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[Review of the Book *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis*]

Abstract
[Excerpt] Over the past two decades many claims have been made for what was once called the "new" labor history. Deeply influenced by European scholarship (especially by the British historian, E. P. Thompson) and by writings in cultural anthropology and sociology, this new history seemed to sweep all before it. In a tumble of discrete community studies and precise examinations of individual strikes lay the foundation of the new history's critique of the work of John K Commons and his associates, who had stressed an institutional analysis of labor's growth and development within a liberal, democratic capitalist society. In studying workers outside the labor movement, in exploring their cultures and values, and in asserting the presence of explicit class tension, these works proclaimed, collectively, a new era in the study of the American working class.

Keywords
labor history, labor movement, worker rights, industrial relations

Comments

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Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis. *Edited by J. Carroll Moody* and *Alice Kessler-Harris* · DeKalb:

Northern Illinois University Press, 1989. xix + 236 pp. Illustrations, tables, and notes. $28.50.

Reviewed by Nick Salvatore

Over the past two decades many claims have been made for what was once called the "new" labor history. Deeply influenced by European scholarship (especially by the British historian, E. P. Thompson) and by writings in cultural anthropology and sociology, this new history seemed to sweep all before it. In a tumble of discrete community studies and precise examinations of individual strikes lay the foundation of the new history's critique of the work of John R. Commons and his associates, who had stressed an institutional analysis of labor's growth and development within a liberal, democratic capitalist society. In studying workers outside the labor movement, in exploring their cultures and values, and in asserting the presence of explicit class tension, these works proclaimed, collectively, a new era in the study of the American working class.

But as books followed dissertations with a dizzying speed, preventing all but the most single-minded specialist from staying abreast, a disquiet slowly became evident. Beyond their critique of the older work, and their depiction of their individual topics, what did the volumes of the new history contribute to an analysis of the meaning of the working-class experience for American history? Was there in these volumes a new interpretative paradigm, similar in its impact on labor studies to Commons's institutional analysis? Might this emphasis on a self-conscious working class transcend the episodic and provide the basis for a revitalized and updated Progressive analysis of the whole of the American experience? Equally troubling was the more specific problem of how to evaluate the sharply different emphasis that emerged in the work of those who developed a cultural approach to the study of working-class communities and those who stressed class struggle and conflict as evident in shopfloor disputes. It was in a search for answers to these and other questions that the editors of this volume helped to convene a conference in fall 1984 at Northern Illinois University; the revised papers from that conference constitute the major sections of the volume under review. The editors would be the first to agree that the conference did not resolve these questions, but the ensuing volume nonetheless raises some interesting issues.

Reading the essays immediately raises questions concerning periodization. Leon Fink and Michael Reich posit the years between 1820 and 1890 as a relatively singular, initial stage of labor's development; Sean Wilentz sees four distinct phases for the years 1780–1920; Mari Jo Buhle eschews periodization altogether to stress the centrality of gender analysis in rethinking the field's conceptual framework. This diversity, suggesting wide gaps in the authors' respective understandings of the field, is reflected in their interpretations as well. Alan Dawley, in his essay on workers in the twentieth century, is instrumental, even deterministic, in his use of Marxist analysis, and offers not even a suggestion as to possible connections between his themes and the nineteenth-century experience; Reich's essay, though rooted in a structural analysis of economic development, nonetheless remains quite sensitive

to the need to integrate political and cultural perceptions across both centuries; Fink's contribution explores, for the nineteenth century, some possibilities for fusing old and new approaches. Wilentz's essay, although quite sensitive to historical complexity, nonetheless seeks to graft that nuanced reading onto a cumbersome and rather unconvincing framework that posits the emergence of a class consciousness as the culmination of nineteenth-century working-class republican thought. Buhle's important contribution specifically underscores the importance of gender analysis for understanding the formation of class perceptions for working-class people who themselves did not have direct, personal relations to capitalist modes of production. It remains unclear, however, whether her call for a "massive dose of theoretical revitalization" (p. 70) will invigorate the field unless it is accompanied by a reexamination of basic assumptions in the context of conducting broad empirical research in the quite complex historical record.

This volume is different from most in its genre in that it contains in the last section two essays of commentary and criticism of the preceding chapters. Alice Kessler-Harris's contribution is very helpful in providing a brief account of the conference itself; in the process, she offers an informative discussion, accessible to the nonspecialist, of the numerous historiographical and theoretical issues involved in intertwining analyses of gender and class. David Brody's comment is of a different kind. In my opinion the most valuable piece in the volume, Brody's essay sharply dissents from a number of the interpretative generalizations offered; underscores the fault line that runs through the majority of essays in efforts to unite nineteenth- and twentieth-century labor history; and points attention again to the possibilities of creatively utilizing an institutional synthesis. Brody concludes his essay in an admonitory tone, insisting that a more rigorous intellectual discipline structure efforts in the field.

To the comments of Kessler-Harris and Brody, I would add one additional point. It is striking that, with few exceptions, there is no mention of black workers; or, amid the numerous generalizations offered, is there any sustained analysis of race and its relation to the volume's central category, class. This is not a call for some ritual incantation of the currently popular slogan of "race, class, and gender." Rather, the absence of a serious discussion of black and white working-class experiences suggests how insular even a new and exciting field can be. Nonetheless, the insights and the omissions reflected in these essays are quite instructive in themselves. They accurately represent the evolution of the field over the past two decades and, therefore, will be of interest to scholars in numerous disciplines who examine the central issue of work in American life.

Nick Salvatore teaches at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University. He is the author of Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist *(1982) and has edited and written an introduction to Samuel Gompers,* Seventy Years of Life and Labor *(1984). He is currently writing a biography of Amos Webber (1826–1904), an unskilled African-American worker.*