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For nearly three quarters of a century, between the 1880s and the 1950s, the writing of labor history remained primarily the province of academic labor

economists and a handful of amateur historians linked to specific trade unions and left-wing political parties. Sociologists also wrote numerous contemporary studies of working-class communities that drew upon knowledge of the past to illuminate the present. Before the end of World War II, however, few professionally trained, academic historians ventured into the field of labor history.

Because economists and partisans dominated the

writing of labor history at first, it was usually written

to promote specific public policies or special causes.

Most of the amateur labor historians wrote on behalf

of their unions or political parties, and enjoyed little

readership beyond their own organizational circles.

The labor economists had a different agenda. Nearly

all of them, beginning with perhaps the first of the

breed, Richard Ely, a professor of economics at the

University of Wisconsin, advocated trade unionism

and collective bargaining. They acted as social reformers

and many of them were among the most

prominent figures in the progressive movement of

the early twentieth century, pioneers of the ‘‘Wisconsin

idea,’’ and of such concepts as workers’ compensation,

unemployment insurance, and social

security. Their interest in public policy and their dual

role as policy makers shaped the labor history that

they wrote.

Labor history as a field of scholarship can best be

said to begin with the work of John R. Commons, a

prote´ge´ of Ely and the lead author of the first multivolume

history of labor in the United States. Commons

orchestrated not one but two massive

multivolume works devoted to labor history. He edited

an 11-volume documentary history of U.S. industrial

society from the colonial times to 1880 that

covered nearly every aspect of labor history, including

the place of indentured servitude and slavery. The

11 volumes provided a foundation for the narrative

labor history written by Commons, his students,

and those influenced by the ‘‘Wisconsin school’’ of

labor history. Commons’s four-volume history of

labor in the United States, published between 1918

and 1935, defined and dominated the field for decades.

Commons himself wrote only brief introductions

to two of the four volumes; the remainder of

the first two narrative volumes carried the story of

labor from colonial times to 1896, and the third volume,

a collection of essays on structural rather than

historical aspects of the subject, was written entirely

by students and faculty associates of Commons. The

fourth and perhaps most famous volume in the series,

a history of American labor from 1896 to 1932, was

the work of Selig Perlman and Philip Taft, two of

Commons’s more notable former students, and themselves

leading long-term scholars of American labor

history.

The Commons volumes shared a teleological quality,

presenting the history of labor as the unfolding of

a tale in which working people shed their individualistic

behaviors and aspirations in order to accept their

place as a permanent, dependent wage-earning class

that could best serve its own interests by uniting

collectively in responsible trade unions that bargained

with employers about how to distribute equitably the

wealth created by capitalist enterprises. Selig Perlman,

the most intellectually ambitious of Commons’s students,

provided a theoretical framework for the history

he and other labor economists wrote. Perlman asserted

that workers shared a scarcity consciousness that led

them to stress job control and to create unions that

regulated access to jobs through strict conditions of

apprenticeship, rigid rules for union membership, and

closed-shop agreements with employers. For Perlman,

the American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions

that practiced job control through tightly controlled

memberships and closed shops reflected the scarcity

consciousness and core beliefs of American workers.

Inclusive unions that admitted all workers, promoted

class conflict, and sought the abolition of capitalism

were, for Perlman, the product of the fevered imaginations

of intellectuals that had no purchase among ordinary

workers.

Nearly all the labor historywritten between 1918 and

the 1950s shared some part of the Commons-Perlman

approach. The economics department at The Johns

Hopkins University and the university’s press, for

example, published a series of books that examined

historically how trade unions regulated the labor market,

restricted their memberships, exercised their labor

market power through strikes, boycotts, and union

labels, and engaged in contract bargaining withemployers.

Robert F. Hoxie and Norman Ware, two labor

economists who wrote partly outside the Commons-

Perlman framework, in their histories of organized

labor between 1860 and 1918, nevertheless treated

labor movement opponents of job-conscious AFLstyle

craft unionism, whether the Knights of Labor or

the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), as utopians

whose visions lacked deep resonance among most

workers and who were doomed to fail. Almost without

exception, all the books written about labor history

focused on the stories of individual unions, union

federations, famous strikes, and routinized collective

bargaining between unions and managements.

Even the most notable dissenter from the Commons-

Perlman school, Philip S. Foner, a historian

not an economist, wrote a multivolume history of

labor in the United States and a myriad of separate

studies that scarcely varied from the narrative

model developed by the Wisconsin school. For

Foner, like Commons, Perlman, Taft, and all the

labor economists, labor history was primarily the

story of trade unionists, strikes, bargaining with

employers, union politics and lobbying, material factors

that could be measured and quantified and not

cultural factors that fell outside the sphere of union

institutions and that eluded easy measurement. Foner

followed the original script but reversed its heroes and

judgments. For him, the AFL, while an advance over

the utopian Knights of Labor, represented a setback

for the mass of working people. Its leaders were

men who neglected or oppressed African-Americans,

Asians, and even southern and eastern European

immigrants, women, and common laborers. They collaborated

with employers rather than battling them;

they disciplined their followers rather than encouraging

them to wage class conflict; and they made peace

with capitalism rather than overthrowing it. Foner

had his own teleology. In his narrative, labor history

must lead ineluctably to the rejection of job-conscious

unionism, the triumph of socialism (communism after

November 1917), and the end of capitalism.

A French historian of labor, Georges Haupt, captured

precisely the limitations of the interpretive model

built by such scholars as Commons, Perlman, and

Foner. Their history, he wrote, ‘‘narrows the dimensions

of the workers world and encloses it within a

framework that is fixed and congealed. It does

not focus on the working class itself but on its organizational

and ideological representations.’’ Such studies,

the Frenchman concluded, ‘‘affect at the very

most a small circle of partisans or lovers of historical

detail.’’

**Toward a New Labor History**

Although most histories of labor continued to be

written by labor economists or by Marxist-oriented

scholars like Foner and to focus primarily on white

male workers, their unions, and their struggles, a

number of sociologists, some influenced by Marxism,

began to write about different aspects of the workingclass

experience. Even Commons and Perlman hinted

at a more capacious version of labor history. Perlman

noted that the history of unions reflected workers’

constant adaptation to their environment, both material

and mental, through which they struggled not as

‘‘a class-conscious proletariat’’ but as American citizens

with their own ideal of liberty. Here Perlman

presaged the concept of ‘‘republican citizenship’’

that evolved into a staple of 1980s new labor history.

Another Commons disciple expressed sentiments that

decades later might better be associated with the ideas

of Herbert Gutman, who some credit as the founding

father of the ‘‘new labor history.’’ Alluding to the

‘‘great migration’’ of African-Americans north during

World War I, the Commons team member noted,

‘‘their manner of living and their modes of thinking

had to be recast. The readjustment from the modus

vivendi of agricultural peasants to that of industrial

wage earners involved as great changes in their lives

as in those of European peasant immigrants to the

United States’’ (Commons, vol. 3, p. 44).

Other scholars, however, seized such kernels of

scholarly complexity and turned them into more expansive

portrayals of labor history. Vera Shlakman

and Caroline Ware treated the world of women workers

in the New England textile industry, most of

whom lived their daily lives beyond the reach of

trade unions or other institutionalized manifestations

of the labor movement. Shlakman and Ware probed

the factors that moved women into textile towns and

factories, how their experiences as full-time wage

workers shaped their daily lives outside the factory

as well as within its gates, and the particular kind of

female culture these workers created. Other observers

and scholars wrote a series of books that dissected the

lives and cultures of southern textile workers, most of

whom entered the mills as family units. Although

many of these studies were inspired by a series of

strikes that swept across the Southern Piedmont between

1928 and 1934, the vast majority of mill

families remained beyond the reach of unions. For

most of them, religion and the church occupied a far

more vital and influential part of their daily lives than

trade unionism, as the study by the sociologist Liston

Pope, Millhands and Preachers, attested. Sterling

Spero and Abram Harris wrote the first general history

of African-American workers in the industrial

age, and Horace Cayton and George S. Mitchell described

in their Black Workers and the New Unions

how the labor upheaval of the 1930s transformed the

relationship between African-American workers in

mass-production industry and unions, turning it

from one founded on mutual antipathy and despair

to one based on cooperation and hope. The Yale

sociologist E. W. Bakke published two books that

portrayed the daily lives, family relations, cultural

values, political practices, and search for work by

the unemployed in Depression-era New Haven.

Alfred Winslow Jones did much the same for the

rubber workers of Akron, Ohio, using opinion-sampling

methods to uncover how that city’s industrial

workers felt about such issues as corporate power,

private property rights, religion, education, and politics.

Had any historians paid attention to such scholarship

in the 1930s and 1940s, they might have sensed

a whole new way of writing the history of labor in the

United States.

When historians, as distinguished from labor economists,

industrial relations mavens, and sociologists,

finally turned their attention to labor history in

the late 1940s and 1950s, they concentrated on the

staple agenda of traditional U.S. history. The big

question asked by historians writing about workers

was, did labor support Andrew Jackson? They questioned

Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s re-interpretation of

Jacksonian Democracy, which claimed that the political

movement drew its strongest support among

workers in the nation’s eastern seaboard and interior

cities, not among western farmers and frontiersmen.

Most of the historians who asked the question answered

in the negative and even doubted that workers

in the Jacksonian era thought of themselves as a class

and behaved as one. One of the young historians who

joined the debate, Richard Hofstadter, later one of

the nation’s most distinguished scholars, would forever

remain linked to the ‘‘consensus school’’ of historical

interpretation and to the notion that the United

States was fundamentally a one-class, middle-class

society. Alone among that group of historians,

Edward Pessen continued to write books and articles

about labor history, though that was never his

primary interest.

What later came to be known as the ‘‘new labor

history’’ emerged without proclamations, publicity,

or even awareness that such a subfield existed. The

three names most commonly associated with the creation

of the ‘‘new labor history’’—David Brody, Herbert

Gutman, and David Montgomery—became

linked to labor history only after its invention as a

subfield of history. Indeed, the book that in some

ways marked the birth of a new labor history, Irving

Bernstein’s The Lean Years (1959), remained the work

of an industrial relations scholar. A year later, when

David Brody’s Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion

Era appeared, reviewers failed to stress its contribution

to labor history. Instead, they treated the

book largely as an addition to the growing body of

literature on the impact of industrialization and immigration

on the modernization of the United States.

Only with hindsight can Brody’s book be characterized

as the opening salvo in the historians’ emerging

critique of the Commons-Perlman version of labor

history. What made Brody’s book notable was its

emphasis on a nonunion labor force and its comparison

of the cultures and behaviors of immigrant common

laborers and U.S.-born skilled workers. Brody

highlighted the aspects of working-class experience

that Commons, Perlman, et al. neglected; he opened

the pathways that other historians of labor would

soon follow.

Yet nearly a decade passed before the sort of history

that Brody wrote in 1960 had a real impact on

professional history in the United States. During that

time, omens of what later were characterized as the

‘‘new labor history’’ appeared. Most important perhaps

were a brilliant essay and an epic book by the

English historian Edward P. Thompson. His essay on

the ‘‘moral economy of the premodern workers’’ and

his larger book, The Making of the English Working

Class, altered how historians came to understand and

to write labor history. Thompson ended the sway of

mechanical Marxists and nuts-and-bolts labor economists

by endowing ordinary working people with

nonmaterial customs, traditions, and beliefs, many

of religious origin, that enabled them to resist their

superiors and to act as their own historical agents in

the making of a working class. Slowly at first and

rapidly thereafter, historians of the United States

would try to apply Thompson’s methods and concepts

to the history of American workers. Little noticed

at that time, a young American historian had

been publishing articles in minor state historical journals

that paralleled some of Thompson’s concerns

and findings. That young scholar, Herbert Gutman,

studied theretofore obscure events in labor history:

strikes and riots in small railroad-dominated communities,

a demonstration by unemployed workers in

New York City, a comparison of a strike-torn coalmining

community and an iron enterprise-dominated

city, and industrial conflict and social mobility in

Paterson, New Jersey. In those articles, Gutman illustrated

how workers viewed their world as well

as the traditions and values that governed their

behavior.

As the 1960s drew to an end, labor history

still seemed to be peripheral to U.S. history’s dominant

concerns. Reviewers treated the eminent labor

historian David Montgomery’s first book Beyond

Equality (1967) more as a re-interpretation of civil

war and reconstruction historiography than as a

venture in the writing of labor history. And they

deemed Melvyn Dubofsky’s first book, When Workers

Organize (1968), as primarily a contribution to the

historiography of Progressivism. But then in a paper

delivered in 1969 and published a year later, David

Brody announced the coming of age of labor history,

an event he associated with the publication of two

books in 1969: Irving Bernstein’s Turbulent Years

and Melvyn Dubofsky’s We Shall Be All. Soon

Brody and others heralded a ‘‘new labor history’’

that they distinguished from the old history associated

with Commons and Perlman. The ‘‘old’’ had

limited itself to the story of unionized workers for

whom AFL-style craft qua business unionism represented

the sine qua non of labor history in the United

States. The ‘‘new’’ took as its province the entire

working class, the vast majority outside of unions as

well as the unionized minority; it treated neither the

AFL nor business unionism as the be-all and end-all

for organized labor and its history; it preferred contingency

to determinism, and it treated workers as

active citizens who made their own history.

Not only did the field of labor history flourish in

the 1970s, but its practitioners also won greater respect

within the larger discipline of history. Gutman,

whose scholarship had appeared previously in peripheral

journals or had remained unpublished, now

found his work published in U.S. history’s two primary

scholarly journals of record: the American Historical

Review and the Journal of American History. In

1975, one of the most respected trade publishers released

a collection of Gutman’s major published and

unpublished essays and articles under the title Work,

Culture, and Society in Industrializing America. Allan

Dawley won the Bancroft Prize in History for his

book on the shoe workers of Lynn, Massachusetts,

and by the end of the decade a bequest from the

family of the late Philip Taft established a Taft Prize

for the best book published annually in labor history.

A burgeoning series of community studies, meantime,

sought to determine the realities of occupational

and social mobility across the mid- and late- nineteenth

century, the most famous of which were

Stephen Thernstrom’s dissections of mobility among

working people in Newburyport and Boston,

Massachusetts. Other community studies challenged

the ‘‘consensus school’’ of history, seeking to prove

that a process of proletarianization in which artisans

were separated from their tools of production created

a distinct working class conscious of its subordinate

position and determined to change it through collective

action. Unlike the Commons-Perlman interpretation,

which tightly linked class and trade unionism,

the ‘‘new labor history’’ portrayed class consciousness

as manifested in oppositional cultural, ideological,

and religious ways that built on historical traditions

and customs. Many of these younger labor historians

saw themselves as disciples of E. P. Thompson and as

scholars who had uncovered ‘‘the making of the

American working class.’’

If anything, the myriad of community studies, a

stream that never slackened, led to confusion as much

as to enlightenment. Rather than revealing a working

class conscious of its own interests, such studies disclosed

a working class fractured along lines of ethnicity

(national origins), race, and gender. Instead of

attesting to the ‘‘making of an American working

class,’’ the new labor history revealed many working

classes in a constant state of decomposition and recomposition.

David Brody and David Montgomery

sought to bring a measure of order out of the scholarly

chaos in separate essay collections that focused

on the workplace as the site of a collective job

consciousness (in Brody’s case) and of a workers’

control ethic based on the autonomy and manliness

of the skilled worker (in Montgomery’s). Yet, when

workers returned to their neighborhoods from their

places of labor, they separated themselves on the basis

of ethnicity, race, religion, and even politics. The

more that was written and published about labor

history, the more diffuse the subject grew. In 1984,

the older and the younger practitioners of the ‘‘new

labor history’’ met in a conference funded by the

National Endowment for the Humanities, at which

they discussed how to bring synthesis to the field.

That conference, which gathered at Northern Illinois

University, went about its business in a metaphorical

and literal fog. Rather than establishing the basis for

a new synthesis in American labor history, the conferees

further fractured the field by raising the subjects

of gender and patriarchy. Now, not only did

labor historians have to contend with workers divided

by ethnicity, race, and religion, but they also had to

recognize that Montgomery’s manly craftsman and

Brody’s job-conscious trade unionist were but a part

of a working class that must perforce include its

women. After such scholars as Alice Kessler Harris

and Mari Jo Buhle laid down the challenge at the

1984 conference to treat gender as a vital aspect of

labor history, historians have written a flood of books

and articles on women workers, women and the labor

movement, and masculinity as a central characteristic

of the male worker.

The large, new body of scholarship about gender

has clarified how women’s work, career, and life trajectories

differed from those of men. It attempted to

explain how women and their work were marginalized

by men and their unions as well as in most of the

extant literature about the history of labor. Its practitioners

interrogated the concept of skilled labor, suggesting

that gender (masculinity), not knowledge

acquired through years of training, created skill.

They argued that concepts of masculinity and femininity

defined nearly all aspects of work and the

differential beliefs and behaviors of male and female

workers and union members. Several gender scholars

even credited the labor movement’s hyper-masculinity

with the movement’s Pyrrhic victories and too-frequent

blatant failures. Yet many of the interpretations

and conclusions drawn by the historians of

gender rested more on putative theories and assertions

than on careful analysis or firm evidence. Indeed,

much of the scholarship on gender and labor

could be read to re-inforce prevailing beliefs in the

field of labor history rather than to transform core

knowledge in the field. In fact, one might argue that

gender scholarship has served more to add to our

knowledge of labor history than to reconceptualize

how we perceive and comprehend the subject.

**Goodbye to the New Labor History**

As the twentieth century drew to its close, there was

little new about writing ‘‘history from below,’’ giving

voice to the heretofore inarticulate, perceiving the

diversity of working people, or introducing gender

as a category of historical analysis. Not only had

labor history created a valued place for itself in the

larger discipline, it had become as diverse as the people

and institutions that it studied. Labor economists

and industrial relations authorities continued to write

institutional histories of trade unions, labor markets,

and collective bargaining. Sanford Jacoby, for example,

wrote two of the finest books on the subject of

corporate labor policies: Employing Bureaucracy and

Modern Manors. Historians published books and articles

about the rise and fall of trade unions and labor

federations, among which the most notable might have

been Robert Zieger’s massive history of the Congress

of Industrial Organizations, which delineated the

lives of such labor leaders as John L. Lewis, Sidney

Hillman, Walter Reuther, Jimmy Hoffa, and Samuel

Gompers. Radical movements and industrial conflicts

also remained essential parts of labor’s story. Historians

as well as sociologists persisted in studying local

communities, and for them, as well as for many other

scholars of labor, ethnicity, race, and gender remained

vital parts of labor’s history.

Two sets of scholars, however, dismissed the ‘‘new

labor history’’ as old. One group, influenced by poststructuralism

and postmodernism, rejected labor history’s

emphasis on measurable or quantifiable data,

its focus on the material aspects of everyday life,

and its acceptance at face value of the languages of

trade unionism and working-class radicalism. These

scholars became associated with what was known as

the ‘‘linguistic turn’’ in labor history, a movement

that borrowed from linguistic scholars, literary critics,

and philosophers and that treated language rather

than material factors as the source of human consciousness,

including class consciousness. Language,

rather than the forces and relations of production,

constructed cultural meanings. Language thus created

whatever sense of class existed. Hence, cultural studies

rather than labor history held the key to understanding

the working-class experience. Scholars attracted to

the ‘‘linguistic turn’’ have been heavily involved in

rewriting the history of gender, as attested to most

notably by Joan Scott’s leading role and by the stress

on language and culture in the writings of Alice Kessler

Harris, Nan Enstad, and Elizabeth Faue, among

others.

A second group, associated most closely with the

writings of David Roediger, insisted that the key to

opening the hidden history of American workers was

the concept of ‘‘whiteness.’’ For them, ‘‘whiteness’’

and American citizenship acted as synonymous terms.

Those workers defined as white occupied a privileged

position causing each generation of new immigrant

workers to struggle to define themselves as white, a

possibility denied to those of African, Asian, and

Native American (thus many Hispanics) origins.

Thus, race had to be as much about being white as

being black, brown, red, or yellow. Like the scholars

and historians who took the ‘‘linguistic turn,’’ the

historians of whiteness focused more on language

and cultural practices, both of which they read in

particular ways, than on hard, or measurable, archival

and documentary evidence to prove that Caucasian

workers treasured their white skins and the

privileges it conveyed. Because most of the scholars

of whiteness, Matthew Frye Jacobson and others as

well as Roediger, rely for their evidence mostly on

language, which can be read in multiple ways and

malleable cultural concepts, their findings have been

subject to withering criticisms, most notably by Eric

Arnesen and Peter Kolchin.

Yet another group of scholars unwilling to jettison

either the old or the new labor history set as its

agenda the internationalization of U.S. labor history.

Aware that the history of workers in the United States

has its own peculiarities, these historians insist that

there is little exceptional about the American experience.

From early on in the nineteenth century, capital

and labor circled the globe. In the heyday of industrialization

(1870s–1920s), the labor force in the United

States was overwhelmingly immigrant in composition,

composed in the main of working people who carried

with them traditions and customs as well as concepts

about worker movements that originated in their lands

of origin. And such immigrant workers, as countless

new studies have proved, rarely broke their links to

their original home places, continuing to communicate

with those who remained behind. The late twentieth

century saw this process repeated on an even grander

geographical stage, with capital circulating around the

world more rapidly than ever and peoples from all

continents moving in search of jobs and income. For

a new generation of American labor historians, then,

transnational capital, worker, and labor movements

became the subject of their research and writing.

If labor history at the start of the twenty-first

century no longer carried the freighted charge it had

when its ‘‘newer’’ version was invented in the 1960s, it

was well rid of that burden. Its practitioners have

indeed restored voice to the previously inarticulate,

turned those at the bottom of society into historical

subjects with will and agency, and portrayed working

people in all their ethnic, racial, gendered, and cultural

diversity. They have continued to write solid institutional

histories and substantial biographies; add

more and more working-class communities to our

knowledge base; broaden substantially our understanding

of nonwhite workers; explore how gender

has governed the behavior of workers; interrogate

the language and cultural practices of working people;

and probe the ever-changing relationship among

workers, the state, and the law. Labor history has

become a movable feast.

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