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American Labor History

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American Labor History

Abstract

To account for the persistent struggles of a working people that only episodically (and even then with but a small minority) sought to transform democratic capitalism, and to do so without exaggerating the reality of employer or governmental opposition, will not produce an heroic synthesis of this country's history, to be sure. But it could abet an even more serious appreciation of the highly complex social and political lives Americas working men and women.

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“To account for the persistent struggles of a working people that only episodically (and even then with but a small minority) sought to transform democratic capitalism, and to do so without exaggerating the reality of employer or governmental opposition, will not produce an heroic synthesis of this country’s history, to be sure. But it could abet an even more serious appreciation of the highly complex social and political lives of America’s working men and women.”



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Nick Salvatore

AMERICAN LABOR HISTORY

AMONG HISTORIANS OF AMERICAN LIFE, THE STUDY OF American working men and women has undergone an enormous change in the past half century. Once unquestioned truths are now barely remembered, and formerly basic methodological approaches are now little used. Simultaneously, the contemporary world of trade unionism entered a new phase, as the sure expectation of continued social influence gave way before a far more ambiguous reality. These transformations have forced new conceptions on both scholar and activist alike, which sharply altered the often tempestuous relationship between the two. This, in turn, partially explains aspects of the evolution of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

In 1945, when the school opened, both labor historians and the organized labor movement with which many of the academics identified so closely shared an expansive, optimistic vision of their intertwined futures. An institutional emphasis dominated the analyses of the historians, one that focused on the manner in which working people, organized into their respective unions, sought to improve their lives and leave their mark on American society. For its part the labor move-

ment, while often suspicious of what the professors might say or do, nonetheless generally applauded this emphasis. Self-confident of their place in American life despite the imminent problems of the postwar conversion, union leaders expected that the exhilarating growth of the past decade simply would continue its upward spiral.

In this process the professors at the school thought they had a specific, important part to play. As the school's charter from the New York State Legislature made clear, one of its tasks was to utilize scholarship so as to minimize the recurrence of the tensions of the 1930s: intelligent, informed, and disinterested third-party intervention, by historians studying the past and by economists and industrial relations specialists in the present, would plane any remaining rough edges. As the founding faculty and the returning veterans, who comprised so many in that first class, settled into their studies, they perhaps forgave those campus wags who in that era of gathering Cold War furies dubbed the school "Red Moscow." The expectation of social progress was again in the air; scholarship would be its handmaiden; and the benefits to society and to the school would soon quiet the local naysayers.

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The guiding scholarly vision of American labor at that moment focused on an institutional analysis most closely associated with the work of John R. Commons of the University of Wisconsin. Trained in economics and sociology under the tutelage of Richard Ely at Johns Hopkins University in the early 1890s, Commons and his students established the field of labor history as a subset of the broader study of American economic life. Central to this approach was the belief that fundamental questions concerning the society's economic structure had already been answered. In his 1909 essay "The American Shoemakers, 1648–1895," Commons argued that production for ever-expanding markets drove the transformation of work in American society, undermined artisan work relations, and fostered the emergence of industrial manufacturing. Commons made clear that this growth of markets was inevitable, as it was a central foundation of a dominant and productive democratic capitalist economy.

Developed conceptually in the essay, this insight informed the multivolume history of American labor Commons published with his students in later years. Although in that more ample work Commons paid greater attention to the activities and intentions of unorganized workers, he focused primarily on trade unionists, their leaders, and their organizations. Writing of an era when the unions never represented more than 10 percent of the nonagricultural workforce, Commons inevitably underemphasized the great majority of workers who remained outside the organized labor movement. This was especially true of his treatment of African-Americans, women, and immigrants from eastern and southern Europe. What encouraged Commons in this approach—however limited it may seem at present—was the belief that, in stressing the institutional role of the union in a society committed to a belief in progress, he answered the central question posed by radicals and reformers alike since the Civil War: was there a more viable economic system for a democratic society than industrial capitalism? Many labor activists had pressed against the edges of industrial capitalism in search of either more elastic boundaries or a completely revolutionized terrain. Commons cautioned that the playing field was a given in capitalist, democratic

America, and directed attention instead on how trade union institutions could influence the evolution of a political and economic system already well established.

Commons connected his scholarly work with the practitioner's world, and in this fashion was not so distant a forerunner of the ILR School. Directly engaged in reforming municipal practices in Milwaukee and elsewhere, in nurturing an atmosphere conducive to collective bargaining and industrial relations through the National Civic Federation, and in sparking legislative reform through his frequent congressional testimony, Commons affirmed both his progressive political agenda and a very specific understanding of his scholarly work. Generally optimistic, and buoyed by a wave of Progressive reform throughout American life, Commons committed his scholarship to explicit social goals. Rather than a professed scholarly disinterestedness, Commons gloried in the presumed intimate connection between past deeds and present efforts. Believing as he did in the political importance of the trade union for contemporary industrial democracy, it was not accidental that he emphasized that same institution in his history.

Commons's efforts in both the library and the legislative hall provided a detailed American response to the famous question framed by the German scholar Werner Sombart in the title of his 1906 work, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* Ultimately, Sombart wrote, the socialist imperative floundered in America on the reefs of "roast beef and apple pie"; that is, on the relatively high standard of living and the widespread, if uneven, opportunity for economic advancement. The meaning of these conditions for American working people (a theme emphasized by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* in 1835) was brilliantly developed by Commons's most famous student, Selig Perlman, in *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928).

Where European movements possessed a developed revolutionary rhetoric and, at times, the experience to match, American workers, Perlman wrote, generally shunned such ideas in favor of a more direct job consciousness. Attention here was not on transforming society, or even on constructing a broad and inclusive movement conscious of the general social needs of working people. Rather, as Perlman formu-

lated the idea, American workers were most attentive to, and actively engaged in constructing, the conditions that framed their daily work lives. Sharp, intense antagonism toward employers could and did occur within this arena, and a fierce solidarity among these workers was frequently evident. But Perlman insisted that these feelings both had a short half-life (as they were focused on specific, pragmatic issues) and were bound within tight, definable limits even when most intense. As one expanded in concentric circles from the immediate shop floor, to other departments within the plant, to other plants within the industry, or to other industries altogether, the level of worker solidarity and group consciousness plummeted. Class consciousness, following Marx, Lenin, or other political theorists, was in America a luxury of the intellectuals, this immigrant intellectual and former socialist proclaimed. In this Perlman followed Samuel Gompers, the first leader of the American Federation of Labor and arguably the single most important trade union leader in American history. In a famous formulation, Gompers sharply distinguished between class consciousness, which he dismissed as the fantasy of the intellectuals, and class feeling, "that primitive force that had its origins in experience only."

What Commons and his students had wrought in but a few decades was truly impressive. They had largely created the field of labor history, rooted it in the broader field of institutional labor economics, and established intellectual standards for and acceptance of the study of American working people in the university. Yet this impressive edifice already contained fissures within it that would transform the field substantially.

The first concerned the growing distance between labor history and its parent discipline. As the field of labor economics developed after World War II, it increasingly lost interest in historically informed institutional studies and emphasized instead a quantitative micro-analysis of all human economic activity. Labor history, with its concern with social issues and historical context, simply had little place in the emerging order. Nor, as the historian David Brody has written, did the field of industrial relations prove any more hospitable. Although at first the marriage between industrial relations and labor history

seemed fruitful, by the mid-1950s those hopes were largely dashed. The same forces that transformed the study of economics overwhelmed industrial relations as well, and its intellectual practitioners across the nation were less hostile to historical studies than oblivious to their possible relevance for their own work. So pervasive was this trend that George W. Brooks, a member of the ILR School's faculty for more than three decades, could sadly note in 1961, "[A]s nearly as I am able to discern, the relevance of labor history to industrial relations is negligible or nonexistent."

The second fissure in the structure Commons erected reflected the narrowness of labor history as a discipline. Even as Commons wrote, other scholar-activists, including Frank Tannenbaum, James O'Neal, and Scott Nearing, sharply questioned the commitment to a capitalist, democratic ethos. Simultaneously a rich scholarship emerged from writers who concentrated on those the Commons paradigm downplayed. In the important work of W. E. B. DuBois, Abram Harris, Sterling Spero, Lorenzo J. Greene, Alice Henry, Carter G. Woodson, and Louis Levine, the experiences of women, immigrants, and African-American workers received attention. Historians Norman Ware and Chester Destler paid particular attention to labor dissidents who tested organized labor's ideological parameters. Although the methodology utilized by these scholars often retained Commons's institutional focus, others raised quite different issues. The work of Margaret Bynington, Isaac A. Hourwich, and William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki stressed instead family structure, religious commitment, and the meaning of ethnic identities for these immigrant working class men and women.

In the 1930s and 1940s, a new generation of politically engaged scholars continued some of these themes. Influenced by the pain of the depression decade, the upsurge of the labor movement, and a revitalized and seemingly ascendant Marxism, they continued the effort to construct an alternative analysis. Most prominent and prolific among these was Philip Foner, who in 1947 published the first book of his own multivolume history of American labor.

Although Foner's politics differed greatly from Commons's, his methodology reflected the prevailing assumptions. Foner highlighted

radical workers, often without due consideration of their context, yet his basic approach reflected similar institutional sources that had informed Commons's volumes as well. Foner's strained analysis and questionable research did little to dislodge the Wisconsin school, as the Commons legacy had come to be known. But, as organized labor reached 35 percent of the work force in 1955 (the high point of labor's strength for the whole of the twentieth century), the search for an alternative to Commons continued. In part this reflected a need to ground labor history in a new disciplinary home. All but excluded by both labor economics and industrial relations, and with institutional economists a dying breed who reaped few rewards from their professional colleagues, a younger generation of scholars interested in labor issues turned to the discipline of history for their training and intellectual methodology.

The examples these new scholars had before them during the 1950s were dramatically different from the work of Commons and his followers. Where the plodding accumulation of fact upon fact marked the style and the interpretative structure of Commons and many of his critics, these historians of labor read instead the compelling interpretative essays of Richard Hofstadter and Louis Hartz and the path-breaking research of historians C. Vann Woodward, Oscar Handlin, Merle Curti, and Kenneth Stampp, to name but a few. In this fashion the study of working people became anchored in the discipline of history, an analytical narrative of people and events that existed in another time, when the outcome was far from clear. Historians recognized a legacy from the past in human affairs that influenced the present and yet changed, if slowly, over time in response to new circumstances. To capture these complex ambiguities required intellectual rigor as well as a supple and sensitive analysis, and an empathy for one's historical subjects that undermined neither. Although not immediately clear, this turn from economics to history actually prepared the way for a broader social and cultural study of working people.

But for all the excitement of the new approach, these social historians who studied labor had sharp differences with reigning historical wisdom. The writing of American history was too celebratory, many

felt, too wedded to a consensus approach that all but eliminated conflict from the American past. Many in this generation of scholars had been politically formed in the politics of dissent in the American communist and socialist movements, and their critique of consensus echoed their criticisms of the limitations of the Wisconsin school. Political events had their impact as well, and Nikita Khrushchev's speech to the Twentieth Communist Party Congress in 1956, where he stripped Josef Stalin of his sacred aura, spurred the development of a new political critique of both capitalism and orthodox Marxism. Out of this heady mix over the next decade came a new politics of dissent and a new turn in the writing of labor history.

In Herbert Gutman's early essays, especially those dealing with miners and railroad workers in the 1870s, one aspect of this new approach took form. Gutman examined workers engaged in a struggle with employers but who lacked the institutional structure of a national union to aid them. Looking for the sources of solidarity and cohesion that allowed these men to maintain their strikes (even though they eventually lost), Gutman explored the importance of noneconomic social and cultural ties in bolstering worker protest. At the same time, in quite a different fashion, David Brody infused the moribund institutionalist framework with a nuanced historical perspective. In his 1960 book *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era*, Brody remained appreciative of the institutional forces in business, labor, and politics that established the context of these workers' lives; yet he gave serious attention to the workers themselves in exploring how their ethnic identities and varied work experiences influenced their attitudes.

But a few years following the publication of Brody's first book, a British scholar made a dramatic impact upon American labor historiography. In 1963 E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* burst upon American scholarship with its promise of a vital neo-Marxist analysis of work and workers in capitalist society. Thompson argued that class consciousness did not derive automatically from one's economic status, as Marxist orthodoxy had long held, but rather it emerged when workers "feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men." This

approach, which Samuel Gompers would have applauded (if from a different political perspective), acknowledged the structural economic roots of class awareness but also emphasized the social and cultural influences that encouraged workers to acknowledge (or not) that condition. But perhaps Thompson's greatest effect upon Americans lay in his affirmation that working people themselves historically possessed the ability to influence the transition to industrial capitalism. With these ideas Thompson provided cohesion for American scholars restive with the Commons legacy, canonical Marxism, and a celebratory consensus alike.

The Making of the English Working Class confirmed the broad direction that historians such as Melvyn Dubofsky, David Montgomery, Gutman, and Brody had already taken. But Thompson's greatest effect would be on the generation of labor historians who came of professional age in the late 1960s and 1970s. Influenced not only by Thompson but by the tumultuous political events of the '60s, these men and women turned to the study of the past as a continuation of their contemporary politics. Scouring the archives and old newspapers, they announced the presence not only of sustained class consciousness but of a systematic repression of it by employers and the state. Ironically if often unwittingly following John R. Commons's Progressive impulse that wedded scholarship to quite palpable political goals, these historians created the "New Labor History" in their intellectual pursuit of the making of the American working class.

The joint influences of Thompson's work and the politics of the era had at least one pervasive common effect. The concept of worker agency, of the ability of working people individually and in groups to direct aspects of their own lives, became the mother lode of the new history. As Herbert Gutman expressed it, after Jean-Paul Sartre, the guiding principle for the New Labor History must be "not what 'one' has done to man, but what man does with what 'one' has done to him." But beyond that much was in debate. Some understood Thompson's contribution, especially in its cultural reading of working people's understanding of class, as a call for a more nuanced treatment of the power relationships traditionally thought central to class conscious-

ness. In this reading American workers engaged employers from a self-conscious understanding of their class position, and the clearest evidence for this could be found by studying the antagonistic relations held to dominate the shop floor. In the mutualistic, anti-individualistic ethos that, they claimed, produced a distinctive working class ordering of work, these historians found both class consciousness and the social and cultural network that supported that vision. But cultural perceptions also undermined the ability to act on a common class attitude, as ethnic, racial, and gender tensions fragmented working people. Indeed, in the early work of Alan Dawley, democracy itself was thought a hindrance to the expression of class held to emanate from the work experience, as the tradition of equal rights prepared workers poorly for sustained economic conflict with ever-stronger and more centralized employers. At root this tendency, most closely identified with David Montgomery and his students, held that the workplace remained the key area to uncover the making of the American working class.

A second tendency paid less attention to the shop floor and more to the social and cultural networks that crisscrossed working class life. Although not inattentive to the power relations held to dominate work (if at times charged with this by enthusiasts of the shop floor), these historians reacted to Thompson with renewed interest in the meaning of culture for working people. Gutman, for example, followed his early essays a decade later with, perhaps, his most influential essay. In "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America" (1973), he sought to explain the nature of working class consciousness in nineteenth-century America with reference to the dialectical relationship between a social structure that itself changed dramatically and the successive waves of preindustrial (and, he thought, precapitalist as well) peoples migrating to the nation's industrial centers. The cultural perceptions held, sequentially, by immigrants from rural America in the 1830s, from rural Ireland in the 1840s and 1850s, and from southern and eastern Europe at the turn of the century, and the manner in which they accommodated or antagonized the evolving industrial institutions of the host society, to a

large extent structured the experience of these working people. While Gutman found many points of resistance to capitalism, he rooted them in a cultural analysis that revealed an accommodation over time. That Irish policemen in New York City, themselves the metaphorical grandchildren of immigrant Irish women who in 1837 destroyed stores of flour to protest immorally high prices, would arrest Jewish immigrant women in 1902 as these women engaged in their own moral protest against the high price charged by kosher meat dealers, was ironic, if not sad, Gutman inferred.

Others writing in this vein offered different approaches. Elliot Gorn's perceptive study of boxing and male working class culture; Christine Stansell's examination of antebellum working class women in New York; Sean Wilentz's innovative study of artisan parades; or Kathy Peiss's analysis of working class women's popular entertainments—all sought in their fashion to explore the existence of a distinct class experience apart from the shop floor. Roy Rosenzweig, in his 1983 study of Worcester, Massachusetts, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, addressed this point most explicitly. In a study of working class leisure in an industrial town hostile to trade unions, he examined the belief systems of working people as expressed in cultural struggles over regulation of public parks and saloons. To discover a class awareness in these cultural arenas—if not on the shop floor or in political activity—might diminish the sting of earlier commentators who stressed the irrelevance of class for understanding the American past.

Most recently a third tendency has emerged, or perhaps more accurately, reemerged, in the scholarship of American labor. Dubbed “neo-institutionalists” or “historical institutionalists,” these writers seek to maintain the central insights of the Commons legacy (especially its recognition of the pervasive influence of entrenched economic and political institutions) while adopting aspects of the new approaches. In books, articles, and essays over the past thirty years, David Brody has continually underscored this possibility; and others in a slightly older professional generation, such as Lloyd Ulman and Irving Bernstein, have as well. To some extent at least their exhortations reached this

younger generation. In Sanford M. Jacoby's historical studies of corporate institutions and their workers, Michael Kazin's analysis of the San Francisco labor movement, Victoria Hattam's investigation of nineteenth-century legal structures and workers' political culture, and in Walter Licht's examination of workers in an emerging railroad bureaucracy, a revived and expanded institutional analysis has produced some exciting results. While Kazin and Licht are historians, Jacoby's training is in economics and Hattam is a political scientist, a point that reflects a welcome interdisciplinary focus.

This rediscovery of institutions has also redirected attention to the legal context in which labor operates. Commons and his students criticized the unfair implementation of the law by employers and jurists alike. Commons questioned the use of conspiracy doctrine and strike injunctions against labor, and he rejected the harshly narrow, individualistic emphasis that would treat the individual worker as an equal with the corporation in legal disputes. Like the good Progressive reformer that he was, however, Commons saw in the emergence of legal realism a welcome critique of such formalistic reasoning. By insisting that judges consider evidence of social conditions as well as legal tradition in reaching a decision (an approach that helped to create career paths for activist scholars and lawyers for generations to come), legal realism reinvigorated Commons's basic belief in the ability of this capitalist legal system to address labor's needs. His early efforts to shift the responsibility for industrial accidents from the individual worker to the company, and his persistent support for unemployment compensation and other forms of industrial regulation, combined with the activities of other reformers to transform the American legal landscape.

In the last full decade of his life, Commons's work and confidence were rewarded when Congress enacted first the Norris-LaGuardia Act (1932), which sharply limited the judicial use of labor injunctions, and then, in 1935, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which recognized the right of working people to organize themselves collectively if they desired. These laws, within the context of the broad swath of New Deal legislation, transformed the starkly individualistic ethos of earlier legal analysis of industrial life. In the process Commons and

his colleagues reaffirmed their basic faith in the potential of American institutions.

Recently, however, a new generation of legal scholars has questioned this faith. William Forbath, in a study of late nineteenth-century labor law, stressed the antilabor animus of that “judge-made” law. Forbath did not examine the social and cultural context of these legal decisions, nor explore in detail legal reforms that would follow; but others, also writing in a critical manner, did. James Attleson, for example, argued that the very passage of the NLRA betrayed the collective rights of working people, as neither the legislative act nor its administrative implementation honored the collective consciousness Attleson asserted as the core of working people’s lives. In a more sophisticated work, Christopher Tomlins examined the intimate relationship between organized labor and the state. While legislation such as the NLRA provided a certain approval for labor, it was, Tomlins wrote, a highly conditional legitimacy that was bestowed. The state’s primary interest was its own security, and this demanded that labor embrace the goal of industrial stability in exchange for the right to organize collectively. The resulting constrictions on labor’s activity, circumscribed by decisions of the National Labor Relations Board and by the courts, produced a “counterfeit liberty,” Tomlins argued—the only type attainable by a labor movement dependent upon the state.

Finally, in a widely read article analyzing the post-1945 structure of American labor law, Katherine Van Wezel Stone argued that the very process of collective bargaining was itself flawed. In an interpretation sharply different from that of Tomlins, Stone wrote that the assumption that labor and management were “equal parties who jointly determine the conditions of the sale of labor”—a model she called industrial pluralism—distorted actual workplace reality. Rather it reflected the ideology of the framers of that model, those postwar liberal legal theorists, economists, judges, and arbitrators who constructed the postwar structure of labor law. While they legitimized collective bargaining rights, Stone thought that this model actually undermined workers’ rights by demanding privatized, narrowly economic parameters for bargaining that prevented workers from

appealing either to the state or to the broad arena of national politics for support. To ignore and explain away class conflict, all four of these scholars assert in their divergent ways, has been the aim of all parties in American industrial relations except, perhaps, for the workers themselves.

Prevailing notions of America’s working people have changed over the past half century. The at times flat celebratory tone, associated both with aspects of the Commons tradition and the consensus historians of the immediate post-World War II decades, has been largely displaced, and the widespread conflict evident on long-forgotten shop floors and in famous national strikes has rightly assumed greater importance. Similarly, assumptions about the unrelieved uniformity of American culture have been largely shaken as studies of ethnicity and immigration, influenced by new work in anthropology and sociology as well as in history, underscored the inadequacy embedded in such concepts as the uprooted immigrants or the homogeneity of America’s melting pot. In the new writing work itself has received sustained attention, its actual processes as well as the manner in which workers adapted to it, and the new labor history has been quite receptive to sociologists of work and historians of science and technology in expanding this focus. Finally, the new labor history has irrevocably broadened its field of vision. Unorganized workers, racial and ethnic minorities, women workers—these groups were largely bypassed in the Commons tradition. That narrow approach is inconceivable now for any labor historian.

Yet central questions remain. As the claims for the presence of class and conflict throughout the American past grew, so too did demands for a new synthesis of all of American history based on these insights. Echoing nineteenth-century producerist thought, late twentieth-century labor historians insisted that in the words, deeds, and cultural expressions of working people resided the essential value structure against which to evaluate the American past. The concept of class, even if the historical subjects were frequently unaware of its influence, was offered as the fundamental American dilemma.

But the value of this concept as a core organizing principle remains dubious. As employed in much of the new work, class analysis has been unable to satisfactorily account for key aspects of working class life. First, of course, is the question of race. Until very recently the majority of labor historians downplayed this issue and implicitly assumed that racial tension among workers was itself a secondary characteristic of the primary economic struggle with employers. But as the work of Gwendolyn Mink, James Grossman, Earl Lewis, Alexander Saxton, William Harris, and others suggests, race has been a central fault line in the American experience that cuts across all class divides.

Equally problematic in recent discussions of class is the very notion of class itself. In the hands of some historians it becomes so liquid a cultural concept that no structure yet constructed is impermeable enough to contain it. An historical narrative driven by a class analysis surgically separated from the experience of work itself begs too many questions to be intellectually viable. On the other hand, historians who would assert a workplace-rooted class consciousness have not been able to ground that argument in sustained historical evidence. David Montgomery, for example, in *The Fall of the House of Labor*, must emphasize the activities of a “militant minority” to make this point. In the process, by largely obscuring the majority of skilled and unskilled workers, he unwittingly reproduces the narrowness of the very Commons legacy he would replace. Missing from this approach is any appreciation of interclass influences, of the union itself as a mode of social mobility for some working people, and of the complex institutional exchanges that did occur between workers and employers. As Elizabeth Cohen has pointed out, many workers in the 1930s developed their own concept of rights (a concept that proved important in building the Congress of Industrial Organizations) from their experiences with a “moral capitalism” in the preceding decade—that is, from a system of reciprocal obligations between them and their employers as developed under welfare capitalism before the depression. Rather than a prophetic use of class consciousness, historians might better employ a historical and sociological analysis of work, its structures, stratifications, and complex, layered relations in and beyond the workplace.

What is most striking about the new labor history is its own discomfort with a broadened perspective. To critique the purview of Commons and the consensus historians is useful, but why stop there? How should an historian weigh evidence of past class conflict, especially if the moment of eruption is followed by profound silence? That classes formed and conflict occurred does not therefore “prove” the existence of a pervasive and deeply rooted collective consciousness. In the absence of evidence of transmission of such a consciousness over time, between generations, and through ongoing cultural and political institutions, claims for the prevalence of class consciousness and its centrality to any synthesis of American history are simply misguided. Why, one wonders, is class so privileged a concept as to be above question?

This point is even more apparent when one considers what is left out of the new labor history. Take but one example: Traveling today to the Pittsburgh area, a visitor would encounter barren, open spaces where factories once operated alternating with rusted, listing, semi-dismantled mills, mute testimonies to an industrial life now gone. And if one were to drive along the ridges above the surrounding towns, stopping to look down on Homestead, Duquesne, or Braddock, the first impression of the town’s remaining architecture would be revealing. Like trees in a dense forest groping toward the source of light, the tall, Gothic revival columns of the Roman Catholic churches stretch toward the sun from grubby streets, vying with the more austere and angular Protestant spires and with the immense, rounded gold domes of the Eastern Orthodox Christians, blinding with their reflected brilliance when they catch the sun. A closer look would reveal synagogues as well, not as obvious from that perch on the ridge, as befits a religion that shuns spires and minarets alike. Yet it is astounding that at best a handful from the legion of new labor historians have ever studied this aspect of working people’s lives; and even fewer have not reduced religion to a function of economic or psychological exploitation. The powerful analysis of popular religion among working class Italian immigrants in New York evident in Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th Street* is neither understood nor even referred to in most labor history. The uncomfortableness with religious sensibilities of a generation

framed in the secular (if millennial) promise of the 1960s sharply limit their ability to grasp the past experience of others.

A similar point might be made concerning a variety of other voluntary associations entered into by working people. The fraternal organizations of the Masons, the Odd Fellows, the Pythians, and literally hundreds more, the mutual benefit organizations among both immigrant and native-born workers, industrial sports leagues, political campaigns, and, from 1868 into the present, the numerous and valued veterans' organizations—all these were multiclass associations freely joined by working men and, to some extent, working women too. While a few, such as Mary Ann Clawson, have studied the influence of these voluntary organizations in working people's lives, most labor historians have not. Do not these affiliations also reflect the much-discussed "agency" of American working people?

It may be that for all of the new labor history's innovative methodologies, it shares with the Commons school a fundamental defect. Both "old" and "new" labor historians self-consciously conceived of themselves as political activists and as scholars, and this commitment profoundly shaped their historical work. For Commons, intent on encouraging industrial democracy within a liberal capitalist society, this approach led him to emphasize the institutional trade union's rightful place in the American democratic firmament. For more recent writers, the politics of the 1960s as experienced or as recalled—in the manner of a lingering glow that remains visible long after the fire itself is banked—produced a history that exalted the possibilities of human agency even as it attempted to funnel that varied and complex human attribute into narrow, precast molds. The pitfalls inherent in equating one's politics and one's scholarship are evident. History, the study of a past by definition not one's own demands of the historian a sustained, self-conscious effort to understand and to explore that "other" experience in terms comprehensible to those being studied.

Oddly, it was E. P. Thompson himself who, in a review published just prior to his death in 1993, raised a cautionary flag. Reviewing Linda Colley's study of the formation of British national identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Thompson acknowledged

that her emphasis on a national Protestant religious culture in sharp contradistinction with French Catholicism—and the manner in which these religious characteristics played themselves out politically and economically over the two centuries—had great merit. It was, however, categorically at odds with Thompson's own positing of the "contradictory cultures of class" as the central issue. While still allowing for multiple social identities, which might coexist with a national identity, Thompson nonetheless suggested that "'class' was perhaps overworked in the 1960s and 1970s, and it has become merely boring. It is a concept long past its sell-by date."

It is ironic that, as these exaggerated claims multiplied in the scholarly literature, the labor movement itself began its precipitous modern decline. Encompassing some 15 percent of workers in the early 1990s, organized labor's strength diminished to levels last seen during the 1920s. Nor are the sources for a dramatic revival evident. Employer opposition and governmental hostility have certainly contributed to this decline, but one would be foolhardy to attribute the loss solely to those factors. Basic changes in production methods, for example, all but assure that unionized workers in steel, rubber, auto, and other industries will never again reach pre-1980 numbers. With the partial exception of limited efforts at revived union-management cooperation, the labor movement's response to this fundamental transition reveals an absence of alternatives at the institutional level, a limited political power, and the historically weak presence of even trade union consciousness in the minds of American workers, organized or not.

Rather than appeal to class consciousness or evoke models of imagined radicalism in the 1930s, students of labor may well face a more somber task. To account for the persistent struggles of a working people that only episodically (and even then with but a small minority) sought to transform democratic capitalism, and to do so without exaggerating the reality of employer or governmental opposition, will not produce an heroic synthesis of this country's history, to be sure. But it could abet an even more serious appreciation of the highly complex social and political lives of America's working men and women. ■

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