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**From Machine Man to Information Manager:
Class Formation and Group Mobility in Corporate Computing, 1953-1964**

Now that the twentieth century is over we may begin to close it; to discipline its partisan unruliness into a coherent and explicitly historical framework. As labor history grapples with the last half of the century, its most pressing problem will be to make sense of the putative "information society" and "new economy". Was the American working class merely an historical blip, unmade by the ascent of "free agent" knowledge workers to the proud independence of the artisanal small producer?

Probably not. But to even address this widely held belief we must go beyond an exclusive focus on the working class, just as we have moved beyond an exclusive focus on skilled white craftsmen who unionized or attempted to do so. The rise of so many new technical occupations in the post-1945 period has distorted once firmly drawn distinctions between managers and workers. Management is no longer a small and culturally homogenous group. We must apply the same care to the identification of rivalries, alliances and complex, multifaceted identities within the managerial and technical classes of the corporation as we have done to the complex and constantly shifting identities of the working classes.

My paper examines the quintessential worker of the information age: the computer programmer. During the mid-1950s large American corporations turned in large numbers to electronic computers. In the process they created new spaces – physical, cultural and occupational – whose outlines were not yet defined. An extraordinarily powerful emblem of technological modernity, the computer brought new prestige and responsibility to the punched card "machine accounting" supervisors to whom it was entrusted.

Mechanical punched card machines, though increasingly important to the accounting operations of many large corporations, had been something of an organizational backwater. Men with little formal training or higher education passed on the techniques of wiring control panels and setting reports. For the punched card supervisors who joined the National Machine Accountants Association, "accountant" was an aspirational term. They saw themselves as nascent professionals, arguing that they belonged in the ranks of management and launching campaigns for certification, education, textbooks, ethical codes and the other apparatus of the traditional profession. Unfortunately managers were less impressed by the efforts of these "machine men" to remove the "blue piping on their white collars."

By 1962 they changed the name of their association to the Data Processing Managers Association - embracing the new technology of the computer and the increased status it followed. Rather than joining accountants, they pushed for the establishment of the Data Processing department outside its traditional roots in the finance organization. As a top-level staff group in its own right it could deal fairly with the increasing demands placed on the computer by different parts of the firm. This push for status rested on a redefinition of management itself, in which computers would be tools not for clerical efficiency but managerial decision-making. Like Taylor, they attempted to leverage knowledge of technical efficiency into a claim to managerial authority.

These men deliberately and energetically set out to create a shared consciousness, the kind of awareness of common interests and culture that has underpinned class formation. They had to shape an identity as managerial professionals, rather than technicians or the rival conceptions of scientists or engineers. Their writings, textbooks, conference addresses and newsletter articles show a constant striving to present a common front and reiterate the need to stick together to achieve their goals. Their goal was to become part of management - not by struggling alone and rising through the ranks but by a process of group mobility, raising the status of their whole occupation. Just as with earlier kinds of worker, to understand the behavior of this class we must understand the historical process by which it was formed.