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Gaston's Economic, Religious and Political Intersectionality

Jack Droke¹

Abstract

Gaston county, North Carolina provides a perfect case to explore the intersectionality of the economy, politics, and religion that dominates power structures on a national scale. With an attention to the Loray Mill strike of 1929, this paper theologically analyzes the relationship between neoliberal economy and the prosperity gospel and questions whether the church is a setting of concessions when it should be acting as a voice for its constituents, regardless of what the upper class desires or has constructed.

"Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws."

- John Adams

Early Gaston County

In 1846, Gaston county was founded. This is the beginning of what Liston Pope identified as the early stage of Gastonia's progression. This early period was marked by three consecutive eras of development: "institutional growth, social control, and cultural defense."² At the dawn of its period of institutional growth, Gastonia saw the genesis of the textile mills and churches that would define its history. These competing institutions developed in a formative way, defining the social and economic construction of Gastonia. Earle, Knudsen and Shriver are quick to declare, "Churchmen helped amass capital for the mills."³ This is further expounded upon with the accusation that ministers helped "recruit workers to tend the spinning frames, and cheered on industrial development with the religious zeal of southerners who were as sick of poverty as of sin."⁴ Earle, Knudsen and Shriver clearly identify a dialectic relationship between the churches of Gaston and their industrial counterpart. As these institutions grew, albeit together, so

¹ I have many people to thank for this article, but most importantly my research adviser Dr. David Woodyard and research partner Owen Crum.

² John R. Earle, Dean D. Knudsen, and Donald W. Jr. Shriver, *Spindles and Spires: A Re-study of Religion and Social Change in Gastonia* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1976), 33.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

too did the community's opportunities. However, beneath this positive feedback system, there appears to be a distinct lack of resentment over the civil war. "The people of Gaston were far more concerned with holding their own community together and escaping the ravages of poverty than they were over the conflicts that swirled around their established landscape."⁵ With a foundation in the "Gospel of Prosperity," preaching a message of financial security guaranteed through the worship of the Christian God, the fledgling community was too busy to worry about its potential development and survival to contemplate the larger narratives occurring around it.⁶

Gaston county, North Carolina provides a perfect case to explore the intersectionality of the economy, politics, and religion that dominates power structures on a national scale. Here, the church is a setting of concessions when it should be acting as a voice for its constituents, regardless of what the upper class desires or has constructed.

Although Gaston's early history was dominated by "mutual pioneering" and sense of reciprocal development between competing institutions, Liston Pope's era of social control began in 1914 with the arrival of the Great War.⁷ This period normalized the hierarchical relationship between mill owners and mill workers. The communal memory of shared expansion and communal growth dulled the intense emotions found in the widening gulf between employer and employee; at the same time the undercurrents of distrust and dissatisfaction that arose out of the increasing disparity in wealth began to stir. Shriver, Knudsen, and Earle identify the period as warping around the construction of hierarchy. Where there is a question of power there exists a need for control. The authors claim that "Religion, many owners decided, helped to mold the character and outlook needed now more than ever among workers in the mills: regularity in their duties, cooperation with their superiors, ambition to improve their station in life, and contentment if it improved slowly..."⁸ As Pope phrases it, "The managers of mills began to promote the causes of church-building with a zeal of their own for the sake of maintaining the industrial system now in place."⁹ Liston Pope and the authors of *Spindles and Spires* illustrate that mill owners were heavily invested in forging a community that formed concrete foundations for the elite's power. The period

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

⁷ Earle, Knudsen and Shriver, *Spindles and Spires*, 33.

⁸ Ibid., 33-34.

⁹ Ibid., 34.

of social control was best understood as constructing a solid scaffolding for the continuation of the status quo.

The growing tension between employer and employee boiled over in Liston Pope's age of cultural defense. The epicenter of the community's struggle came together during the Lorry Strike of 1929. In context, unionism and Communism were budding ideologies displaced in a community developing under the hierarchy of the industrial age. These agents of social change challenged the status quo, bringing into question the balance of a community still coming to terms with the expanding gap between the elite and their workers. This is not to say that unionism and Communism are synonymous, but in the specific example of the Lorry Strike and Gastonia of the 1920's, they helped produce one another. The 1929 strike and the deep-rooted opposition to its resulting violence seemed to support "the restoration of an overarching community order which was deemed essential to continued industrial productivity."³ Earle, Knudsen and Shriver assert that this period accented a narrative where churches cultivated the infrastructure of their own domination. More specifically religion in Gaston informed its period of institutional growth while they began to chafe under the overwhelming control exerted by the mill owners in the latter two eras. Those in positions of power dictated the structure of society.

A certain civil consciousness prevailed in the following decades, a consciousness that was perpetuated by the mills and churches to sow peace in the county. Time and time again, the citizens of Gaston county saw their rights eroded in the face of increased corporate profits. Until the 1970's when foreign markets took over control the supply of textiles and the factories shut down, the happiness of the factory workers always came second to the growth of business. What then happened in Gaston? Many left, moved on to opportunities far from where they were born. Gaston was a depressed economy for the next thirty years, but the proximity of the Charlotte airport and cheap land proved to be enticing to international manufacturers of high quality goods. Once again, jobs have been pouring into the county, but how will Gaston fair if these manufacturers decide that their costs will be cheaper elsewhere, or if demand for these goods dries up. Without a real voice, and without a share of the profits, the factory workers are at the whim of the industrial elite. How then, can lessons from the past teach us how to build an economy that will sustain happiness and prosperity for those most vulnerable to shifts in the economic structure of the world?

Loray Strike and Pope

The Loray Strike was the impetus for Liston Pope's earlier book, *Millhands and Preachers*. The protest was produced by the climax of ideological and wage disagreements between the local millowners and some leaders of the Communist National Textile Workers Union organizing in the area. The strike saw almost two thousand mill employees rise up to protest their repressive working conditions.¹⁰ The community, thrust into the national spotlight, was in tumult. Citizens took sides and "[The 1929 Strike] became a struggle between the culture organized around paternalistic capitalism and an alternative culture proposed by the Communists."¹¹ The capital owning citizens of Gaston County were wholly against the union, and for good reason. The Communists and unionists protested for the recognition of unions, higher wages and a shorter workweek. Clearly any force concerned with limiting mill operations was a hazard to profits; the Communist organized strike represented an alien and atheist threat to the society that the mill owners cultivated.

In a community still unaware of the undercurrents of domination that facilitated control over their church and public institutions, it is not surprising that mill owners would stop at nothing to reestablish the stability of their hierarchical foundations. According to Pope,

Most of the ministers... appear to have been sincerely opposed to the strike apart from questions of personal advantage. They were constrained by general culture much more powerfully than they would have been by fear of financial self-interest. They shared the general presuppositions of the community as to proper industrial relations.⁴

For all intents and purposes Pope seemed to miss what Earle, Knudsen and Shriver are quick to acknowledge, the industrial power of Gaston was willing to exert, albeit unseen, power over religious institutions to affect the strike outcome.

One cannot possibly deny that with the reality of Gaston tied to the continuation of industrial prosperity, clergymen would have felt pressure to support their patrons. The authors of *Spindles and Spires* claim,

That the interests of the community and of the textile manufacture were identical, but the interests of the manufacturer, being more definite and

¹⁰ Patrick Huber, "Mill Mother's Lament: Ella May Wiggins and the Gastonia Textile Strike of 1929," *Southern Cultures* 15, no. 3 (2009): 83.

¹¹ Earle, Knudsen and Shriver, *Spindles and Spires*, p. 35.

concrete and powerfully represented, were taken as the standard in terms of which the welfare of the community was to be judged.¹²

The tide of power had risen to meet the unionist from the very beginning. It was not a question of if the strike could prevail against the mill, rather it was a question of if the strike could overcome a community zealously entrenched against their call for change.

The momentum for the strike was well founded. A new economic scheme had been devised by the captains of industry termed 'the stretch-out' that doubled both the responsibilities of workers and their hours while decreasing wages.¹³ This tactic reduced the lives of the laborers to indentured servitude because they were forced to spend most of their waking hours frantically working to keep up with new quotas. The sentiments of the town during and after the strike were based on fear, fear of their lives being upended over the whims of communists and union members. A well to do mill manager interviewed in the course of Earle, Knudsen, and Shriver's research stated that the people who lived through the strike were deeply troubled by the thought of a repeat of the Loray mill strike. Laws were passed and policies were enacted to mitigate the possibility of something like that happening again.¹⁴ Responses like this point to how much sway industrial leaders have over the ideology of the town, an ideology that is based on a sanctified economy.

The Loray strike posed a threat to the entrenched power of the town, and with the murder of the policy chief, different concepts of how the economy should function, and a rift between the god-fearing and atheists propelled Gastonia into chaos.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the resulting opposition to the strike had already permeated the community by the time of the strike turned violent. In June of 1929, the murder of the Gaston police chief offered the community a catalyst for its widespread and long-lasting opposition to unionization. The community turned in on itself to exorcise the ghosts of communist aggression. In many ways, the coercion of churches into the power structure of hierarchy in Gaston made the trial of murder also a trial of religious conviction. As Earle, Knudsen, and Shriver articulate,

[Liston] Pope was attributing great power for social change and social stability to the ubiquitous reality of culture... God and good roads and

¹² Ibid., 36.

¹³ Ibid., 21-24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 58.

cotton mills and contended labor and legal justice were all closely connected in the culture of Gaston county.¹⁶

More specifically, Pope saw much of culture as perhaps more vague than we would like; however, he did provide us with a clear picture of how all of the community's turn on the unionists postulates how the ideology of industrialist power hierarchy had truly saturated the community. To uphold the status quo, as the trials showed, was to uphold the community. In the eyes of Gaston's elite, without this status quo, discord and recession would prevail, thus destroying society. Politics, economics, and religion are all at play.

The Development of Economic Theory and Its Integration into the Psychology of Society

To understand the locations of power and theoretical origin of the "Gospel of Prosperity" for Gaston and the US as a whole, a discussion of economic theory must be conducted. The foundation of neoclassical economics, about half of the theoretical structure on which the US economy rests, is tenuous at best. The basic assumptions of this theory were advanced by E. Roy Weintraub: people have rational preferences between outcomes that can be identified and associated with values, individuals maximize satisfaction and companies maximize profits, and finally, people make decisions based on objective facts that they understand perfectly.¹⁷ The first two are mostly reasonable and are generally accurate, but the assumption that facts are objective and that everyone has access to the same information is categorically untrue, especially in the pre-internet age. Even now, so much misinformation is available online that people without the skills to discern real news from fake news can be lead to believe just about anything, even in a president who is undoing the work of generations of diplomats. There is no world where perfect competition exists and where all information is equally and instantly accessible or even understood. In Gastonia, mill owners are under the impression that the factory workers of Pope and Earle, Knudsen and Shriver's eras were mostly content and that they have little to complain about. As for the mill workers themselves, unions proved to be the only way to bargain for better conditions and pay when they were being forced into indentured servitude by their employers.

Neoclassical economics is only a more modern version of classical economics,

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ E. Roy Weintraub., "Neoclassical Economics," *Library of Economics and Liberty*, 2002. Accessed July 30, 2018, <https://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/NeoclassicalEconomics.html>

and it uses many of classical economics' glaring misinterpretations of reality as the basis of its logic. Classical economics was a response to the "top-down, command-and-control government policies" of mercantilism popular in Europe up until the 17th century.¹⁸ Classical economics is wildly presumptive about the nature of human desire and needs. Adam Smith's 'the invisible hand of the market' claims to account for human self-interest and greed. "...in a free market economy, self-interested individuals operate through a system of mutual interdependence to promote the general benefit of society at large."¹⁹ Here, the pairing of wealth and power was not taken into account. Classical economics missed the opportunity to undo the top-down system that it responded by not identifying the entrenchments of power and ensuring that the entrenchments would not persist. It promoted the ideal of perfect competition in a world where monopolies and oligopolies already existed, ensuring that the status quo, established by the major European powers, would go unchallenged and the rich would only get richer.

The deeper challenge to neoclassical economics... is that there seems to be no rational foundation to this inequality; that people, therefore, do not act rationally, and that the outcome of the market can, therefore, be other than equilibrium.²⁰

This guaranteed equilibrium is the reason why hope is able to prevail in the economy, but Rieger points out that this hope relies on faith. This belief in the self-regulating powers of the free market rests squarely on the assumption of a transcendent factor. Faith in a regulating invisible hand, as it were, makes efforts to stage corrective interventions in the market appear like unfaithfulness or even blasphemy.²¹ If you cannot even question the reasoning that your hope exists without being ostracized, is that hope real? This is akin to Berger's concept of alienation and *anomy*. While they can occur at the same time, alienation on a mass scale is often an ideal source of *nomos*, helping to bind people together on a similar logic. The economy alienates its workers and elite using a false notion of individualism as well as a predefined sense of happiness produced by advertisements in the form of consumerism. Reiger recognized this alienation as "faith in the invisible hand."²²

¹⁸ Julie Young, "Classical Economics," *Investopedia*. Accessed July 30, 2018. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/classicaleconomics.asp>.

¹⁹ Christina Majaski, "Invisible Hand," *Investopedia*. Accessed July 25, 2018, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/i/invisiblehand.asp>

²⁰ Reiger, *No Rising Tide*, 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²² *Ibid.*

Gaston county is proof that this logic is untenable. The aim of corporations is to increase profits and decrease costs. "The Race to the Bottom" is inevitable in a situation like Gaston, and until the massive demand increases after the great depression and WWII occurred, the stretch-out system appeared to be necessary for profit growth. Believing in the economy is hard when your job just got twice as hard, twice as long, and you are earning less money. This is where the "Gospel of Prosperity" rescues workers from despair or fails to do so and events like the Loray Strike take place.

Gaston and the US will always be influenced by the president and other important figures who determine our economic policies. Reagan, with his "Reaganomics," and every president after has brought mainstream economic thought into the discourse on the future of our society. I will skip over the republicans in this era as they are obviously promoters of lower taxes for the rich and other policies that result from top-down logic. Clinton partially repealed the Glass-Steagall act which opened the floodgates for banks to double as investment banks. This allowed the money people had in a bank to be invested in any asset, including the infamous subprime mortgage-backed security that instigated the global recession of 2008.

Obama both affirmed and worked against the status quo of trickle-down economics, even once saying that \$20B in corporate bonuses during the great recession were "shameful." He was deemed a socialist by many for this remark.²³ Politics requires major concessions to satisfy one's constituents and donors; Obama appointed Timothy Geithner as Treasury Secretary who had no problem with the way the 'free' market was structured. Geithner sought to make the recovery after 2008 as painless for banks and big corporations as possible, not even daring to discuss alternatives to bailouts in fear of upsetting the market and the great concentration of power and wealth found there.²⁴ Counties like Gaston are hit hard in recessions. Lower demand due to people saving more is met by lower production. Lower production is met with fewer jobs. Fewer jobs result in less money to be spent on goods creating a positive feedback loop of financial instability. In the context of Gaston, Governor Cherry echoed many of the same sentiments that were promoted by millowners, specifically harmony and progress.²⁵ In understanding how harmony and progress were manufactured, Joerg Rieger's conception of market capitalism must be explored further.

²³ Ibid., 75.

²⁴ Ibid., 74-75.

²⁵ Earle, Knudsen and Shriver, *Spindles and Spires*, 67.

Rieger, Top-Down, and Christ

A top-down construction of power, wealth, and ideology had a stranglehold on the Gaston county of Liston Pope and Earle, Knudsen and Shriver's time. This construction is sustained by civil religion, specifically the use of the "Gospel of Prosperity." Joerg Rieger defines the Gospel of Prosperity as "[an] economic theology [which] promotes the idea that if your faith in God is strong enough, you will continue to move up the economic ladder of happiness and prosperity."²⁶ In his most succinct summation of the problem with this gospel, he states "[The Gospel of Prosperity] is problematic because it tends to construct an image of a god that radically differs from the image of the Christian God."²⁷ The "Gospel of Prosperity" will serve the double purpose of revealing the economic ideology of Gaston county and open up a discussion on top-down vs bottom-up. This gospel presents a top-down view of God and power, one that goes against almost everything in which Horsley's politicized Jesus practiced. A top-down approach begins at the peak of power and wealth. It analyzes how the system works for those who have benefited the most, and it attempts to make changes that would further benefit these people. The alternative, a bottom-up approach, starts with the most disenfranchised in a society and looks for ways to make the system work better for them. Jesus practiced a bottom-up approach.

Jesus worked with the people, against Rome and its vassals in order to free the Canaanites from their oppressors. He spread hope through his words and deeds, healing the diseased and preaching the infinite love of God. Jesus' ideal of servant leadership encapsulates a bottom-up approach, one that looks at the world through the eyes of the oppressed and challenges those in power.²⁸ his struggle against His Roman oppressors was a struggle against the top-down ruler cult and patronage system. In Rieger's words, "

If God is envisioned as being on top, those who are closer to the top are more like God than others. And since the question of what 'being on top' means is never explicitly discussed, 'being on top' is defined by default - yet very effectively - by the top echelons of society.²⁹

A top-down construction is how the rich want religion to be seen because it places the blessed, the wealthy in the case of Gaston county and the US, closer

²⁶ Joerg Rieger, *No Rising Tide*, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

to God; this is the opposite of how Jesus operated in ancient Galilee and Judea and opposite to how God is perceived in Gaston, at least in the minds of the mill owners.

Though it was not yet identified, Gaston's "Gospel of Prosperity" was there from the very start, and it was disseminated through the church and the mills' promotion of "civic consciousness." These competing institutions' attempt at creating social harmony was tied to the growth of the mills. In Pope's early "institutional growth" period, churches and mills were popping up in response to one another and supported each other's growth. At this time, the "Gospel of Prosperity" inspired hope through an escape from poverty provided by stable employment at a mill. In the next period, "social control," the doctrine of civic consciousness carried the "Gospel of Prosperity" in promoting harmony between workers and owners. Earle, Knudsen and Shriver state

Pope's account of the coming of great prosperity to the textile industry during World War I makes very clear what kind of harmony textile management had to prize if the two-class society of the nineteen twenties was to hold together: the harmony of low-wage textile workers and the increasingly rich textile owners.³⁰

Larger demand driven by WWI forced firms to increase their production capacity, so workforces increased. This is the first time the mill owners saw their profits truly sore; at the same time, factory workers' income only rose when their voices grew too loud to be ignored. A good life was promised to those who worked in the mills, and the possibility of promotion to a managerial position always left hope for an even better life; the stretch-out flew in the face of this hope. In the post Loray Strike "cultural defense" period, Gaston saw the continued promotion of civic consciousness to deter unionization and a deep mistrust of the godless Communists. Mill owners claimed that the threat of unionization was more powerful than actually forming a union.³¹ This is not unfounded, but workers have very little ability to collectively bargain for their fair share of profits unless they are a loud, unified voice. In the post WWII period, mills advertised themselves to G.I.'s with ads featuring young men standing next to sports cars claiming that a good middle-class life was achievable on a mill wages.³² Most G.I.'s were not convinced by this iteration of the "Gospel of Prosperity" but did not leave Gaston.

³⁰ Ibid., 21.

³¹ Ibid., 187.

³² Earle, Knudsen and Shriver, *Spindles and Spires*, 187.

To better understand how mill owners were able to control the society they had helped to build, power must be understood in the context of the economy. Power and money are interchangeable in that money legitimizes power and power legitimizes money. This dialectic legitimization makes the two virtually inseparable. "Those who hold the most power - whether CEOs or large investors - make sure that no one is in a position to challenge them."³³ In addition to ensuring that their power is secured, the wealthy Gastonians needed justification for why they were able to amass such great wealth. This is accomplished through a remarkably insidious and effective method, through the use of individualism. Individualism is "the myth of the privileged and the powerful, who tend to see themselves as independent and autonomous, and who need to convince themselves and others that their wealth and their success are self-made."³⁴ Thousands of statistics reveal how untrue self-made success is, but one stands out in particular: Children from low-income families have only a 1% chance of reaching the top 5 % of the income distribution, versus children of the rich who have about a 22% chance.³⁵ On top of this, one must consider the fact that no one who has ever made it to positions of power in our society have done it alone. Mill owners have employees that put in the hours to make their company function; likewise, investors on the stock market profit from the expected profits of the companies whose source of revenue is only possible due to the sweat of their workers. The myth of individualism distorts reality and makes the rich believe they did it all on their own when in reality they were propelled by the work of those beneath them.

Racism, sexism, Christian triumphalism, and elitism follow similar logic; all in an effort to promote the status quo and expand economic horizons for a portion of its citizens which is visible in Gastonia. An example of this is that Milton Friedman's endorsement of the 'shock doctrine,' according to which people need to experience trauma and terror in order to be converted to the free-market doctrine. The 'shock doctrine' was first applied in the support of the military takeover in Chile in 1973 which accomplished two things: the instillation of a military dictator who killed tens of thousands, and the opening of a new market.³⁶ In Gastonia, this 'shock doctrine' was the memory of the Loray Strike. Trauma, in the form of losing the town's highest-ranking police officer, helps to enforce the status quo of anti-Communist and anti-union sentiments. Occasionally, a unionized mill would go on strike if their negotiation failed, and in response, new

³³ Reiger, *No Rising Tide*, 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

employees were hired which meant the loss of the old worker's jobs. These points show how the US and its upper class extends its economic empire through any means necessary. This is due to their belief that 'the invisible hand of the market,' as "a quasi-theological concept which symbolizes the force that guarantees economic prosperity and success."³⁷ In these two cases, the invisible hand opens up new territories and secures old ones, leaving the bodies or livelihoods of the uncooperative to decompose.

Power

To find the avenues of power in Gaston, one must follow the avenues of money. Labor is the engine of an economy and without it, the rich would never see a penny from their companies or investments. This is what the wealthy do not want the rationale to be, as it would take power out of their hands. The current course of reason is the theory of trickle-down economics. Trickle down was coined by the Reagan administration referring the flow of money downward when taxes are reduced for the rich; a theory that only works in the long-run and can be entirely disrupted by other economic factors before the trickle has a chance to begin. Unfortunately, the working conditions of US laborers has been steadily trickling down for the last sixty years and Gastonia is no exception. "Cuts of increases in pay and wage, major intensification of workload, reneging in pension plans, reductions in health care, and increasing resistance to the organization of labor" are all persistent problems for our working classes.³⁸ Clearly an indirect class warfare was carried out through the exploitation of working people. This blind faith in an economic philosophy that has been proven to not actually work is a very real form of civil religion that manipulates our sacred canopy due to its production of desire and consumption based meaning. Gastonia saw a similar reduction in respect for workers in the 1920's with the stretch-out system. After a sharp rise in quality of work conditions over the next thirty years, the county has been forced into competition with foreign markets due to globalization. Globalization took away large numbers of mills in the 80's and 90's; even the Loray Mill, called the Firestone Mill after its buyout during the great depression, fell victim to lower wages overseas.

In the years just before *Spindles and Spires* was written, the relationship between ministers and managers had changed only partially when compared eighty years earlier. Managers still relied on ministers to help maintain community values, and ministers still relied on managers to provide work for their many of

³⁷ Ibid., 65.

³⁸ Ibid., 52.

their members. In the 60's there were two meetings between large numbers of managers and ministers, and Shriver's description of them conveys a sense that ministers were still seen as a tool the managers could use to keep their businesses running smoothly. In the first meeting, the managers and church leaders had a very warm and positive interaction. The managers said that churches made their employees more docile and employable while building character. One revivalist leader told the entire group, with enthusiasm, that he was close with the mill managers and "frequently reminded people in the mill villages to turn off their lights so as to save on the electric bills being paid by the mill."³⁹

In the second meeting, focused on the topic of ministerial involvement in unions and unionization, the tone turned bitter. Managers were appalled that any pastor would dare take sides in a union election or strike publicly, and that they should only be promoting the worker's right to vote. Shriver was pummeled with questions about his intention to visit a picket line that seemed to lack any understanding that working conditions in the mills could be less than perfect.⁴⁰ The power, authority and righteousness of the mill owners were challenged by Shriver with his support of the mill workers, and they railed back viciously in self defence. This points out the love-hate relationship of top-down power and religion that exists across the United States. When the rights of workers are defended, even religious leaders are scorned for their actions.

Gaston county and greater United States require a rethinking of the economic system and distribution of power in order to achieve adequate fairness for the working class. Put simply by Robert Bellah,

The Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution have never been fully implemented. Certainly, the words 'with liberty and justice for all' in the Pledge of Allegiance are not factually descriptive.⁴¹

Only a handful of viable solutions exist, most revolving around some form of major revolution, but how can we refocus the economy to provide for those who have the least?

Marilyn Power offers the basis for Feminist Economics; a new way of looking at the global economy that puts people first, with the term ...'Social provisioning'... [emphasizing] the analysis of economic activities as interdependent social

³⁹ Earle, Knudsen and Shriver, *Spindles and Spires*, 26.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁴¹ Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 151.

processes.⁴² For Power, there are several important facets of “social provisioning” but three are applicable to Gaston: caring and domestic labor, happiness and wellbeing as a central measure of economic success, and that the amount human agency reveals many of the power dynamics that exist within a society.⁴³ The garment industry, like the mills of the old Gaston, often argues that they consider all aspects of their laborers’ lives in order to pay them the proper amount, but when the garment industry is the best, and sometimes only, option for these people, the employers can pay them the lowest amount to keep them coming back. This lack of agency gives factory owners near absolute power over their employees; these factory owners are undoubtedly sinful in Reiger’s interpretation of the word. Gastonia was not terribly different during the stretch-out of the 1920’s, even though the workers earned higher wages than their modern counterparts. It seems as though the subjugation of workers has evolved over the last century, and nearly perfected in the third world where workers have almost no alternative sources of dependable employment. The future is bleak for these workers, but an economic scheme centered on social provisioning provides a possible substitute.

While the unstoppable march of time has claimed the lives of those who hold power, the systems that support the wealthy have constantly adapted to the ever changing social and economic situation. To undo the power and wealth concentrations that have reinforced themselves over the last five hundred years is nearly impossible. It will take a new approach, from the bottom up, to begin this process. There is no one answer, and due to the constraints of this project, only one good example of the right vein of logic could have presented. Social provisioning forwards the possibility that advertising, consumerism, and the rest of the foundations for an incessant increase in desire in the general population could be undone if we took the time to understand how to care for those who the rest of society has forgotten. It is where we place our priorities, in the profits of corporations and the mega rich, or in the survival and prospering of every citizen, that our supposedly secular American experiment can forge a new path to freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness for all. Gaston county is a microcosm of the United States, and it shows that our use of sanctified, top-down power structures does little more than secure the wealth of the already wealthy. When churches act in the interest of the powerful by preaching “The Gospel of Prosperity,” the working class is left behind in the pursuit of ever greater profits.

⁴² Marilyn Power, “Social Provisioning as a Starting Point for Feminist Economics,” *Feminist Economics* 10, no. 3 (2004): 3-19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

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