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[Review of the Book *For Democracy, Workers, and God: Labor Song-Poems and Labor Protest, 1865-95*]

Abstract

[Excerpt] In this slim book, Clark D. Halker raises a series of complex and interrelated issues. Focusing on some 4,000 song-poems that appeared in the labour press in the late 19th century, Halker states that his purpose is to "expand knowledge of the musical and poetic history of the American working class;" to use these song-poems and their poets as "a lens into the larger world of Gilded-Age workers and labor protest;" and more specifically to examine the contours of a "movement culture" that, he acknowledges (14), was never coterminous with the whole of the working-class cultural experience. The result of this study, he suggests, establishes the existence of a distinctly working-class criticism of industrial capitalism, a critique rooted in the class-specific understandings of the American republican heritage, mechanic ideology (for example, producerism), and "the true religion*" of egalitarian Protestantism evident in these song-poems. Halker concludes his study with an effort to understand the decline of this movement culture in the years after 1895.

Keywords

Gilded Age, song-poems, working class, labor movement, worker rights

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions | United States History

Comments

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result of this study, he suggests, establishes the existence of a distinctly working-class criticism of industrial capitalism, a critique rooted in the class-specific understandings of the American republican heritage, mechanic ideology (for example, producerism), and "the true religion" of egalitarian Protestantism evident in these song-poems. Halker concludes his study with an effort to understand the decline of this movement culture in the years after 1895.

While Halker's handling of these important themes is highly uneven, his treatment of American Protestantism and its relation to working people of varied ethnic and religious identities is most problematic. Halker is right when he states that religion was a central force in these song-poems, but beyond that his judgments are highly suspect. "Infused with a character" derived from its encounter with "contemporary capitalism," Halker explains, "religion became transformed from an inert cultural inheritance into a crucial part of the labor movement and the crusade for humanity." Mechanically following Herbert Gutman's 1966 essay, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement," Halker asserts the existence of a distinct class-based religious expression which called for a return to the "true religion" where character and not wealth determined temporal and spiritual standing. In this account neither ethnicity nor diverse religious traditions presented any serious barrier to working people's embrace of this universalist dogma. "Under the weight of a working-class influence," Halker writes, sectarianism and dogma declined, thus easing the way for these non-Protestants. Catholic workers, he asserts without supporting argument or reference note, "would have been sympathetic when other workers [presumably Protestants] argued that society did not measure up to the standards of Christianity..." (142) Similarly, what eliminated ethnic and religious tensions, and helped solidify the class nature of this religious practice was the fact that "sig-

Clark D. Halker, *For Democracy, Workers, and God: Labor Song-Poems and Labor Protest, 1865-95* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 1991).

IN THIS SLIM BOOK, Clark D. Halker raises a series of complex and interrelated issues. Focusing on some 4,000 song-poems that appeared in the labour press in the late 19th century, Halker states that his purpose is to "expand knowledge of the musical and poetic history of the American working class;" to use these song-poems and their poets as "a lens into the larger world of Gilded-Age workers and labor protest;" and more specifically to examine the contours of a "movement culture" that, he acknowledges (14), was never coterminous with the whole of the working-class cultural experience. The

nificant elements of the immigrant population harbored [a] strong anticlericalism." With these difficulties dispensed with, the author proceeds to castigate elite Protestants and middle-class reformers influenced by the Social Gospel in a relentless pursuit of that magic moment when "true religion" reigned.

The problems here are myriad. The idealized, static understanding of historical relations vitiates efforts at interpretation. Halker's reduction of 19th-century Protestantism to "an inert cultural inheritance" awaiting the quickening that presumably followed contact with movement culture is uninformed and ahistorical, and insulting to the memory of the numerous 19th-century workers who took their Protestantism seriously. Halker's treatment of Catholics and Jews, moreover, is profoundly disturbing for its glib generalizations. Where is there engagement with (or even acknowledgement of) the richly textured analysis of Italian immigrants and the meaning of the *domus* as presented by Robert Orsi; of the moving, if idiosyncratic, evocation of pious Jewish immigrants in the *landsman-shafin*, as described by Michael Weisser; of the proud, and intensely insular, Polish National Catholic Church which to this day remains in schism from Rome? Where too is there the recognition of the role of John Cardinal Gibbons in bridging the gap between Irish Catholic workers and the Protestant-influenced Knights of Labor, with the result that many of those workers could avidly embrace *their* religion, *their* unions, and *their* prelates simultaneously? Gibbons does not even appear in the index.

Ultimately Clark D. Halker does not treat his own themes seriously. For a book of only 150 pages of actual text, he proposes quite an ambitious agenda. Indeed, immediately following the rote dismissal of John R. Commons and the Wisconsin School of labour history with the ritually obligatory invocation of E.P. Thompson and Herbert G. Gutman,

serious problems appear. If these song-poems reflected the "conscious politicized tone" of the movement culture, a culture Halker describes as "a life apart" from the broader world of working people, exactly how these song-poems will be the "lens" onto that larger population is unclear. As the author never addresses this issue, it remains a question throughout. Similarly, the very concept of movement culture itself proves problematic in Halker's hands. It "retained an ambiguous relationship with the larger society," the author writes, and even "showed a certain accommodationist character" to the status quo. (14) A few pages later, however, the reader learns that this movement culture, while not autonomous, nonetheless "provided a separate way of life based on the intersection of workplace, community, class, and labour movement; the values of this lifestyle stood sharply at odds with those of the dominant cultural system." (28)

There are two obvious problems with these formulations. Not only is there a contradiction between these two conceptions of movement culture, but the latter, more assertive claim is itself undermined by Halker's sympathetic treatment (128) of a more orthodox Marxist critique of republicanism, producerism, and what Karl Marx called "religious nonsense." Second, nowhere in this book is there a sustained effort in social historical analysis that would provide a context for examining the value of Halker's lens(es) for understanding American working people. His most interesting comments in this regard are buried in a footnote (22-23, note 30); while his one effort to establish historical context (an examination of the social origins of 93 of these song-poets) reveals the rather embarrassing fact that more than one-third of them were not working people at all. Halker's effort to explain this with reference to labour's ability "to maintain a trans-class foothold" is profoundly inadequate in light of the book's announced purposes.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the author consciously sought to funnel the varied experience of these diverse working people into a preordained framework. At least the persistent internal contradictions, the thinness of the actual research, and the analytical narrowness in the book suggest this as a possibility. Protestantism, as H. Richard Niebuhr noted in his 1962 essay, "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," has been marked by a constant urge for renewal. This sharply distinguishes Protestantism from Catholicism, with its historic belief that it already possess a fixed truth, and this urge provides both the context and the impetus for institutional as well as spiritual revival. Buffeted as mid-19th-century Protestantism was, not only by the challenge of capitalism but by scientific Darwinism, a new biblical criticism, and by what were often seen as enormous waves of immigrant Catholics flooding the nation, numerous tendencies emerged. Some were clearly regressive, as the example of the American Protective Association would suggest. But what was most astounding about late-19th-century Protestantism was its ability to regenerate itself, address contemporary issues, and to retain, or in many cases, win back the allegiance of working people.

"God of justice," read one late-19th-century song, "save the people/From the clash of race and creed,/From the strife of class and faction,/Make our nation free indeed;/Keep her faith in simple manhood/Strong as when her life began,/Till it find its full fruition/In the brotherhood of man!" These sentiments were not penned by a song-poet of the labour press, although in many respects they might have been, but by the mainstream Protestant hymnist, William Pierson Merrill. It is only by understanding the power of this Protestant society to regenerate itself culturally and spiritually that we can evaluate the force of Protestantism in the late 19th century and, not insignificantly, pay our respect to the very real pain these

song-poets experienced as their world underwent a fundamental transition.

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