

REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

Sixty Characters in Search of Authority

The Northern Illinois University NEH Conference on
“The Future of American Labor History:
Toward a Synthesis”

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This conference, held October 10–12, 1984, in Dekalb, Illinois, was nothing if not ambitious. The aim was to consolidate the gains of much recent scholarship, and on this basis to define, or at least anticipate, the synthesis held incipient in this work, in several senses: a synthesis of “old and new” labor history, of social history and labor history, and of labor history and more general analyses of the history of American society.

To achieve such fusion, the basic idea seems to have been, first, to assemble a critical mass of substantial scholars from labor history and ancillary fields, including younger scholars as well as those more well known. To set the electrons in motion, research papers and specially commissioned synthesis papers were organized into several major sessions. To provide the force of implosion, all sessions were conducted as large plenaries—papers supposedly having been read in advance, all the participants sat at tables formed into one huge square, heard brief presentations, and then went at it in extensive discussions skillfully moderated but relatively undirected by session chairs. Broken only occasionally by special slide-show presentations of work in progress by the American working-class history project, the format produced intense discussion in which all participants become known to each other, and issues could be carried from one session to the next.

Beyond this formal structure, the architecture of the sessions suggested something about the kind of intellectual chain reaction conference designers hoped might happen. Alice Kessler-Harris chaired an opening session focused on the “integrating themes” of class, race, and gender; these were then presumably to be examined more extensively in sessions each featuring several research papers and a synthesis paper. These sessions were defined by a mixture

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of chronological sequence and themes epitomizing major work in each period. Thus, an eighteenth-early nineteenth-century session focused on “The Formation of the American Working Class” (chair, Gary Nash; synthesis paper, Sean Wilentz); the late-nineteenth-century session was “Class, Culture, and Ideology” (chair, Mel Dubofsky; synthesis paper, Leon Fink); and the twentieth-century session chaired by David Montgomery was “Labor, Capital, and the State,” with the synthesis paper by Alan Dawley. Eric Foner had the unenviable task of chairing a summary *Quo Vadis* session at which the megatonnage of the new synthesis was to be initially gauged.

As most *ILWCH* readers probably know, there were no conceptual mushroom clouds seen over Dekalb that weekend; most participants, whose initial expectations were probably far less elevated than those of conference organizers, seem to have come away frustrated at best, disappointed on average, and cynical at worst. The research papers were uneven, and the more provocative synthesis papers too complex to be adequately dealt with, even assuming prior reading and digestion. Although the discussions were consistently lively and occasionally electric, and although the mix of participants proved stimulating in all the informal ways that intense gatherings can provide when interesting people are locked up together for several days, the sequential plenaries generated little sense of progress or direction, despite impressive efforts by well-prepared Chairs. Groundwork terms and definitions remained murky or contentious, the same kind of stumbling-block issues kept coming up, and intellectuals, as usual, proved better at speaking than at listening.

Responsibility for some of this rests with the organizers. Even before the conference, there were hard feelings about the awkward selection process (based on “applications” and “acceptance/rejection” letters) and about the closed and inevitably elitist composition of the meetings (a “strike” by excluded Northern Illinois University graduate students was avoided by granting them observer status). The synthesis framework, in practice, placed the conference under a discipline perhaps more hobbling than helpful. Nobody seemed to take the grail-like quest very seriously, which belied a deeper skepticism about whether the goal had much real meaning, and whether, indeed, it would even be a good thing for such a group to feel it had found or fashioned such a synthesis. The framework proved hard to work around—major theoretical points; substantial historical issues; and fundamental differences in perspective, method, and value all surfaced regularly, but were not comfortably discussable in a framework implicitly presuming that alternative visions were to be synthetically reconciled.

Accordingly, many participants seemed to blame the frustrations of the conference on its conceptualization and its brave but unwieldy structure. Having shared some of this sense at the time, I have come to feel differently, looking back several months later from the vantage of an unsynthesized present. True, the synthesis framework was, in the final analysis, not maximally help-

ful, but it needn't have been that serious a burden—the discussions were open-ended enough, and as Gary Nash pointed out early on, we might simply work towards defining an agenda instead of a synthesis and move ahead on that basis.

The fact is, I think, that the frustration reflected more what the participants brought to the conference: a reasonably accurate cross-section of the current moment in American historiography as it relates to the issues before us. The problems that proved most frustrating to the conference are, indeed, the problems defining this moment, and hence the conference succeeded, in a way, by failing to avoid stumbling over them. This is true even of those issues that were not so much points of frustration as points of evasion—issues that never “took” when raised in discussion. If these various problems remained unresolved or unengaged, that is not primarily the fault of the conference framework.

The most explicit issue involved gender. Not coincidentally, it was the relatively few women at the conference who kept raising this point, only to find other discussants treating their challenge as a “contribution” to an in-motion historiography rather than a stick thrust between the spokes, requiring a more fundamental reconstruction of the basic terms, categories, and dynamics of working-class history. The issue of race was easier to avoid given how peripheral it has been in much recent work, evidenced in part by the fact that only two black scholars were in attendance. As Barbara Fields argued eloquently, for instance, the fact that most participants accepted the periodization of an eighteenth-early nineteenth-century formation of the American working class only showed how little Black experience has been acknowledged and taken into account in thinking about such categories and the issues flowing from them.

Other persistent debates swirled around how—not really whether—the macroanalytic study of capitalism as offered by Michael Reich could be satisfactorily employed in the fine-focus work of working-class social history. Looming over all were the political and intellectual implications of the near-orphaned status of current working-class historical work, considering the contemporary state of the labor movement and American politics.

Seen as a whole, these are formidable problems, each precluding facile answers or “synthetic” historiographical formulas. To have been brought into sustained confrontation with all of them is disturbing in the best sense, offering a good base for the close rereading and study of the many excellent papers, especially the synthetic efforts, prepared for the conference and probably soon to be published. In retrospect, all this makes the frustration of those long, diffuse discussions more worthwhile than it seemed at the time. As with most conferences, after all, the point should be less what happens there than what happens afterward—what people bring away, and how this is shared beyond the inevitably small circle of participants.

In this sense, the organizers and planners of the Dekalb conference deserve more appreciation than I suspect participants have accorded them. During the conference, I kept having the feeling that we would do better to focus on particular problems rather than the synthesis project—that the group might have worked more constructively by collectively puzzling through various ways of understanding and explaining a given phenomenon or issue. And yet, of course, this is what we do best in our research, writing, teaching, and public-political work with history. If some elusive, hard-to-think-about dilemmas were at least forced a bit more to the surface at De Kalb, perhaps that is all we should expect; the real working-through, if it is to come, will come as we do history, individually and collectively, not as we talk about how to do it. And as this happens, the value of conferences such as this may be more clearly understood.