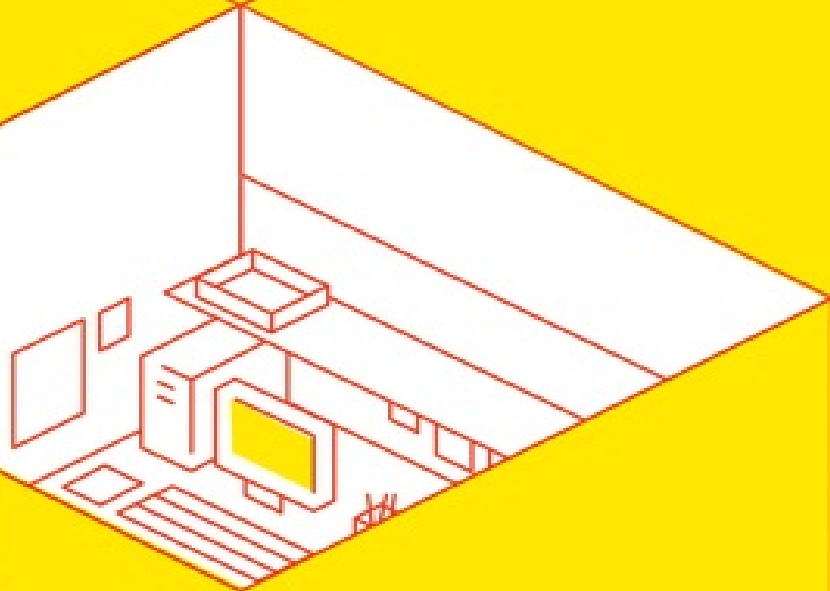


# Cubed

Nikil Saval

A Secret History of  
the Workplace





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*A Secret History of the Workplace*

Nikil Saval



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I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils ...

—Theodore Roethke, "Dolor" (1940)

ESTEEMED GENTLEMEN,

I am a poor, young, unemployed person in the business field, my name is Wenzel, I am seeking a suitable position, and I take the liberty of asking you, nicely and politely, if perhaps in your airy, bright, amiable rooms such a position might be free. I know that your good firm is large, proud, old, and rich, thus I may yield to the pleasing supposition that a nice, easy, pretty little place would be available, into which, as into a kind of warm cubbyhole, I can slip ...

—Robert Walser, "The Job Application" (1913)

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# INTRODUCTION

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Because the footage comes from a security cam, the images are grainy and silent, the perspective fixed. We are in a recognizable scene: a cubicle farm, with workers crammed next to each other, all staring at their computers, in a tiny, fluorescent-lit space. A man in a shirt and tie sits at his desk while a co-worker crouching next to him collects papers from a filing cabinet. Time passes with little else happening until the crouching man suddenly grabs the sheaf of papers and hurls it at his colleague. The colleague backs away as the man lifts up his hulking computer monitor—a cathode ray behemoth from another time—to send it careening to the next cubicle over, where it crashes into the corner of a desk before tumbling to the floor, exhaling smoke. With self-possession and eerie calm, the man collects more papers from the floor before aiming and snapping his arm as he slingshots them at transfixed colleagues farther away, the pile fluttering into the air like oversized confetti. He gets up from a desk and begins kicking at the thin partitions that grid the room, bending them out of shape. Two co-workers hiding behind a corner record the scene with cell phone cameras. The man, prowling the room, lithe and balletic in his rage, secures a large stick from behind a desk and quickly lights into the copy machine. At last one of the other employees works up the temerity to grab the stick from him and wrestle him down to the ground. Disarmed and pinned to the carpet, he is incapacitated by a Taser. In the last images, we see him fetal-like, writhing, clawing at his stomach, his collar, his tie.

“Security Cam Footage of Cubicle Rage to the Extreme Is Every Cube Dweller’s Fantasy,” I read the *Gizmodo* post from June 2008 linking to the video. Over time, as the original footage went viral, one of the cell phone cameramen would post his video too: with sound and color it better conveyed the sickly, toothpaste green of the walls, the shrieks of the onlookers amid the flurry of white papers, and the pain and exhilaration of the man in the last minutes of his revolt. Yet nothing could top the original security-cam video for its panoptic view of the office from above: how recognizably cramped it looked; how obvious were the conditions and potential for this rage. “This dude rocks,” ran the first comment. “He really knows how to live. His cellmates should’ve joined in the rebellion.” Inevitably, after it had been viewed millions of times, some would charge that the video was fake (who doesn’t have a flat-screen LCD monitor these days?), but, authentic or not, the video struck a nerve. Common among the sentiments, whether pro or con, was this, from a blogger: “Deep down every employee wants it to be real.”



In 1997 Steelcase surveyed cube dwellers and found that 93 percent of them would prefer a different workspace. A 2013 study from two University of Sydney researchers indicates that little has changed: the cube-ists (about 60 percent of office workers) expressed the highest rates of unhappiness with their work setup. (People with closed doors were unsurprisingly the most satisfied of the bunch.) This dissatisfaction with office spaces and office life more generally—the myriad aggravations, small ironies, larger defeats, and modest victories—has



been seeping into the broader culture for years. In the film *Office Space*, a trio of disgruntled tech employees take out their frustration at their company's downsizing by annihilating the office printer with baseball bats and dropkicks. (You can find dozens of amateur remakes on YouTube.) In the novels *Personal Days* by Ed Park and *Then We Came to the End* by Joshua Ferris, proper e-mail etiquette becomes the subject of quasi-academic debate, and the highlight of a typical day is discovering that free bagels have been left over from a breakfast meeting. Both novels are narrated by an impersonal "we," the better to capture the passive conformism and bland anonymity of the contemporary white-collar landscape. The original British version of *The Office* (now remade in the United States, France, Germany, Quebec, Israel, and Chile, with Swedish and Chinese versions in the works) had one character tormented the other by encasing his stapler in a Jell-O mold. Meanwhile, the Danish author Christian Jungersen's worldwide best seller *The Exception* took the concept of "office politics" to the extreme by having office workers seem to plot against and murder each other.



Destroying the printer of oppression in *Office Space* (1999). Photofest

Above all, of course, we've had *Dilbert*, a comic strip that converted fungible dullness into a concise, portable office satire. Appropriately enough, the original *Dilbert* comic grew into a small franchise, which soon became a cliché fixture of the very office environment that satirized so well, with ubiquitous desk calendars, coffee mugs, mouse pads, and plush toys (all available in the online store's "Cubeware" section). As bleak as *Dilbert* sometimes was, running through all of it was a simple, even humanist sentiment, most succinctly expressed by one of the characters in *Office Space*: "Human beings were not meant to sit in little cubicles staring at computer screens all day."

Or you might take a cue from Rousseau: *Man is born free, but he is everywhere in cubicles.*

□

Happiness has no history, says Balzac; neither does the office. “The white-collar people slipped quietly into modern society,” wrote the sociologist C. Wright Mills, and the office that housed them appeared with reticence as well. Other workplaces, like the factory, entered clanging and whistling; the office was typically demure. By the middle of the twentieth century, when Mills was writing his book *White Collar*—to this day, the only comprehensive treatment of the subject—men and women who worked in offices were on the verge of constituting a majority of the American population. But where the office came from has remained a mystery—too banal, perhaps, to be felt worthy of serious inquiry.

People first began to notice offices in the middle of the nineteenth century, when such spaces were first called countinghouses—virtually indistinguishable from the Italian merchants’ offices of centuries ago. These were small, cozy—or certainly small. “The door of Scrooge’s counting-house was open that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, who in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was copying letters.” A *sort of tank*, where men entered in the prime of health and exited shrunken and phthisic; where so much activity took place, but only paper seemed to be produced. From the outset, the office was considered unworthy of its own appointed tasks. Business was noble, exciting even: one could risk, venture, thrive, and grow prosperous.

The office, meanwhile, was weak, empty, and above all boring. If business took place in the office, it was a dry, husky business. And yet it was this boredom, this tedious respectability, that made the office the forging ground for a twentieth-century discourse that has proved indispensable: the rhetoric of the middle class, and the promise of upward mobility. The clerk in his dismal cell might one day rise up to the top; the accountant marooned out in the snake pit of the data-processing pool could, with pluck, become the president of his company; the drone in the cubicle could code his way into the boardroom. No other workplace, no matter how degraded, has been such a constant source of hope about the future of work and the guarantee of a stable, respectable life.

In other words, offices were never meant to be icons of tedium. In fact, since the early twentieth century, the office has been the source of some of the most utopian ideas and sentiments about American working life. From their very origins at the beginning of the twentieth century, when they began to expand as administrative centers to ever larger Gillette Age businesses, offices offered a potential refuge from that other icon of tedium, the factory. Visionary architects like Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright designed offices that hummed with the efficiency and regularity of an assembly line but with less physical danger and manual hardship and, therefore, more social prestige. By the 1950s, it was possible for an entry-level employee to imagine himself (and, considerably less often, herself) rising through the ranks, taking on more tasks and counting beneath him ever more subordinates.

Few jobs rivaled in prestige and symbolic power that of white-collar workers in mid-twentieth-century America. The structures that housed them—like the Lever House and the Seagram Building—would be among the most iconic buildings of the century. In the 1960s, management theorists began to imagine new kinds of office workers who, aided by technological advances in computing, would become “knowledge workers”—highly educated, creative white-collar professionals who would be paid to *think*. Office design theorists tried to house this new kind of worker with a bewildering number of designs, from the German *Bürolandschaft* (“office landscape”), which tried to make indoor offices cohere with the eb-

and flow of paperwork, to Robert Propst's Action Office, which consisted of shiftable modular walls for the active, hard-thinking office worker of the future. The 1990s witnessed yet more office utopianism, fueled by the perfervid fantasies of the dot-com bubble: offices that were miniature cities, offices equipped with bowling alleys, offices as big as college campuses, offices as small and as comfortable as your tricked-up garage or rec room. With better telecommuting technologies in the first decade of the twenty-first century and beyond, designers and theorists began to glimpse the end of the physical office itself, to be replaced by an invisible and ubiquitous office of networkers in cafés and living rooms who attend the virtual meetings of a company nominally based in Bombay while they lounge in New Canaan in their pajamas.

Look closer, though, and the picture gets grimmer. Transposing the factory model to the office turned white-collar work into numbing, repetitive labor. The mid-century middle manager began to feel himself as spiritually trapped—an “organization man,” his soul made captive to his company. Soon after joining the workforce, women were often assigned to administrative or secretarial roles from which it was impossible to rise, and they faced double subordination in sexual harassment. The offices themselves began to be reproduced endlessly: for every elegant Seagram Building, there were ten more soulless modular knockoffs, their interiors lacking in human warmth. Honest attempts to fix these problems produced more problems: the German “office landscape” was chaotic and inhospitable to concentration. Robert Propst's Action Office would be perverted over the years into the most notorious symbol of the American office world: the cubicle. Even the crazy dot-com offices would be remembered not for their architectural utopianism but for the crazy hours the denizens worked: “white-collar sweatshops,” many began to call them. Meanwhile, the burgeoning café life of the freelancer is a reality for many, but it comes with persistent financial insecurity, no benefits, and a relatively asocial work environment. In short, the story of white-collar work hinges on promises of freedom and uplift that have routinely been betrayed.

Why have the best intentions of planners and architects, designers and executives, fallen short of producing a happy environment for the American worker? And among the rare instances of successful offices, what about them works so well? Why has the allure of office life (so prestigious on the face of it) consistently proved to be so elusive or disappointing from the earliest days of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” to the baseball-bat-wielding dudes from *Office Space*? How have the compromises and changes made inside the office come to affect the world outside it?

*Cubed* talks about design and history, and it speaks through faceless, unnamed workers and sometimes the typewriters and file cabinets they used and the chairs they sat in. But it also chronicles the history of individuals who sought to shape the office, whether physically or socially—often with the aim of bettering the lives of individuals within it and usually achieving something far from what they intended. It is a history from the perspective of the people who felt these changes from their desks.



This book is inspired by and is an homage to C. Wright Mills's *White Collar*, a dyspeptic and classic work about the nonmanual worker at mid-century. Though I don't discuss this book

detail, its influence and ideas are everywhere. There are differences, of course, in the method: Mills's work was sociology, or at least his own, highly subjective brand of it. This book is a social history, mixed with some journalism and, toward the end, some stabs at futurology. Moreover, Mills's term "white collar" is at once more expansive and more vague than "the office," referring, as he does, to professors and salesmen, doctors and military generals, alongside clerks and stenographers. By restricting my view to the office, I omit many of the larger questions about professionals and politics that he describes; or those questions come up more indirectly. Here history is glimpsed through the office—through the feelings and attitudes of those who worked in offices over the decades, as well as those who tried to impose a vision on what office workers could do, and what their work should be like.<sup>1</sup>

*White Collar* came out in 1951, when white-collar workers constituted just under half of the workforce. They were an emerging group whom most observers saw as replacing the old middle class of artisans and small shopkeepers—their salient characteristics had to be defined, and their politics and outlook on life remained amorphous. Mills's portrait was scathing: he saw white-collar people as "little men," or autonomous followers, people who felt themselves to be independent, entrepreneurial, even when they were enslaved to large companies. Though their work was becoming just as routinized as factory labor, the intangible aspects of their job—prestige, high status—rendered them immune to the idea that they belonged to a particular class with particular interests. Their politics were up for grabs. "Of what bloc or movement will they be most likely to stay at the tail?" he wrote. "And the answer is, The bloc or movement that most obviously seems to be winning."<sup>2</sup> He was right to see the self-understanding of white-collar workers as highly subject to vague categories like prestige. And the social features of the workplace he described have remained: the office as a place of glad-handing and vacuous sociability, alongside tedious, numbing work and individual isolation.

Mills argued his case as if the entire white-collar workforce could be seen as a new middle class, and therefore could be viewed as constituting a single bloc. But the history of office work betrays less solidity than that. Few things ever remained fixed about the office, outside the realm of contestation, least of all the understanding that office workers had of themselves, and what their life chances were. Subjecting Mills's synoptic portrait of the office to the claims of history reveals ideologies and classes being made and unmade, along with fundamental notions of how and why we work.

Nor could Mills have quite realized what the world would look like when the office was not just another workplace, alongside the store and the factory, but the signature of an advanced industrial society. When the German journalist Siegfried Kracauer visited Berlin in the 1920s, he was astonished by how much the city seemed to be characterized by an "employee culture," how overrun it was by salaried office workers. In what American city now—or indeed any European city—would this be a startling observation? The culture of the office has become the dominant workplace culture of the country; the United States is a nation of clerks. *Cubed* is the history of how this came to be, and an analysis of what it has meant and might mean in the future.

## THE CLERKING CLASS

*The torn coat sleeve to the table. The steel pen to the ink. Write! Write! Be it truth or fable. Words! Words! Clerks never think.*

—BENJAMIN BROWNE FOSTER, *Down East Diary* (1849)<sup>1</sup>

They labored in poorly lit, smoky single rooms, attached to merchants and lawyers, insurance concerns and banks. They had sharp penmanship and bad eyes, extravagant clothes but shrunken, unused bodies, backs cramped from poor posture, fingers callused by constant writing. When they were not thin, angular, and sallow, they were ruddy and soft; their paunches sagged onto their thighs.

Clerks were once a rare subject in literature. Their lives were considered unworthy of comment, their workplaces hemmed in and small, their work indescribably dull. And yet one of the greatest of short stories is about a clerk. In “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853), Herman Melville, who had become famous for writing memoirs and novels about spectacular sea voyages to exotic islands—gaining a readership he eventually lost with that strange, long book about a whaling voyage—decided to turn inward, to the snug, suffocating world of the office. The titanic hunt for the white whale was exchanged for the hunt for the right-sized pen. And for finding the right position to sit at a desk: “If, for the sake of easing his back, he brought the table lid at a sharp angle well up towards his chin, and wrote there like a man using the steep roof of a Dutch house for his desk, then he declared that it stopped the circulation in his arms. If now he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it writing, then there was a sore aching in his back.”<sup>2</sup>

Melville himself had worked as a clerk for a merchant in Albany before he—as Ishmael put it—took to the ship. He knew from the inside the peculiar emptiness that office work could often have, its atmosphere of purposeless labor and dead-endedness. Even in *Moby-Dick* he speaks of the thousands in Manhattan who idle along the Battery, lost in “sea-reveries avoiding returning to their work lives “pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks.”<sup>3</sup> Appropriately, the few windows in the Bartleby office look out onto nothing but more walls. “On one end,” the unnamed narrator writes, the window faces “the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom.”<sup>4</sup> And on the other side, “an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade.” This wall, the narrator adds, wryly, “required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed within ten feet of my window panes.”<sup>5</sup> On two sides, then, two walls: one, the white wall of the light shaft; the other, a soot-black brick wall hemming in vision and light. A walled-in window: a room with no view.

But the office of “Bartleby,” like the *Pequod* of Ishmael and Ahab, is also a place of bonding, cheery with camaraderie and bonhomie. The narrator, a lawyer, initially employs three clerks with absurd nicknames—Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—that he uses affectionately. Each of them behaves with exact predictability the same way every day; for example, Turkey, an old man, always ceases to get work done after his noontime dinner, which he takes with an inordinate quantity of wine, causing his face to “blaze like a grate full of Christmas coals.”<sup>6</sup> But the boss is too kind to do anything Trump-like, and the distempered workers never challenge their boss.

The entire order dissolves, however, when a sudden increase in the volume of business pushes the narrator into hiring a new scrivener—the eponymous Bartleby. He arrives looking “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable,” and, mysteriously enough, “incurably forlorn.”<sup>7</sup> The narrator gives him a desk next to a window, but like the other windows it offers little to look at, “having originally afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though,” the narrator concedes, “it gave some light.”<sup>8</sup>

At first Bartleby works diligently, his thinness inversely proportional to his ravenousness for writing: “As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on many documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on, silently, palely, mechanically.”<sup>9</sup> The trouble comes when this routine is interrupted. The lawyer-narrator calls Bartleby in for assistance in comparing two copies of a document. After outlining the duty, the narrator is stunned by Bartleby’s infamous reply—“I would prefer not to.” Repeating the maddening phrase at the narrator’s every spluttering attempt to get him to work, Bartleby plunges the calm predictability of the office into thunderous irregularity. In the end, the lawyer, baffled by Bartleby’s intransigence, his passive resistance, is forced to leave his office altogether. Bartleby himself is taken off to prison, where, bereft of his sustenance of documents, he starves to death.

What “Bartleby” *means* has been a subject of endless debate. Office workers have always taken it to be a mirror of their condition, with Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” an encapsulation of how the office reduces all titanic conflicts to petty grievances and simmering resentments. But in 1853, when the story was written, the term “office”—and the sort of labor that was performed there—had nowhere near the universal significance it has now. In those tense years before the Civil War, clerks were a small but unusual phenomenon, a subject of anxious scrutiny; their workplaces were at once significant centers of American business and breeding grounds for a kind of work that nobody recognized as work. Clerks were a kind of worker that seemed, like Bartleby, at once harmless and ominous. “Bartleby” was evidence that the office had just begun to blot its inky mark on the consciousness of the world.



When does the office begin? It’s a question without an easy answer. One can associate the origins with the beginning of paperwork itself—until recently, the most common mental association with office work (think of the derogatory phrase “paper pusher”). In other words

since the invention of writing and the corresponding ability to keep records in a systematic manner, there have always been places that resemble offices: monasteries, libraries, scholar studies. Banking furnished an especially large amount of paperwork; the Uffizi, an incomparable gallery of Renaissance art in Florence, was also one of the first office buildings—the bookkeeping offices of the Medici family’s groundbreaking financial operations. Clerks, too, have existed for ages, many of them unclenching themselves from their desks to become quite famous: from Samuel Pepys, the British government diarist who reported on the gossip world of seventeenth-century England, to Alexander Hamilton, who had cut his teeth as a merchants’ clerk before he became the first secretary of the Treasury of the United States. Benjamin Franklin, paragon of pecuniary restraint and bourgeois self-abnegation, started out as a dry goods clerk in 1727. Perhaps some of the tediousness of Franklin’s own writing was honed in the conditions of his first job: since clerks have had the opportunity to keep diaries, they have bemoaned the sheer boredom of their tasks—the endless copying, the awkward postures, the meaninglessness of their work. When not doing writing for the job, clerks have cultivated the habit of writing about the job—or literally around it, as in the case of some infamous marginalia from medieval scribes. “Writing is excessive drudgery,” one such jottings reads. “It crooks your back, it dims your sight, it twists your stomach and your sides.” “O my hand,” goes another—even though writing out that sentence would have only magnified the problem it described.<sup>10</sup>

The notion of the office as the quintessential location of alienated work, or simply drudgery, is far from the etymological root of the word. “Office” itself comes from the Latin for “duty.” One of the more famous philosophical works of Cicero, long-winded scold of the latter days of the Roman Republic, is a treatise called *De officiis*, usually translated as “On Duty” or “On Duty,” though it might just as well be “Of Office.” For Cicero’s understanding of duty isn’t far from our contemporary sense of “holding office” or the “office of the president”: “office” as connoting a specific set of responsibilities. For Cicero, “office” was what was proper to you, what fitted you as your natural duty. This, too, seems far from an understanding of the office as workplace: few people have ever considered office work to be natural, proper, or fitting.

To find the emergence of the office in history—the workplace that prefigures the offices of today—one has to look at a peculiar confluence of new sorts of buildings, deep economic changes, as well as (most slippery of all) new kinds of feelings and mass awareness of one another among particular strata of the workforce. Industrialization in Britain and America was producing more and more administrative work, and alongside it a need for a rational approach to managing accounts, bills, ledgers: in short, paperwork. Rising to take these positions were clerks, who, looking around, began to see themselves growing in number, and to feel themselves as belonging vaguely to a special group. One finds the evolution of the office coinciding, then, with a change in the position of the clerks themselves—a new restiveness on their part, a new sense of power. They were not quite sure of themselves, but they were no longer isolated. By the middle of the nineteenth century, clerks and their workplaces begin to appear with a new regularity in the literature and journalism. “Bartleby,” with its simultaneously assertive and retiring protagonist, nicely captures this ambivalence in the early world of the office.

What “Bartleby” also captured, as other descriptions of office life at the time did, was the

sense that office work was *unnatural*. In a world in which shipping and farming, building and assembling, were the order of work, the early clerical worker didn't seem to fit. The office clerk in America at the high noon of the nineteenth century was a curious creature, an unfamiliar figure, an inexplicable phenomenon. Even by 1880, less than 5 percent of the total workforce, or 186,000 people, was in the clerical profession, but in cities, where the nation's commentariat was concentrated (who themselves tended to work in office-like places), clerks had become the fastest-growing population.<sup>11</sup> In some heavily mercantile cities, such as New York, they had already become ubiquitous: the 1855 census recorded clerks as the city's third largest occupational group, just behind servants and laborers.<sup>12</sup>

For many, this was a terrible development. Nothing about clerical labor was congenial to the way most Americans thought of work. Clerks didn't work the land, lay railroad tracks, or make ammunitions in factories, let alone hide away in a cabin by a small pond to raise bears and live deep. Unlike farming or factory work, office work didn't produce anything. At best, it seemed to *reproduce* things. Clerks copied endlessly, bookkeepers added up numbers to create more numbers, and insurance men literally made more paper. For the tobacco farmer or miner, it barely constituted work at all. He (and at that point it was invariably a he) was a parasite on the work of others, who literally did the heavy lifting. Thus the bodies of real workers were sinewy, tanned by the relentless sun or blackened by smokestack soot; the bodies of clerks were slim, almost feminine in their untested delicacy.

The lively (and unscrupulous) American press occasionally took time to level invective against the clerk. "We venture the assertion that there is not a more dependent or subservient set of men in this country than are the genteel, dry goods clerks in this and other large cities," the editors of the *American Whig Review* held. Meanwhile, the *American Phrenological Journal* had stronger advice for young men facing the prospect of a clerical career. "Be men therefore, and with true courage and manliness dash into the wilderness with your axe and make an opening for the sunlight and for an independent home." *Vanity Fair* had the strongest language of all: clerks were "vain, mean, selfish, greedy, sensual and sly, talkative and cowardly" and spent all their minimal strength attempting to dress better than "*real* men who did *real* work."<sup>13</sup> Somehow it was never questioned that journalism, also conducted in offices and with pen and paper, constituted "*real* work."

Clerks' attire was a glaring target for the barbs of the press, since the very concept of business attire (not to speak of business casual) came into being with the mass appearance of clerks in American cities. "In the counting-room and the office," wrote Samuel Wells, the author of a "manual of republican etiquette" from 1856, "gentlemen wear frock coats or sack coats. They need not be of very fine material, and should not be of any garish pattern." Other fashion advisers pointed to a whole host of "business coats," "business surtouts," and "business paletots," which you could find at new stores like Brooks Brothers. Working-class Americans would be seen in straw hats or green blouses; what distinguished the clerk was his collar: usually bleached an immaculate white and starched into an imposing stiffness. Buttoned collared business shirts were expensive, so stores catering to the business customer began to sell collars by themselves, half a dozen collars running to under half of what a cheap shirt would cost. The white collar, detachable and yet an essential status marker, was the perfect symbol of the pseudo-genteel, dual nature of office work.

The self-regarding clerk in his white collar became a stock subject of satire. Edgar Allan



Poe, in his story “The Man of the Crowd,” saw the “tribe of clerks” as being composed entirely of overdressed dandies, imitating aristocratic styles already several years old:

There were the junior clerks of flash houses—young gentlemen with tight coats, bright boots, well-oiled hair, and supercilious lips. Setting aside a certain dapperness of carriage, which may be termed *deskism* for want of a better word, the manner of these persons seemed to me an exact fac-simile of what had been the perfection of *bon ton* about twelve or eighteen months before. They wore the cast-off graces of the gentry;—and this, I believe, involves the best definition of the class.

The division of the upper clerks of staunch firms, or of the “steady old fellows,” it was not possible to mistake. These were known by their coats and pantaloons of black or brown, made to sit comfortably, with cravats and waistcoats, broad solid-looking shoes, and thick hose or gaiters.—They all had slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end. I observed that they always removed or settled their hats with both hands, and wore watches, with short gold chains of a substantial and ancient pattern. Theirs was the affectation of respectability;—if indeed there be an affectation so honorable.<sup>15</sup>

It fell to the poet Walt Whitman, bard of the masculine professions—the farmer, the builder, even the loafer and layabout—to establish that clerking was antithetical to manly American democracy. In a journalistic piece called “Broadway,” the poet turns up his nose at a “jaunty group of “down-town clerks” sauntering down the great avenue toward their cramped rooms in lower Manhattan. “A slender and round-shouldered generation, of minute leg, chalky face, and hollow chest.” Again, what distinguished the clerks was their dandyishness, “trig and prim in great glow of shiny boots, clean shirts—sometimes, just now, of extraordinary patterns, as if overrun with bugs!—tight pantaloons, straps, which seem coming little in fashion again, startling cravats, and hair all soaked and ‘slickery’ with sickening oils.” But their sparkling clothes merely hid the truth of their bodies: “What wretched, spindling ‘forked radishes’ would they be, and how ridiculously would their natty demeanor appear suddenly they could all be stript naked!”<sup>16</sup>

But the fantasy of exposing the clerk to his own inadequacy only concealed a deeper fear about the changing world of American business. Under the pressures of growing industrialization in the North of the United States, the Jeffersonian democracy of farmers was heading toward the same fate as the buffalo. More important, the old eighteenth-century world of businessmen who were also craftsmen—white-collar types who worked with their hands—began to suffer a slow decline as merchants and their groups of clerks started to exploit their superior knowledge of distant markets, and industries began to require more and more bookkeepers to maintain their ever more complicated accounts. New York was a case in point: by 1818, a packet line had begun to carry goods from the East River docks around to Liverpool (which had one of the highest concentrations of clerks in England); by 1825, the completion of the Erie Canal had connected the city with western New York; importers in lower Manhattan had set up shop to get goods from markets in the Caribbean and Asia as well as from Europe. The growth of manufacturing led to myriad urban retail and wholesale establishments, which in turn required people to do the paperwork. The “Basis of Prosperity” *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* held in 1839, lay in “the vast modern increase of the facilities for

diffusing and obtaining full and correct information on everything pertaining to trade.”<sup>17</sup> The people who handled this were clerks. Cities began to acquire ever more sizable numbers of clerks ambling down their broad avenues for men like Whitman to gawk at and fret over. By 1860, 25 percent of Philadelphians were working in nonmanual occupations; in the brand new city of San Francisco it was already 36 percent; in Boston it was nearly 40 percent. Not all of these were clerks exactly, but the trend was clear: more and more people had ceased to work with their hands and were now working with their heads. The journals of opinion in the United States might have hated the “wretched, spindling” office worker, but the hatred refracted the intense ambivalence over the nature of business—and the possibility that clerks might be not an aberration but the future.<sup>18</sup>



Despite the furor over their aggressive unmanliness, clerks, and with them the office, crept silently into the world of nineteenth-century America. Moral philosophers were most preoccupied with the clang of industrialization and its satanic mills, and most regarded as negligible the barely audible scratch of pens across ledgers and receipts that characterized the new world of clerical work. It was only a “dry, husky business,” as the narrator of “Bartleby” had it. Yet the expansion of the clerking force heralded a change as great as that of industry, and the humble clerk in the white collar would be as significant a figure as the factory hand in blue.

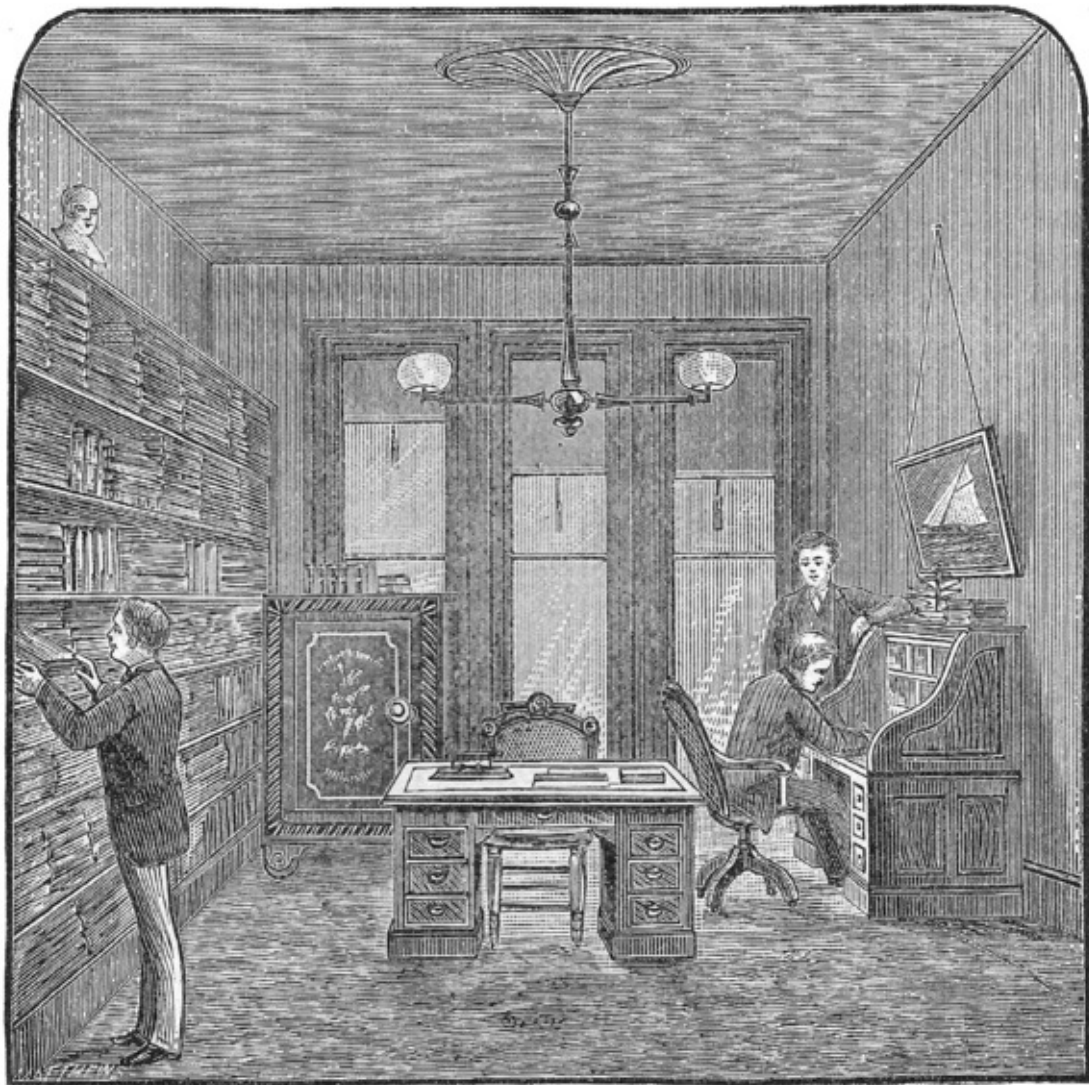
Part of what made the office so unworthy of notice was the fact that clerks in the mid-nineteenth century seemed to do business in exactly the same way as clerks decades before in colonial and revolutionary America. The typical structure of a merchants’ firm was still the partnership of two or three people, often in the same family, with the venture secured by contract. The standard method of accounting, double-entry bookkeeping, had been developed in Italy in the fourteenth century. And the offices, too, resembled the banking and merchant offices of Renaissance Italy—called in America, as they had been in the Renaissance, countinghouses. In these office spaces, a door from the street would open into darkness, perhaps graced by a single window streaked with dust from the outside, glommed over on the inside with soot from the potbellied stove in the middle of the room. A high rolltop desk was where one of the partners sat; a higher desk in the corner was reserved for his small staff of clerks. The partners themselves were often absent from this scene, making personal calls to conduct their business transactions while the clerks stayed behind and copied documents endlessly. The other signal figure of this office was the bookkeeper: the patient, sallow-faced pen-and-ink man regarding the ledger carefully through his pince-nez, whose chief source of pride was his ability to conjure the sum of a column of numbers quickly and efficiently.

A former employee of the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company in Pittsburgh in 1869, whose office had all of six men (three of them partners, three others doing bookkeeping and clerical work), recalled the office life at the time some seventy years later: “There were no telephones, stenographers, or typewriters, and business was done face to face. A man would travel hundreds of miles to buy a carload of iron (15 tons), rather than write because he could see all the iron manufacturers, and felt he could more than save his expenses in getting the lowest price. There were probably more callers at our office than there are today ... Business hours began at seven in the morning and six in the evening was recognized

as quitting time only if the day's work was finished, and it was not unusual to continue work after supper."<sup>19</sup> Even if the workday was long, the pace of business was almost enviably slow, as one partner's account of a "busy" day had it. "To rise early in the morning, to go to breakfast, to go down town to the counting house of the firm, to open and read letters—to go out and do some business, either at the Custom house, bank or elsewhere, until twelve, then to take a lunch and glass of wine at Delmonico's; or a few raw oysters at Downing's; to sign checks and attend to the finances until half past one ... to return to the counting house, and remain until time to go to dinner, and in the old time, when such things as 'packet nights' existed [when packet ships came in], to stay down town until ten or eleven at night, and then go home and go to bed."<sup>20</sup>

The offices themselves were crowded and characterized above all by face-to-face interactions, as was industry in general. One exemplary office, of a New York commission house that sold western and southern produce, was only twenty-five square feet in size but managed to house four partners and six clerical workers, all men. One was an office manager; two clerks handled the major accounts, while a fourth handled the smaller ones. A fifth acted as secretary to the senior partner; a sixth was a receiving and delivery clerk who worked "from early in the morning until eight to ten o'clock at night" handling freight and storage. There was a group of salesmen who went in and out of the office to arrange transactions and a collector who processed bills and handled bank deposits.<sup>21</sup>

But the surface continuities in the lives of office clerks masked a deeper, momentous series of changes in the structure of office work itself, which subtly began to reshape American cities and the working worlds they contained.



The General Business Office of the Stratton Commercial School, Boston (1884). *Early Office Museum*

One such change was the increasing specialization of business. The previous century had seen a host of mercantile activities united in one figure, the merchant, who was “exporter, wholesaler, importer, retailer, shipowner, banker and insurer” all at once (in the words of the business historian Alfred Chandler). By mid-century, all these tasks were divided. There were banks to handle the money, insurance firms to minimize risk, and shippers to carry goods while merchants themselves ceased to handle multiple products, focusing on just one or two and only on one aspect of the business (importing or exporting), while the day-to-day business was increasingly being handled by subordinate staff.<sup>22</sup> In retail, the growth of manufacturing meant that the goods being sold (clothes, say) were made off-site, and stores simply took on the function of selling—again, with a host of underlings to record the day-to-day transactions. In other words, manual work was being separated from nonmanual work.<sup>23</sup>

The separation of tasks, and the making of things from their selling, crystallized in the development of offices with clerks, sometimes completely separated from the dirty, noisy, and smelly world of “real work.” In city directories of the time, one notices for the first time companies that have factories in or near a city, with a separate listing for an office in which, increasingly began to be called, and exclusively in American English, “down-town” (the first usage is recorded in 1836). At the same time, the customary word “countinghouse” began to give way to the word “office.” Even where administrative offices remained on factory

property, they were often separated from the shop floor itself so that factory managers and clerks had entrances to their places of work physically distinct from that of the manual workers (and the office entrances were often prettier as well, distinguished by lintels and columns framing the doorway, rather than the warehouse atmosphere of the factory). Office buildings began to acquire their own architectural idiom, a “Greek Revival” style replete with Doric pilasters and large display windows for retail. It was a sign that the work being done within was noble, dignified, and important.<sup>24</sup>

Another, otherwise invisible but significant distinction adhered to the split of income between manual and nonmanual workers. Most married skilled laborers barely earned enough off one job to support their families, with the average running to about \$500 a year. Meanwhile, *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* estimated that the average annual expenses of a family of four, living frugally, amounted to \$1,500—*three times* the average income of a manual laborer. While clerks usually faced dismal incomes their first year clerking, with an entry-level salary of about \$50, their earning power could rise well above the low ceiling of a manual laborer’s salary, and there are plenty of reports of clerks in their late twenties and early thirties, often single men, earning as much as \$1,500 or \$2,000. Above all, the income difference lay in how these incomes, whether small or large, were paid out. Manual workers received hourly or piece-rate wages, while nonmanual workers earned annual salaries. What this meant for white-collar workers, in an American economy beset by intense fluctuations in prices and frequent financial panics, was a measure of stability that manual workers never enjoyed.<sup>25</sup> A small shift in power had begun to take place. If people who “worked with their hands” still assumed their possession of the world of things, clerical workers, those working “with their heads,” were now at the heart of capitalism’s growing world of administration and direction—close to power, if not exactly in control of it.

And so unlike “solidarity,” the key word of the European industrial labor movement that had made its way to England and America, the ethic that began to take hold among clerks was that of “self-improvement.” Clerical workers were uprooted from the close-knit world of families and farms, where knowledge was passed down from father to son. Other clerks were merely their competition; they had no one to rely on but themselves. “The man who does not at least propose to himself to be better this year than he was last must be very good or bad indeed,” wrote the merchant’s clerk Edward Tailer in his diary entry on New Year’s Day, 1850. There is, he continued, “no such thing as a stationary point in human endeavors; he who is not worse to day than he was yesterday is better; and he who is not better is worse.”

Self-education became a key component separating the office world from the rest of the world of work. Entire schools—a parallel academy for clerks—sprang up in cities everywhere to assist young people with the new knowledge they needed to succeed in business. The loftiest of the heads in the countinghouses of America was the bookkeeper, who was the closest to true knowledge in the white-collar workplace. Accounting courses proliferated—usually \$25 a pop, a sum that only more stable families could afford—and some offered to “watch over your work as you advance step by step, from book to book, entry to entry, and transaction to transaction.” Accounting books like S. W. Crittenden’s *Elementary Treatise on Book-Keeping* became widely known, thanks to their promise to “bring the subject within the grasp of any boy or girl.” Though copy clerks had to acquire their own special skills in these schools, such as the ability to write thirty words in sixty seconds—the measure of good

penmanship—bookkeepers were the source of fundamental truth in American business. The numbers, after all, had to add up. So pervasive was the bookkeeping impulse in American life that Thoreau made it a chief object of parody in the “Economy” chapter of *Walden*, where, in order to argue the superiority of his frugal, simplified life, he ostentatiously added up his food expenses in a ledger.



Unlike the anonymous, wide, deep, air-conditioned warrens that most workers around the world experience as their offices today, the early offices of the Western world—particularly those of England and America—were intimate, almost suffocatingly cozy spheres characterized by unctuous male bonding between business partners and their clerks. Because of the close proximity of clerks to their bosses, they were sometimes considered by the bosses, as the great historian of the workplace Harry Braverman had it, “assistant manager, retainer, confidant, management trainee, and prospective son-in-law.”<sup>27</sup> Or, as *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine* had it, the merchant’s clerk “is to business what the wife is to the order and success of the home—the genius that gives form and fashion to the materials for prosperity which are furnished by another”—a comparison that could hardly give comfort to those who worried about the “femininity” of American clerical work.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the closeness belied a deeply competitive streak in the American clerk. Unlike their brothers in the factory, who had begun to see organizing on the shop floors as a way to counter the fancies and arbitrary whims of their bosses, clerks saw themselves as potential bosses. What appeared to be an exemplary “middle-class” patience, a willingness to endure anything in order to rise to the top, went hand in hand with utter impatience. Indeed, their whininess was proverbial. As America’s finest moralist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote in his canonical essay “Self-Reliance”: “If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened, and in complaining the rest of his life.”<sup>29</sup> But the complaint derived from the proximity to power that a seat in an office guaranteed them. Virtually no space separated clerks from their superiors; between their position and that of the partners of their firms lay only time.

Edward Tailer, a New York merchant’s clerk who kept a steady diary throughout his years in business, gives a vivid picture of the working world of clerks. He sounds the proper, Uriah Heep-ish tone for the early white-collar worker as well: humility masking greed, whininess masking confidence. The son of a rich lawyer, in 1848, at age eighteen, Tailer managed largely through the efforts of his well-connected family, to procure a clerkship in the merchants’ firm of Little, Alden & Co., which was an importer of British, French, and German dry goods. Aside from the partners (Mr. Little and Mr. Alden), the small dark office consisted of a single bookkeeper, Frederick Haynes. When not delivering bills to dry goods houses owing money to Little, Alden & Co. or depositing said money in the bank, Tailer was employed in an endless monotony of filing receipts. In one entry he writes with satisfaction that his day consisted of filing three hundred freight and receipt bills. Highly self-conscious of the stereotypes of spindling weakness associated with members of his profession, Tailer became an exhausting propagandist for regular exercise and wrote several newspaper articles praising the gym he went to. In a piece for the *New-York Enquirer* in 1848, he wrote, “It

particularly recommended to those of sedentary habits, to undergo the training which is to be found [on Crosby near Bleecker].” As if responding to the satire of people like Walt Whitman, Tailer argued that after regular exercise “narrow and contracted chests are soon turned into broad and expansive ones, and the puny limbs of him who is not accustomed to exercise are soon changed into well developed and finely formed ones, and he imperceptibly finds himself re-established in health and strength.”<sup>30</sup> The idea of a manly, ripped clerk has its contemporary counterpart in the health-crazed office workers of today, whose biceps stiffen and shift like packs through their shirtsleeves, though they rarely lift more than boxes of files or a planter of ferns at their workplace. The office—and the fears of physical degradation engendered—might in fact have given birth to our modern idea of the gym.

At the same time, the obscurity of the poorly lit office drives him to complain about the worsening of his eyesight: “My eyes felt, when the labors of the day were finished, as if I were to become blind, a cloud appeared to hover over them, which prevented my seeing distinctly those minute objects which would be presented for admission to be portrayed upon the retina. The reason which I assigned to account for this singular occurrence was that they had been strained and sorely tried by the miserable light which finds its way into our counting room.”<sup>31</sup> The darkening of Tailer’s vision might have had less to do with the light and more to do with complaints about his position. Earlier in the same diary entry, Tailer complained that he has yet to hear from his boss over a request he had made, three days earlier, for a raise: “The answer which I have been daily expecting from Mr Alden, whether he will furnish me to draw for one hundred fifty or not, has not yet made its appearance. It strikes me more forcibly as exhibiting a mean trait of character, that a man, who has made thousands of dollars, should refuse the paltry sum to a faithful and hard working clerk, which would make him feel happy and independent, and inwardly bless the bountiful hand which could thus place him above want.”<sup>32</sup> Tailer’s request was for a yearly salary of \$150—a raise of \$100 from his \$50 starting salary, after less than a year of employment. Such was the salary he deserved, he argued, and moreover it was the only salary that would allow him to support himself and relieve his (wealthy) father of the burden. Alden’s response at the time, measured and calm, was that Tailer was asking too much for his position: Boston clerks, he argued, received only \$50 their first year, with a \$50 raise every subsequent year.



Thomas O'Brien, notary public, sitting at his Wooton desk (c. 1900). *Early Office Museum*

With Alden stalling on the raise month after month, Tailer's list of affronts began to multiply. In several entries he testifies to the strain on his eyesight. He also complains about the manual labor he is often forced to perform—an affront to his status as a clerk who works with his head: "It often occurs to me, that it is time Little Alden & Co had a young man to carry out bundles and parcels of pattern cards, as I have now been with them over a year and it is not creditable to myself that this kind of awkward and clumsy work should still devolve upon me."<sup>33</sup> Tailer, a "young man" himself, didn't mean that he wanted someone younger; rather, he wanted a porter to do the work, which he would eventually get. The distinction that Tailer drew between clerking and portering was both class based and race based; most porters tended to be immigrants or minorities of some stripe—at least 66 percent in New York City, according to the 1855 census, while 6 percent were African American—giving the work an especially low cast in the minds of clerks. The whiteness of their collar was about more than just attire.

Tailer's worries over his position were common in a clerking world where the distance between junior clerk and partner was seen as both enormous and easily surmountable. No other profession was so status conscious and anxiety-driven and yet also so straightforward seeming. No matter how dull their work might be at any given moment, there was little doubt that clerks saw themselves, and were seen by their bosses, as apprentice managers-businessmen in training. Few people thought they would languish as clerks, in the way that it became proverbial to imagine people spending their lives in a cubicle, or how for decades becoming a secretary was the highest position a woman office worker could aspire to. Part of the prestige of clerking lay in the vagueness of the job description. The nature of the dry goods business meant that clerks often spent time in the stores where their goods were sold, acting as salesmen and having to be personable to customers. In other words, the duties of clerks were vast enough to allow them to be tasked with anything, which meant that so much of their work depended upon so many unmeasurable factors besides a clerk's productivity: h



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