

REPORTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Political Ideologies and Social Movements: A Report on the 1994 Organization of American Historians Conference

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The theme of the eighty-seventh annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians readily incorporated a substantial array of papers and sessions on labor and working-class history. These sessions evidence both the ideological and methodological range that characterizes historical analyses in the field as well as the diverse media being employed to relate the history of working people.

Over 200 participants gathered on Friday afternoon to hear Paul Faler, Theresa Murphy, and Susan Pennybacker discuss E. P. Thompson's influence on American historians and the writing of American working-class history. Paul Faler led off the session with a critical analysis of Thompson's legacy, arguing that general interest in Thompson's analysis dissipated quickly after the 1960s, leaving labor history "the rust bowl of the profession." Ultimately, Faler suggested, Thompson's identification of class with culture proved the undoing of class in historical analysis. Theresa Murphy disagreed, suggesting that class as a cultural category needs expansion rather than repudiation. She particularly emphasized the role of religion in shaping working-class consciousness.

Susan Pennybacker analyzed how the differing political cultures in England and the United States produced a thinker of Thompson's stature but made his ideas difficult to translate into the American environment. David Montgomery, who chaired the session, eloquently defended the Thompson legacy, arguing that "the style of cultural criticism practiced by Thompson drew historians' attention to the whole order of human life and could find much that was congenial in the current quest for multiple narratives." Montgomery went on to suggest that historians today are in danger

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of forgetting Thompson's "insistence that poplar culture was molded by the encounter of ordinary people with exploitation and with the creative destruction of capitalism."

Thompson's continuing influence and the legacy of the 1960s was apparent in a roundtable discussion entitled "Radicalism Re-Examined" involving Mari Jo Buhle, Douglas Monroy, Barbara Ransby, and Harvey J. Kaye. The theme of radicalism and revolution was also addressed in a panel entitled "Workers in the Age of Revolution" in which Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker surveyed the international working class while Sean Wilentz and Michael Merrill focused on plebeian democracy.

Thomas Summerhill and Frank Towers examined the sometimes-unruly character of working-class political culture. Summerhill, drawing on Thompson, among others, focused on the ways in which upstate New Yorkers understood, debated, and modified free labor and free soil ideas between 1840 and 1856. The Anti-Rent movement, he argued, "offers a particularly rich view of plebeian political culture and its relation to national issues in antebellum America." Summerhill particularly featured the manner in which Anti-Renters used popular political traditions and symbolism to advance their radical message. Frank Towers scrutinized yet another instance of "disorderly democracy" in "Nativism and Free Labor in 'Mobtown': Baltimore Workers' Clubs and Urban Political Culture in the 1850s."

Kerry Candaele used New York working-class intellectuals during the same time period to discuss how power was maintained or challenged and to examine the tensions that existed between workers and those who spoke on their behalf. More significantly, she observed, "paying due attention to working-class intellectuals will demonstrate how 'the process by which struggle between men leads to a struggle within each man' is played out in both its intimate, personal detail and also with deadly seriousness on the terrain of social conflict."

"The Legacy of the Pullman Strike" featured presentations by Susan Hirsch, Karen Orren, and Janice Reiff and comments by Shelton Stromquist and John Cumbler. Reiff argued that the traditional picture of Pullman as an isolated, homogeneous community under dictatorial capitalist control was outdated by the time of the great strike. In 1894 the town exhibited occupational and ethnic diversity and close ties with surrounding towns. Nevertheless, Pullman strikers used the traditional picture to portray the conflict as one between workers and a greedy owner rather than as part of a general crisis in the capitalist system. This focus attracted support but also divided Pullman workers who lived in the town from those who did not. Karen Orren asked why Pullman provoked massive federal intervention and the sweeping *in re Debs* decision. Intervention, she argued, was partially based on national political considerations unrelated to the strike, while the *Debs* decision largely reflected the Supreme Court's support for

an attorney general who had proven himself a political ally. Susan Hirsch located Pullman in a long tradition of organizing among railroad and shop workers. Concerned with wages, hours, and working conditions, railroad workers used a variety of organizations to advance their agenda: What mattered was the struggle, not the type of organization through which it was fought. Thus, they were willing to ignore union leaders and even sacrifice their unions as the need arose, believing they as individuals had the right to join unions and to decide when to strike and when to quit. Shelton Stromquist's comment lauded the presenters for placing Pullman in two promising narratives, one national and political, the other rooted in worker communities and culture, while John Cumbler saw the papers as representing a "post-new labor history" that is moving beyond the debates on which labor historians have focused for some years.

As reflected by the preceding descriptions, many of the labor-related sessions and papers examined the character of working-class political culture. They also exhibited a continuing fascination with the South. Ideology and republicanism, for example, provided the focus for three papers on southern artisans. Mary Ferrari examined the impact of the American Revolution on artisans living in Charleston, Norfolk, and Alexandria. In each of these cities between 1764 and 1800, she observed, "mechanics developed some sense of unity, class consciousness, and realizations of their political worth." Many of these politically active artisans employed unfree labor, which gave them the time and skills to pursue political positions. Johanna Miller Lewis's study of artisans in colonial Rowan County, North Carolina, differed significantly from Ferrari's observations regarding urban mechanics. Artisans in rural areas, Lewis concluded, lacked a unifying political ideology. The rural environment sharply limited their political activity. Because of their isolation and their incomplete proletarianization, when these artisans became involved in politics they did so based on their individual experiences in the backcountry and not as representatives of an occupational group.

Michele Gillespie discussed limitations in using republicanism to explain the social cohesiveness of white southerners in the face of mounting social and political dissension during the antebellum era. Urban Georgia artisans, she concluded, did not exhibit a monolithic republicanism that served all white men in the same way. Moreover, the presumed unifying power of republicanism failed to deter urban master craftsmen from constructing a new mechanic consciousness that excluded journeymen-turned-workingmen after 1820.

In a substantially different vein, Jeffrey Bolster read a fascinating and wide-ranging paper examining the effects of the Haitian revolt on itinerant black mariners sailing out of ports located in the West Indies and off the Atlantic coast of North America. These black seamen, he concluded, "helped forge a black Atlantic sensibility by becoming 'citizens' of Haiti—

but ‘citizens’ who returned to the sea and kept moving as roving ambassadors of the proto-Pan-African sovereignty that they had found in Haitian ports.”

The continuing influence of race in the writing of working-class history was perhaps most dramatically exposed in Eric Foner’s presidential address: “The Meaning of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation.” Emancipation experiences represented a common theme running through several papers. In a session that featured southwest Georgia, one of the more fascinating regions of the late-nineteenth-century South, Lee Formwalt, in “African-American Persistence and Mobility in Post-Emancipation Southwest Georgia,” discussed the demographic structure of plantation society, while Susan O’Donovan’s “Free Labor and African-American Households: Reconstruction in Southwest Georgia, 1865–1868” emphasized the subjective side of emancipation with its complex aspects of independence and dependence.

Grace Palladino chaired another session, “Racial Identity and Nationalism in American Labor Ideology,” which extended the analysis well into the twentieth century. Andrew Neather examined labor republicanism, patriotism, and the working-class response to the American imperialism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Paul Taillon reexamined the Georgia “race” strike of 1909, and Lawrence Glickman discussed “wage slavery” and American labor from 1865 to 1930.

David Godshalk and Michael Honey brought the analysis of the freedom struggle of black southerners into the twentieth century. Godshalk’s “Silence and Memory in Local History: The Continuing Struggle Over the Meaning of the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906” provided a new perspective on that infamous episode in Atlanta’s labor history. Blacks and whites treated the incident quite differently. Whites tried to forget it, Godshalk concluded, while the black community used the memory of that unfortunate event to forge its own identity.

Honey examined the labor and civil rights movements in conjunction with Martin Luther King, Jr., black workers, and the Poor People’s Campaign. As the problem of black unemployment became increasingly severe during the mid-1960s, Honey argues, King shifted from civil rights to class and economic issues, seeking to create a labor, civil rights, and reform coalition to demand a fundamental restructuring of economic and power relationships. Racism, Vietnam, and a political shift to the right, however, undermined this effort, and King’s death in 1968 removed the one unifying figure who might have brought together a coalition of workers and the poor. As Honey suggested, the shift to the right after the sixties increasingly isolated progressive labor and civil rights advocates in the political arena of the 1970s and 1980s. Gary Fink examined that development in “George Meany, Jimmy Carter, and the Failure of Democratic Party Constituent Politics.”

“Going to Chicago,” a film by George King with commentary by James Grossman, examined the black migration experience. The film focused on the lives of black Mississippians who migrated to Chicago after World War II; it also provided appropriate historical context going back to the initial stages of the “Great Migration” during World War I. King and his camera ride a bus from Chicago to Mississippi, accompanying Chicago’s Greenville Club back home for a reunion. This trip provided the framework for the film, which conveys the meaning of migration to those who left Mississippi and the perspective of those who either did not leave or returned to the South.

While the influence of race continues to attract the attention of numerous working-class historians, gender studies remain relatively underdeveloped. In the one session that did specifically address gender and family issues, Bonnie Stepenoff, Thomas Dublin, and Walter Licht creatively examined the legacies passed on from parents to children among northeastern Pennsylvania silk and anthracite coal workers. Stepenoff scrutinized the choices of mothers and daughters, and Dublin and Licht considered those of fathers and sons. Along substantially different lines, Jennifer Scanlon studied the working lives of forty-one women employed in the advertising industry. She concluded that some of these women neither accepted consumer culture as their own nor accepted jobs purposefully to exploit other women to get ahead themselves; yet others, influenced by the progressive politics of their college educations, pursued the consumer culture with a missionary zeal, viewing their work not as exploitative but as a positive good. Ultimately, Scanlon uses these diverging behaviors to challenge commonly held assumptions about the hegemonic development of the advertising industry in the early twentieth century.

Finally, around fifty historians accompanied Robert McMath (Georgia Tech) and Gary Fink (Georgia State) for a lively “session on wheels” and discussion of the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills. Norman Elsas, the grandson of corporation founder Jacob Elsas, and president of Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills from 1942 to 1949, also accompanied the group, fielding questions about the now-abandoned industrial complex, the business of bag manufacture, and the work environment at Fulton Bag. Following the on-site visit, the group gathered at the Georgia Institute of Technology to examine personnel records, business ledgers and files (including reports from labor spies), and other materials rescued from the basement of one of the mills in the 1980s. Gary Fink’s recent book, *The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Strikes of 1914–1915*, and Jacquelyn Hall’s “Private Eyes, Public Women: Images of Class and Sex in the Urban South, Atlanta, Georgia, 1913–1915” (in Ava Baron, *Work Engendered*, 1991) are early results of historians’ research in this rich collection. The tour convinced many participants that the collection will provide materials for historians of labor, industry, and technology.