

Reflections on the Recent Course of Labor History

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I was among the first generation of New Labor Historians that in the mid-1960s decisively and self-consciously broke with the Old Labor History. In truth, by the time I entered graduate school in 1965, Commons-style labor history, the Old Labor History, was already on life-support. Commons himself had died 20 years earlier, and Selig Perlman, his most illustrious student, published his last book in 1950, roughly a decade before his own death. Perlman's students, who comprised the third generation, did not leave much of an academic imprint. (Their strength seems to have come in public service.) The field had thinned to a few scholars, and apart from David Brody's *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (which bridged the Old and the New), there were no fresh works to speak of.¹ The Commons School's focus on unions and strikes in a context friendly to capitalism sounded narrow and stodgy to a new generation of students, who to one degree or another had been influenced by the anti-establishment radicalism of the emerging New Left. Our thirst for something new and different—radical, if you will—coincided with two critical forces. One was our awareness of Edward Palmer Thompson, the apostate British communist, whose magisterial *The Making of the English Working Class* appeared in 1963. In it, Thompson poked a thumb in the eye of the reigning Marxist orthodoxy by audaciously declaring that class was not a “structure, nor even ... a category, but ... something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.” Further, he told us “class happens when some men as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests between themselves, as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.” Even more famously perhaps, Thompson declared, much to the horror of structuralist and economic Marxists, that there was a distinction between class formation and class consciousness, between structures and consciousness; he devoted the burden of his work to the latter, maintaining that “class-consciousness is the way in which these [class relationships] are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.”²

The second force was the arrival on the academic scene of two distinct pairings of labor historians: David Montgomery at the University of Pittsburgh and then Yale, along with Herbert Gutman at the University of Rochester and then the City University of New York; and Melvyn Dubofsky at U-Mass—Amherst, the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, and then the State University of New York Binghamton and David Brody at the University of California (Davis and Berkeley). It is fair to say that Dubofsky and Brody, though very much a part of the New Labor History, remained more attentive than Gutman to the conjuncture of unionism, management, and the state—in short the workings of formal institutional power.³ Indeed, it is not a little ironic that while Montgomery was closer to Thompson personally and politically, Gutman was closer to him theoretically; no senior historian of the era embraced Thompson's understanding of culture more enthusiastically or expansively than Gutman, who applied his insights to black slaves, immigrant laborers, and industrial workers more broadly. As he saw it, “working-class culture” derived from the preindustrial customs of first-generation immigrants; class conflict flared when such customs and traditions clashed with the imperatives of the industrial machine.⁴ Montgomery, in contrast, traced the sources of class consciousness and class conflict to the accumulation of experience on the shop floor and in particular the struggles of industrial workers to maintain or establish control over production.⁵ Despite their differences, such perspectives diverged sharply from the more accommodating scholarship of the Commons School. They were generally in accord with the rebellious spirit of the 1960s.

Gutman and Montgomery—together with isolated but sympathetic scholars at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton with the professionalism and decency to allow radical students to pursue their work—proceeded to train a whole new generation of students (Montgomery directed nearly 60 dissertations alone) who, in the course of two decades, turned out a massive body of work informed by deep research in local sources,

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statistical methods then fashionable in the social sciences, and concepts of culture borrowed from Thompson and anthropology. It typically focused on artisans or single trades in cities or towns—so-called community studies—and spun a heroic narrative of artisan-style resistance to capitalistic forms of work that reflected dissident outlooks variously called the equal rights tradition, labor republicanism, or simply radicalism.⁶ New Labor Historians cut their own style in a profession long known for sartorial proprieties and intellectual decorum, with their beards, long hair, and deliberately casual dress. Despite such outward defiance, their work did not go unrecognized by the academic establishment. The late Alan Dawley's, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (1976) and Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (1984) won major prizes from the mainstream professional organizations in spite of their obvious identity with worker struggles. Such an august imprimatur legitimized the genre.

The mid-1980s marked a watershed in the development of the New Labor History. Dissenters began to grumble that for all the thickly descriptive work, it was still not clear what to make it. What did it mean? Where was the synthesis? With those questions in mind, New Labor Historians gathered in 1984 at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb to take stock of their work. Those who came to celebrate the passing of the Old Labor History found themselves facing sharp and pointed criticism. Some charged that the New Labor History was too tightly focused on communities, that it bunched in the 19th century before the advent of mature industrialism, that it romanticized struggle and resistance and overlooked servile or compliant workers who adjusted to the industrial regime. It distorted the picture of class relations by privileging “moments” of crisis, said Melvyn Dubofsky, who noted that for all its faults the Old Labor History never lost sight of class relations or political power. Others added that the robust radicalism that informed such work did not quite square with the fact that the working class was organized fitfully and weakly. In his summation, Eric Hobsbawm made no friends among the feminists when in response to their questions about the place of gender in the new history, he dryly responded that he was unsure if “there was a very clear idea of what is meant by this.”⁷ Provoked by Hobsbawm and the larger failings of the genre, women's historian Alice Kessler-Harris got to the heart of matter in a reflection published in the aftermath of the conference. “The search for worker's resistance,” or what other skeptics alternately derided as the “tyranny of culturalism” and “faddish culturalism,” had “replaced the history of structures,” a searing point I shall return to in a moment.⁸ Small wonder the DeKalb meeting came to be known as “The Death of Labor History Conference.”

Just when culturalism seemed to be on the ropes, it roared back on the strength of two separate bodies of work on race and gender. The first was launched by David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991). In it, Roediger castigated New Labor Historians for overlooking the pervasive force of race, a matter that had come up at DeKalb if not as persistently as gender. Invoking W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of a racialized “psychological wage,” he argued that white workers compensated for the social subordination imposed upon them in the early stages of industrialism by projecting their anxieties on to blacks and by identifying not as workers but as *white workers* and, more broadly, with “whiteness.” White supremacy, in his reckoning, was the handmaiden of working-class radicalism. No single book since Thompson's had a greater impact on the writing of labor history, or indeed American history generally. After all, if many graduate students pored through Thompson's book as if it were scripture—some committed its signal passages to memory—very few, if any, undergraduates waded through the weighty 850-page tome. But of tens thousands of undergraduates *did* read Roediger's *Wages*, and scores of academics embraced it as their own, launching interdisciplinary “whiteness studies programs” and freely applying Roediger's template to every imaginable group of workers, from the already benighted Irish to Jews (formerly associated with early socialism) and various groups of East European immigrants. In the hands of whiteness scholars, the heretofore heroic industrial workers who were once celebrated as the mainstays of the vaunted New Deal Order in the 1930s were transformed into racists.⁹

The other came in the form of labor feminism. Gutman student Alice Kessler-Harris had pointed the way at the DeKalb conference, where she observed that the culturalist strain of the New Labor History had left women out and failed to theorize gender. There followed an outpouring of work on women and gender that nearly rivaled the prodigious output on working-class racism. Much of it brought women in with myriad specialized studies of specific groups of women at work, clericals, and domestics, along with fresh studies of garment and textile workers struggling to carve out autonomy and overcome male domination. Another strain sought a deeper rendering that opened the way to the elusive synthesis that had eluded culturalism. It was

accompanied by a debate over what came first, class or gender? Structuralists such as Bryan Palmer echoed Hobsbawm in maintaining that “class *is*, in the first instance and at its most basic, an objective, structurally determined relationship to the means of production.... Status differences and self-identification, however contradictory, are nevertheless irrelevant in this generalized class system, determined first and foremost by the homogenizing tendency ... of modern industry.”¹⁰ In contrast, a good number of scholars looked to infuse class formation with new relevance through the integration of patriarchy. How to do it? As Leon Fink has ably demonstrated, feminists proposed two separate sites of class formation and class relations: the productive system of capitalism *and* the sex-gender system of patriarchy, which in turn opened a kind of dualistic analysis focused on the workplace as against the family and community. The result was a new body of work since the turn of the 1980s on women and immigrants that went off in several directions, one of which sought to square working-class family economies with class consciousness that carried demands for what James Barrett calls the “American standard of living.”¹¹

This new focus on the community as the site of identity and struggle simultaneously informed scholarship on race that moved beyond the psychologizing and linguistic analysis of whiteness studies. No work exemplifies this new trend better than Thomas Sugrue’s *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (1996) and Becky Nicolaides’ *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (2002). Although automobile workers feature prominently in both works, the narratives draw attention to homes and neighborhoods, not factories, as the main source of working-class consciousness allied with racial intolerance and social segregation. Both works also move from the community into the political arena to demonstrate that white supremacy was a not simply a linguistic phenomenon; it was a source of ideology and power—in this instance, the potent force of right-wing populism that policed the racial boundaries of white neighborhoods and fueled worker resistance to taxation as well as school integration. This expression of populism also propelled unionized and nonunionized workers into the Goldwater campaign, which proved to be a way station on route to the New Right.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the culturalism of the New Labor History had a limited compass. It never quite impressed David Brody and Melvyn Dubofsky, who, like Old Labor Historians, remained fixed on the workplace and the political arena. Indeed, Brody’s initial book, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (1960), which some think launched the New Labor History, had covered such ground, with arresting insights into social relations between skilled native-born workers and unskilled East European immigrants and their relations with management. His influential *Workers in Industrial America*, published 20 years later, brought industrial relations in mainstream industries to the fore, with luminous essays on welfare capitalism and post-war industrial relations. Montgomery covered similar terrain in *Workers’ Control in America* (1979), followed by his 1987 masterwork, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, but from an implicit Marxist or workerist perspective. Montgomery’s graduate students, as seen in the 1983 *festschrift*, produced an eclectic body of work, seemingly too diffuse to encapsulate here but generally attentive to the conjuncture of worker struggle and politics.¹² Brody’s most productive students or those influenced by him likewise eschewed culturalism for the workplace, and thus unionism, labor–management relations, and labor politics, from a liberal or Marxist point of view. Sanford Jacoby (who took coursework with Brody but was not formally one of his students) made us aware of personnel policies in nonunion firms that paralleled the shop floor regime of unionized industries.¹³ Nelson Lichtenstein, who was a Brody student, breathed Marxism into his studies of the rise and domestication of autoworker unionism.¹⁴

The most recent work in the field reflects the influence of resurgent conservatism, both on the ground and in corporate boardrooms. Indeed, the force of the Right has been pervasive, if my own classroom experience is any guide. My class on U.S. labor, which grew from a handful of students in the early 1970s to over 120 by the end of the decade, dropped precipitously in the Reagan years. I continued to offer it but to smaller numbers of undergraduates who for reasons of sentiment or conviction continued to care about working people. Conservative students avoided it but understandably showed up when years later I began to offer courses on the rise of the Right. They proved to me more than curious. They were principled conservatives schooled in right-wing student groups and leadership seminars sponsored by conservative adjuncts. Where the most active and alert students used to cite Marx and Mills, this new crop knowledgeably refers to Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, and other modern-day conservative icons.

The daunting power of the Right, in conjunction with the demise of private-sector unionism and the acceleration of globalism in the 1990s, has given rise to what some call the New and Improved Labor History. One of its tendencies shifts ground from the agency of labor to the agency of capital. Perhaps the most distinguished work in this new spirit is Nelson Lichtenstein's *State of the Union* (2002), which includes a withering critique of accord thesis. He demonstrates that the corporate sector did not make peace with industrial unionism or the larger social democratic project of the New Deal, a point also forcefully pursued by his student Elizabeth Tandy Shermer in her eye-opening studies of the origin of right-to-work laws in the South and West.¹⁵ Likewise, in *Capital Moves* (1999), Jefferson Cowie shows that within a few years of signing its first contract with UE in 1936, RCA moved "all products that allowed for high-volume and low-cost mass production away from (its corporate complex in Camden) on the banks of the Delaware"—the first steps in a more sweeping strategy of union avoidance.¹⁶ Jennifer Klein's sobering *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public-Private Welfare State* (2003) shows how a united front of capital extended the battlefield in a successful drive during the 1930s and into the 1940s to fend off the threat of government-sponsored health care.

To get to the larger question of the fit among our disciplines, I'd say that the most recent labor history has broken free of the free-floating culturalism of the Early New Labor History and the narrow institutionalism of the Old Labor History. It has learned from students of industrial relations to take personnel policies more seriously, and it has borrowed selectively—I would say judiciously—from Marxist economists. It is more attentive than ever to class formation, the process of capital accumulation, and the exercise of class power at work and in politics that lie at the core of Marxism. On the other hand, the New and Improved Labor History has drawn back from materialism or from consistently applying the insights of Marxism to the formation of *consciousness*. In *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (2006), Nancy MacLean brilliantly captures conservatism's *ideological* reaction to feminism and affirmative action. It is of a piece with Kim Phillips-Fein's richly textured *Visible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (2009) on the marriage between free-market *ideology* and the panoply of business organizations that consistently pushed back against the New Deal Order, and with Bethany Moreton's remarkable treatment of Wal-Mart's vision of Christian capitalism, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (2009). Such work strongly suggests that Marxism is not enough to explain the persistence of racism or sexism or the resurgence of libertarianism and populism of the Right that continue to thwart social democratic politics.

As I see it, the rise of the Right helped thrust the field beyond the seeming dead end of the working-class culturalism that informed the New Labor History. The field is in a much better intellectual place today, even as we puzzle over how to make a better world for the people we study.

Endnotes

¹ See, for instance, David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New," *Labor History*, 20 (winter 1979):511–26, and Brody, "Reconciling the Old Labor History and the New," *Pacific Historical Review*, 62 (Feb. 1993):1–18.

² E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), pp. 9–10.

³ See, for instance, Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1969) and *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1994). Also David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).

⁴ Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

⁵ David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Essays in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979).

⁶ For early critiques of this corpus, see Dubofsky, "The 'New' Labor History: Achievements and Failures," *Reviews in American History*, 5 (June 1977):249–54. Tony Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop Journal*, 7 (1966):66–96, applies to the New Labor History as well as the New Social History.

⁷ Quoted in Alice Kessler-Harris, “A New Agenda for American Labor History: A Gendered Analysis of the Question of Class,” in Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana: Univ. Illinois Press, 2007), p. 137.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁹ As in Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), and Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Quoted in Leon Fink, *In Search of the Working Class: Essays in American Labor History and Political Culture* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 239.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 236–48.

¹² Eric Arnesen, Julie Green, and Bruce Laurie, *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working Class Experience* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1998).

¹³ Sanford Jacoby, *Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism since the New Deal* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997) and *The Embedded Corporation: Corporate Governance in Japan and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982) and *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther and the Fate of American Labor* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

¹⁵ See Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Counter-Organizing in the Sunbelt: Right-to-Work Campaigns and Anti-Union Conservatism, 1943–1958,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 78 (Feb. 2009):81–118, and “Origins of the Conservative Ascendancy: Barry’s Goldwater’s Early Senate Career and the De-legitimization of Organized Labor,” *Journal of American History*, 95 (Dec., 2008):678–709.

¹⁶ Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s 70-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), p. 33.