuals. I have tried to reproduce some of the flavour of the builders’ terms and colloquialisms and, to this end, I sometimes employ parochial argot and have given nicknames to some of the men. I have also tried accurately to reproduce the talk of the builders and, as a consequence, readers should be prepared for the frequent use of profane language.

Structure of the book

The first four chapters describe and analyse the organizational features, work groups and workplace culture of the construction site, while Chapters 5 and 6 focus more specifically on the development and constitution of the class and gender-bound cultures of the builders. Chapter 7 conjoins these observations into an analysis of the social reproduction of class, gender and ethnic advantage and disadvantage, which is followed by a short conclusion about the interrelationships between work, political economy and social stratification.