

SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

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CRUSADES AGAINST CRISIS

A View from the United States on the "Rank-and-File"
Critique and Other Catalogues of Labour History's Alleged Ills*

Over the past generation, labour historians have produced an impressive number of studies of crafts, trade unions, communities, and social movements that have deeply enriched our understanding of working-class and U.S. history. Groups once assigned to the margins (if assigned anywhere at all) of the historical narrative now occupy a more central position. Processes long invisible have become clearer, while cherished myths have been qualified, challenged, or demolished. Since the 1960s, labour historians have successfully redefined their field, documenting the legacy of working-class struggles large and small, formal and informal, from massive strikes to workers' control of the labour process to small group or individual resistance. The topics addressed continue to include trade unions and radical movements, such as journeymen's societies, the Knights of Labor, craft unions, Populists, socialists, syndicalists, communists, and industrial unionists. But the field's scope has broadened considerably to embrace working-class culture, politics, and ideology, as well as processes of class formation. Recently, questions of gender, ethnicity, and race have begun to command long overdue attention. While there remains a tremendous amount to learn about the working-class experience, there is much to appreciate in the achievements of the past decades. Today, we can debate the degree to which the subjects and insights of the new historiography have been incorporated into the academic canon, but few can question that the U.S. past looks very different than it did, say, in 1960 or even 1970.

These accomplishments notwithstanding, few historical fields have been subject to as much criticism or confront such a sense of uneasiness or crisis as labour history. There seems to be no end to the critiques, calls for action, and correctives proposed for addressing its shortcomings. Apparently, the

* I would like to thank Cecilia Bucki, Sarah deLone, Dana Frank, Daniel Letwin, Karin Shapiro, and Thomas Sugrue for their comments and criticisms of this paper.

recent British labour history has generated in some quarters a similar sense of disquietude. In the pages of this and other journals, Jonathan Zeitlin has argued forcefully against a paradigm he has identified as “rank and filism”. Like a nineteenth-century evangelical crusading against rum, Romanism, and Sabbath desecration, Zeitlin has charged alleged rank and filists with committing a long list of sins of theory. The details of those charges have appeared in Zeitlin’s articles and the responses to them; here, a summary will suffice. The paradigm that Zeitlin terms “rank and filism” consists of a series of related theoretical assumptions. In the search for the “authentic experience of the ordinary worker”, historians have refocused their attention away from trade unions and political parties to the workplace and community. Rank and filists (a) insist upon a “fundamental division within trade unions between the interests and activities of the ‘bureaucracy’, ‘leadership’ or ‘officialdom’ [. . .] and those of the ‘rank and file’, ‘membership’ or ‘opposition’ on the other”; (b) locate the structural sources of that divergence in “the process of collective bargaining, and in the inherently contradictory position of trade unions in a capitalist society” (which gives trade union leaders “an inherent interest in accommodation with capitalism”); (c) assume, at least implicitly, that ordinary workers have not only no ‘vested interest in the capitalist order’ but also an “objective interest in the supersession of capitalist relations of production, an interest rooted in the exploitation and subordination inherent in the experience of wage labour, whatever their subjective consciousness”. To lend “plausibility to a ‘rank-and-filist’ analysis, workers must be endowed with a vast reservoir of latent power which is contained by the institutions which represent them”, Zeitlin argues.¹

Not surprisingly, Zeitlin finds such crude, essentialist assumptions highly problematic. He contends, for instance, that it is difficult to define with precision who the bureaucracy and rank and file are; that the rank and file identified by some labour historians are not ordinary workers at all but a minority of activists (thus, following Van Gore, he contends that there are several rank and files); that trade unions, if not always democratic, are responsive to their members’ pressure; that union leaders are often more militant than their members; that trade unions were often more crucial than members’ informal or autonomous activity in securing vital job control at the point of production. Given recent research that supports such challenges, Zeitlin calls for the “outright abandonment” of the rank-and-filist paradigm. In its place, he advocates a “new institutionalism” in labour

¹ Quotes from Jonathan Zeitlin “‘Rank and Filism’ in British Labour History: A Critique”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 42–61, “‘Rank and Filism’ and Labour History: A Rejoinder to Price and Cronin”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 89–102, and “From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations”, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, XL (1987), pp. 159–184.

history that recognises that workplace industrial relations “were shaped less by informal social groups or impersonal social and economic processes than by institutional forces: above all the organization and strategies of trade unions, employers and the state”.²

Zeitlin’s claims notwithstanding, there is no consensus as to whether a rank-and-filist paradigm actually exists. In recent issues of this journal, Richard Price, James Cronin, and Richard Hyman – all charged with propagating rank-and-filist history – have responded eloquently to the indictments.³ Although they approach Zeitlin’s essay from different perspectives, all three respondents deny that such a unified paradigm exists, or that they (or others charged) hold the positions Zeitlin attributes to them. Moreover, they take Zeitlin to task for caricaturing a diverse number of sophisticated approaches and ignoring crucial differences among labour historians. Although this is not the place to rehearse their arguments, let me state here that I share many of their criticisms of Zeitlin’s articles. I find it difficult to discern the baldly-stated rank-and-filist assumptions in the works he criticizes; nor do I share his frustration with a concentration on conflict, radicalism, informal work groups, and the like. Offered as one avenue among many in need of exploration, Zeitlin’s “new institutionalism” constitutes a useful suggestion. But as an all-encompassing paradigm, it imposes its own set of *a priori* assumptions, straightjacketing a diverse field with a set of approaches and answers that Zeitlin thinks are worth pursuing. Ultimately, as Zeitlin himself has suggested, it is for the readers of the literature and of this debate to judge for themselves which group lays the strongest claim to accuracy.

The task of this essay is to bring an “Americanist” view to the debate that has recently filled these pages. Zeitlin’s essays, of course, concentrate on British labour historians. It would be patently unfair to apply his critique to the writings of U.S. labour history, and find it wanting. While the rank-and-file debate finds no identical counterpart on this side of the Atlantic,⁴ there

² Zeitlin, “‘Rank and Filism’ and Labour History: A Rejoinder to Price and Cronin”, p. 101.

³ Richard Price, “‘What’s in a Name?’ Workplace History and ‘Rank and Filism’”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 62–77; James E. Cronin, “The ‘Rank and File’ and the Social History of the Working Class”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 78–88; and Richard Hyman, “The Sound of One Hand Clapping: A Comment on the ‘Rank and Filism’ Debate”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 309–326.

⁴ In suggesting the compatibility of an industrial relations approach to labour history “of New Left or syndicalist persuasion”, David Brody has noted recently that “we have yet to see a proposal for a new synthesis by an American working-class historian along the lines of, say, ‘From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations’, which happens to be the title of a recent essay by the keen young Anglo-American labor historian Jonathan Zeitlin”. See Brody, “Labor History, Industrial Relations, and the

is something to be learned by taking a comparative look at the work of U.S. labour historians who study “ordinary workers” or a vaguely-defined rank and file, and, more importantly, the U.S. critics of such work as well. My purpose, then, is not to judge Zeitlin’s paradigm, but to identify parallels between both his no-holds-barred attack on what he thinks are existing practices in British labour history and his call for a redirection of the field, on the one hand, and analogous critiques of practices in U.S. labour history, on the other. I will suggest that the problem may lie less in a state of crisis hanging over labour history than a state of crisis hanging over labour historians.

It is standard practice in any account of the new labour history to explain its emergence as reaction to the old labour history and changes within American society and the academy. Until the late 1950s and early 1960s, labour history reflected the agenda and approach of John R. Commons and the Wisconsin School. The old labour history took as its object of study American trade unions and their practices, stressing the essentially non-radical, job- and wage-conscious outlook of American workers. Largely the domain of institutional economists and, after World War II, industrial relations specialists, the old labour history retained an institutional perspective that had little to say about the majority of Americans who were not, or had never been, members of trade unions.⁵ Such an exclusive focus proved unsatisfactory to a new generation of graduate students in the 1950s and 1960s. Some were of working-class or immigrant backgrounds and shared a politics of the left. Mining local archives in pursuit of topics and questions not found in the old labour history, David Brody, Herbert Gutman, and David Montgomery broke fresh ground in the 1960s. As the publication of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963 generated excitement and a sense of radical renewal in the field, the new labour history was off and running.⁶ The breakthrough, of course, was

Crisis of American Labor”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 43 (1989), p. 13.

⁵ For overviews of the history of labour history, see: David Brody, “The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of an American Working Class”, *Labor History*, 20 (1979), pp. 111–126; “Labor History, Industrial Relations, and the Crisis of American Labor”, pp. 7–18; David Montgomery, “To Study the People: The American Working Class”, *Labor History*, 21 (1980), pp. 485–512; Philip Scranton, “None-Too-Porous Boundaries: Labor History and the History of Technology”, *Technology and Society*, 29 (1988), pp. 722–773; David Brody, “Workers and Work in America: the New Labor History”, in James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams (eds), *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History* (Nashville, 1983), pp. 154–155, and Melvyn Dubofsky, “Workers, Jews, and the American Past: Review of Gutman’s *Power and Culture, Essays on the American Working Class*”, *Tikkun* 3 (3) (1988), pp. 95–97. The main exceptions to this were the writings of Philip Foner, a prolific communist historian whose histories of the U.S. labour movement contain frequent evaluations of leaders’ correct, and more often incorrect stances. For example, see Foner’s multi-volume *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*.

part of a larger expansion of social history, reflected in an insistence on writing a “history from the bottom up”, a history of ordinary Americans, of the inarticulate, of excluded and oppressed groups – women, African-Americans, and Native Americans, and, more recently, Hispanic and Asian immigrants and their descendents.⁷

The animating vision of the new labour history’s first wave was the concept of human agency. But the first wave was not wholly of one piece. Several key strands – some more influential than others – were evident by the late 1960s. And only one, in fact, built upon a series of assumptions similar to those contained in Zeitlin’s rank-and-filist paradigm. Reflecting the sense of crisis of the 1960s, a group of New Left activists and academics, writing in such journals as *Radical America* (initially a project of the SDS Radical Education Project), sought to recover a usable past. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, they repudiated not only the consensus school of American history (and its assertions and celebrations of a Whiggish, essentially conflict-free American past), but the left critique of corporate liberalism (which, in various guises, credited an “enlightened” ruling class with coopting reform and radical movements, an historical counterpart to Herbert Marcuse’s *One Dimensional Man*) as well. Anti-war activists Staughton and Alice Lynd and Jeremy Brecher identified conflict, crisis, and upheaval

⁶ For better or worse, the new U.S. labour historians of the first wave are not known for their attentiveness to theoretical debate. Adopting with little hesitation or reflection a Thompsonian definition of class and class consciousness, labour historians in the U.S. have remained largely immune from the serious debates between advocates of structuralism and human agency that have engaged the energies of British, Latin American, and South African scholars. For a discussion of the ways in which these debates have shaped Latin American labour historiography, see Emilia Viotti da Costa, “Experience Verses Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor and the Working Class in Latin America – What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 36 (1989), pp. 3–24. Today, theoretical contests are fought over post-structuralism, with feminist historian Joan Scott insisting that labour historians and others operate on the terrain of discourse analysis. See: Joan Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 31 (1987), pp. 1–13. One of the few serious attempts at critically incorporating explicitly theoretical concepts into empirical research has come not from historians but from a political scientist. See Ira Katznelson’s excellent “Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons”, in *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 3–41.

⁷ For a recent interpretation of the rise of a new, radical history and its encounter with the established historical profession, see Jonathan M. Wiener, “Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1950–1980”, *The Journal of American History*, 76 (September 1989), pp. 399–434; on the new social history, see Olivier Zunz, “The Synthesis of Social Change: Reflections on American Social History”, in Olivier Zunz (ed.), *Reliving the Past: The Worlds of Social History* (Chapel Hill, 1985), pp. 63–114, and Ira Berlin, “Introduction: Herbert G. Gutman and the American Working Class”, in Ira Berlin (ed.), Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York, 1987), pp. 3–69.

as the salient characteristics of the nation's past. Brecher's *Strike!*, published in 1972, was the "story of repeated, massive, and often violent revolts by ordinary working people in America". Their stance toward unions was unequivocal: Brecher found that "far from fomenting strikes and rebellions, unions and labor leaders have most often striven to prevent or contain them, while the drive to extend them has generally come from a most undocile 'rank and file' ". In their oral history of union organizers, entitled *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers*, the Lynds complained of the CIO's "degeneration" and its leaders' crushing of "militancy, democracy, and local union autonomy". "The fact remains", the Lynds charged, "that too many industrial unions have become bureaucratic closed corporations, like the craft unions of the old AFL."⁸

In 1977, two politically engaged sociologists, Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, systematically developed this strand of labour history. Applying their theories about disorder, protest organizations, and reform to the industrial union movement of the 1930s and 1940s, Piven and Cloward concluded that factory workers were "able to extract their most substantial concessions from government during the early years of the Great Depression, before they were organized into unions". Workers' power was not rooted in organization, but in their capacity to disrupt the economy. Strikes, demonstrations, and sit-downs spread during the mid-1930s "despite existing unions rather than because of them". While representing a "workers' victory", unionization nonetheless brought with it an end to the disruption that had produced labour's gains, organizational consolidation, a heightened dependence upon the state and management, a decline in workers' political influence, and an institutional imperative to maintain discipline on the shop floor.⁹ Brecher, the Lynds, and Piven and Cloward most closely represented an American version of rank and filism, but their tendency always remained a minority current. Lynd and Brecher wrote in the context of the social protest movements of the 1960s and early 1970s; Piven and Cloward write as sociologists. Without assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their accounts, it is safe to say that their more unique guiding assumptions have had little impact on the new labour

⁸ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (San Francisco, 1972), pp. vii–viii, and Alice and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston, 1973), p. 3. For an excellent account of New Left radical historians, *Radical America*, and its political vision, see James Green, "Introduction", in James Green (ed.), *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 3–32; also see David Montgomery, "Spontaneity and Organization: Some Comments", *Radical America*, 7 (November–December 1973), pp. 70–80.

⁹ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, "The Industrial Workers' Movements", in Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York, 1977), pp. 96–180.

history.¹⁰ If this version of rank and filism was contained and eliminated within the historical profession, what currents emerged dominant?

Emphasising working-class agency and workers' cultural resources (rooted in tradition and sustained by autonomous institutions), Herbert Gutman broke considerable new ground, inspiring a new generation of research. Perhaps more than any other historian, Gutman defined the subject of study in labour history to be all workers – skilled and unskilled, immigrant or native-born, white and black, male and female – and their larger “world” – their communities, ethnic and racial heritages, religious orientations, political identifications, social organizations, and the like. At times, he explored nineteenth-century trade unionism, its language and symbolism, ideological and organizational challenges to less-than-hegemonic corporate power, and role in dividing or uniting racial and ethnic groups. At other times, he bypassed unions altogether, exploring instead non-union workers and the conflicts between preindustrial values and the demands of industrial society.¹¹

If Gutman's province was culture, class, and community, David Montgomery pursued other avenues with his emphasis on the practice and theory of workers' control, the hallmark of his studies in the 1970s. Taking industrial workers (particularly in iron and steel, and the metal trades) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as his subject, Montgomery argued that skilled craftsmen exercised a substantial degree of autonomy in the workplace. Their power was rooted in both a superior technical knowledge of production techniques and the maintenance of “an egalitarian

¹⁰ Is it a coincidence that these historians and sociologists, unlike many (though obviously not all) who reject their version of rank and filism, were and remain activist writers and intellectuals? Brecher, an historian who works outside of the academy, has organized and participated in oral history projects, radio programs, and other public history activities. Staughton Lynd currently works as a labour lawyer and community activist in steel towns hard hit by deindustrialization; his participation at professional historical conferences and his writings on labour and the law bring together in a unique way contemporary practice and theory. Piven and Cloward have subsequently written about the Reagan (and pre-Reagan) attacks against the U.S. welfare state and have been prominent in voter registration drives aimed at reorienting the direction of the Democratic Party.

One of Zeitlin's rank-and-filist assumptions that stresses the incorporative, depoliticizing nature of institutional achievements can be most clearly found in critical labour law, although scholars in this tradition have followed a different pathway to their conclusions and pose a different set of questions and problems. See: Karl Klare, “Juridical Deradicalization of the Wagner Act and the Origins of Modern Legal Consciousness, 1937–1941”, *Minnesota Law Review*, 62 (1978), pp. 265–339; and “Labor Law as Ideology: Toward a New Historiography of Collective Bargaining Law”, *Industrial Relations Law Journal*, 4 (1981), pp. 450–506.

¹¹ See the numerous essays in Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1977), and Gutman, *Power and Culture*.

moral code in opposition to the acquisitive individualism of contemporary bourgeois society". Employer efforts to weaken this power led skilled craftsmen to codify their control through union work rules that carefully defined how much work they would perform, how they would perform that work, and how they would behave toward the boss and one another.¹² While Montgomery's initial essay stressed the specific characteristics of this control impulse, his subsequent analysis in *The Fall of the House of Labor* acknowledges the concrete limits of that impulse. Always subject to intense resistance from steel magnates and managers, the craftsmen's control rested in large part on the fate of their unions. And they never permanently resolved the battle in their own favour. Their struggles resulted in momentary victories of varying durations, but the war continued. (In the steel industry, capital delivered a crushing blow to the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers in the opening years of the twentieth century.) Although Montgomery does not pose his approach as a specific model for studying labour history as a whole – his interests are much broader than that – it might be viewed as something of a rough precursor of Zeitlin's "new institutionalism", with its emphasis on the central role of trade unions in setting and upholding rules governing shop floor relations.¹³

¹² David Montgomery, "Workers' Control of Machine Production in the Nineteenth Century", in *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 9–31, and *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 9–57.

¹³ The study of workers' control in the United States has not been confined to skilled craftsmen or their unions, or consisted in an unqualified celebration of that power. In some cases, the union presence was decisive. Bruce Nelson has shown that the triumph of the International Longshoremen's Association (soon to become the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union) on the West Coast after the great strike of 1934 produced a veritable revolution in social relations on the docks and decks; my own work on New Orleans dock workers shows that from 1880 to the 1920s, unions and union alliances (across racial and occupational lines) were decisive factors in winning and maintaining control not only for the port's most skilled workers but for its unskilled men as well. Struggles over workplace control have been well documented for late nineteenth-century railroad workers, and early twentieth-century cigar makers, butchers, and metal-trades workers, and mid-twentieth-century department store saleswomen. See: Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana, 1988); Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York, forthcoming); Cecilia F. Bucki, "Dilution and Craft Tradition: Bridgeport, Connecticut, Munitions Workers, 1915–1919", *Social Science History*, 4 (1980), pp. 105–124; James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers 1894–1922* (Urbana, 1987); Patricia Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women, and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900–1919* (Urbana, 1987); Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana, 1986), and Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana, 1987).

The first sustained wave of studies by the new labour historians appeared from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s.¹⁴ Informed by the themes of class, culture, community, and control, these works explored the transformation of labour systems and the pathways to capitalist industrialization – from the small artisan shops to unmechanized manufactories to mechanized factories of the boot and shoe industry (described by Dawley, Faler, and Blewett), to industrialization’s vanguard, the power-driven mills of Lowell (Dublin), to smaller mills in Rhode Island and Philadelphia (Prude and Scranton), to the patterns of “metropolitan industrialization”, spawning workshops, garrets, factories, and manufactories (Laurie and Wilentz), to the expansion of the putting-out system in urban and rural settings (Stansell and Blewett). These and numerous additional studies traced, among other things, the emergence and recomposition of a native-born American and immigrant working class and the impact of wage labour and market relations on individual trades, families, and communities. Exploring popular challenges to capitalist industrialization in the workshop, the streets, and at the ballot box, historians also have found sources of resistance in a republican ideology and labour theory of value that stressed (male) workers’ ethos of mutuality, a conviction that political democracy and the very health of the American republic required independence and autonomy, and an insistence that labour created all of society’s wealth. These beliefs, at times, served as powerful indictments of the process of capitalist industrialization. Many labour historians in this wave celebrated republican tradi-

¹⁴ For a representative sample of community studies, see: Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, 1976); Paul Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the Early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Albany, 1981); Susan E. Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Crafts in Newark, 1800–1860* (Philadelphia, 1978); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York, 1979); Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia, 1980); Frances Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877–1919* (Albany, 1984); Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855–1884* (Urbana, 1978); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 1983); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986); Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810–1860* (New York, 1983); Philip Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism: The Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800–1885* (New York, 1983), and Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, 1987). On organization, see: Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the IWW* (New York, 1969); Leon Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, 1983), and Susan Levine, *Labor’s True Women: Carpet Weavers, Industrialization, and Labor Reform in the Gilded Age* (Philadelphia, 1984).

tions and deplored the economic changes that destroyed the older artisanal system. Critics have charged them with exaggerating the negative impact of economic change, overestimating the power or extent of workers' alternative beliefs, romanticizing their historical subjects, and failing to explore the less heroic side of their practices and beliefs.

Yet an increasing number of works are attempting to grapple with these problems. Alice Kessler-Harris, Christine Stansell, Mary Blewett, Kathy Peiss, and Ava Baron, for example, have explored aspects of capitalist industrialization's very different impact upon men and women. They have shown how a single-minded focus on the artisanal workshop or skilled trades distorts our comprehension of labour's past by giving research priority to male-dominated sectors (to the exclusion of the many other modes of non-factory, non-industrial, or non-wage labour), thereby rendering invisible those who do not work in them. Christine Stansell has described processes whereby concepts of the family wage and fears of female sexuality shaped male craft workers' response to factory women's labour activism in the fluid decade of the 1830s. In her *Men, Women, and Work*, Mary Blewett goes well beyond earlier studies of the Massachusetts boot and shoe industry by Faler and Dawley by placing gender at the center of her analysis. According to Blewett, in the realm of ideology and political language, republican's definitions of economic independence and autonomy served to reinforce women's relegation to a secondary sphere. Moreover, she illustrates divisions not only between men and women but within the ranks of women workers themselves, reflecting their differential location in the labour process (upon occasion leading, for example, married women working in the home to articulate demands at variance with their sisters working in Essex County factories).¹⁵ In the 1980s, then, historians of women workers and gender issues have suggested new questions by addressing critical absences in labour history.

Historians of African-American workers, in contrast, have been less successful in making black labourers, "race" and working-class race relations a central concern of the field. Few labour historians have followed lines of inquiry suggested by Alexander Saxton in his *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1971), which placed organized white workers' racist beliefs and practices at center stage. Studies of the communities and trades of white workers have not system-

¹⁵ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982); Stansell, *City of Women*; Mary Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780–1910* (Urbana, 1988); Ava Baron, "Questions of Gender: Deskillling and Demasculinization in the U.S. Printing Industry, 1830–1915", *Gender and History*, 1 (1989), pp. 178–199, and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986).

atically (and in many cases, not even casually) explored working-class racist practices and beliefs. But over the past decade, a small but growing number of studies in African-American labour history have confronted the obvious: Racial distinctions often constituted a fundamental barrier between black and white workers, while labour market segmentation – brought about by historical processes involving actions and assumptions of white managers and workers alike – relegated blacks and whites to different spheres of urban economies and industrial sectors. Where blacks and whites competed for work, both groups (themselves subject to divisions by occupation and status) employed a variety of strategies to achieve their respective and sometimes overlapping goals.¹⁶ Within labour history as a whole, studies of gender, working-class racism, women and African-American workers remain ghettoized in their respective sub-fields. But labour historians are slowly beginning to acknowledge the decisive importance of gender and race in shaping the working-class experience.

Recently, the history of mid-twentieth century labour has come into its own. The spate of new studies of this period come closest to addressing the concerns of Zeitlin's "new institutionalism". What all of these works have in common is an institutional, trade-union focus, a recognition that the state played a key role in establishing the parameters of labour's activities, an integration of political economy into historical analysis, and careful examination of conflicts between interest groups within and among unions. With the exception of the UAW, the unions under study here, for all their differences, often possessed leaders to the left of their members. To take several examples: Bruce Nelson's *Workers on the Waterfront* is a masterful account of West Coast longshoremen and seamen in the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of the left-led International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, a "syndicalist renaissance" that witnessed temporary cross-trade solidarity and a successful struggle for control over the production process. Joshua Freeman's *In Transit* explores the history of New York City's bus and subway workers and the evolution of the Transport Workers Union, which drew together at the leadership level communists and their allies with Irish republicans to direct a union whose membership consisted largely of white Irish Catholics and smaller numbers of Italians and blacks. Gary Gerstle's *Working-Class Americanism* takes as its case study the independ-

¹⁶ Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, 1865–1890* (Urbana, 1989), Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans*; Paul Worthman, "Black Workers and Labor Unions in Birmingham, Alabama, 1897–1904", *Labor History*, 10 (1969), pp. 375–407; Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat 1915–45* (Urbana, 1985); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979); Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780–1980* (Lexington, 1987), and Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–30* (Urbana, 1987).

ent Textile Union of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Led in the 1930s by Franco-Belgian radicals committed to a social democratic vision, and in the 1940s by Catholic corporatists, the union united Woonsocket's traditionalist immigrants, numerically dominated by French Canadians, created a context for the articulation of a distinct working-class Americanist political language, and enabled workers to exert substantial control on the shop floor. Focusing on World War II and its immediate aftermath in *Gender at Work*, Ruth Milkman confronts the dynamics of job segregation by sex in the automobile and electrical industries, the different roles played by the United Automobile Workers and the United Electrical Workers in maintaining or challenging sex segregation, and the unions' ultimate failure to protect women's wartime employment gains. *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, by Brian Greenberg and Leon Fink, is a history of New York's Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199, from its origins in the late 1950s to the early 1980s. Led by former communists who retained a progressive politics, 1199 organized largely black and Hispanic female workers in the city's public hospitals, gradually but dramatically improved wages and working conditions, united a working-class and civil rights agenda, and represented one of the few bright spots in an otherwise conservative labour movement. Important achievements in their own right, these works demonstrate labour history's growing sophistication and capacity to develop along new lines.¹⁷

Some aspects of labour history have been incorporated into "mainstream" history in this country. Sections in many recent U.S. history survey textbooks (devoted to the extension of market relations in the early national period, economic growth, dislocation, and the industrial revolution, the emergence of working-class and middle-class cultures, the rise of corporate capitalism) reflect the findings of the past decades. The inclusion of some of these topics, and certainly their content, would have been unthinkable two decades ago.¹⁸ Almost every issue of the *Journal of American History*, one

¹⁷ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*; Joshua B. Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1933–1966* (New York, 1989); Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: A History of Hospital Workers' Union, Local 1199* (Urbana, 1989); Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (New York, 1989), and Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex During World War II* (Urbana, 1987). Two important works that appeared in the early 1980s are Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO During World War II* (New York, 1982), and Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923–60* (Urbana, 1983). Two recent works that address the role of the law are William E. Forbath, "The Shaping of the American Labor Movement", *Harvard Law Review*, 102 (1989), pp. 1111–1256, and Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880–1960* (Cambridge, 1985).

¹⁸ For examples, see James Henretta *et al.*, *America's History* (Chicago, 1987); Mary Beth Norton *et al.*, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States* (Boston, 1986),

of the largest circulation journals for professional historians, contains an article or discussion on some topic in labour history. Yet could it be that labour history has won the battle but lost the war? Despite the accomplishments of the past generation of scholars, the directors of the American Social History Project could complain in 1989, with some justification, that despite the “enormous ferment in the profession [. . .] mainstream American history writing remained essentially unaffected by the new scholarship and the insights that it offered”. The “balkanization” of historical analysis condemned by Herbert Gutman in 1982 – which, not surprisingly, affects not just labour history but social history and American history as well – has persisted into the 1990s.¹⁹

While many – if not all or even most – of labour history’s findings have been incorporated into narrative histories and textbooks in American history, practitioners as well as critics have repeatedly pointed out the field’s inadequacies and shortcomings, denounced its failure to address various subjects, and identified its allegedly faulty assumptions. It should not be surprising that liberal and conservative historians find the field’s focus and findings problematic. Populated by many a former activist out of a New Left tradition and animated by a sense of political commitment, labour history has touched more than one ideological nerve. If historians cannot miss the existence of class conflict in our nation’s past, some certainly dispute its impact and centrality. Moreover, the recovery of working people’s alternative moral and political values – be they republican, socialist, or more generally mutualistic – that run counter to the long-recognized acquisitive individualism has left more than one critic on the right unconvinced.²⁰

and Gary Nash *et al.*, *The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society* (New York, 1986).

¹⁹ American Social History Project, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 1, *From Conquest and Colonization Through Reconstruction and the Great Uprising of 1877* (New York, 1989), p. xii.

The proliferation of case studies has transformed the field in less than a generation; that same proliferation has left many labor historians frustrated at the lack of “synthesis” – so much is known, but no one has risen to the occasion to pull it all together. While the absence of a U.S. version of E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* troubles more than a few, some contend that such a project – given the size of the United States, its regional and economic diversity, and the heterogeneity of its working classes – may be an impossibility. On the question of synthesis, see: David Brody, “Workers and Work in America: The New Labor History”, in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life*, pp. 154-55, and Michael Kazin, “Limits of the Workplace”, *Labor History*, 30 (1989), p. 111. Also see the contributions by Leon Fink, Michael Reich, Mari Jo Buhle, Alan Dawley, Sean Wilentz, David Brody, and Alice Kessler-Harris, in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (eds), *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb, 1989).

²⁰ See: John Patrick Diggins, “Comrades and Citizens: New Mythologies in American

The sense of uneasiness exists not only among critics but among practitioners and those sympathetic to the new labour historians' project as well. And indeed, they have produced no shortage of declarations – some in the form of criticisms of past practices, others in the form of programmatic injunctions – on the need for labour historians to adopt new directions. Over the past decade and a half, labour history has been charged with numerous faults: “sentimentalism” of the right and the left (McDonnell); “nostalgification of working-class history” (Monds); betraying a “wistful conception of the past” and overestimating the capacities of “self-reliant subcultures of the poor” (Kazin).²¹ From the left as well as the right, social history (and by direct extension labour history) has come under fire for its lack of attention to politics and the state.²² As I noted above, historians of women workers and gender issues have regularly chided the field for its emphasis on skilled, male workers in artisanal trades or heavy industry and a concomitant lack of attention to non-industrial or non-wage workers, especially women.²³ Following parallel lines, historians of African-Americans have been critical of the labour historians for failing to recognize, condemn, or give proper scholarly weight to the persistence of racism and the traditions of racial exclusion in white trade unions.²⁴

Historiography”, *The American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), pp. 614–638, and Aileen S. Kraditor, *The Radical Persuasion 1890–1917: Aspects of the Intellectual History of Three American Radical Organizations* (Baton Rouge, 1981); non-conservative critics who challenge this view of oppositional values include Jackson Lears, “Power, Culture, and Memory”, *The Journal of American History*, 75 (1988), pp. 137–140.

²¹ Lawrence T. McDonnell, “‘You are Too Sentimental’: Problems and Suggestions for a New Labor History”, *Journal of Social History* (1984), pp. 629–654; Jean Monds, “Workers’ Control and the Historians: A New Economism”, *New Left Review*, 97 (1976), pp. 81–104, and Michael Kazin, “The Historian as Populist”, Review of Gutman’s *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, *The New York Review of Books*, 12 May 1988.

²² William E. Leuchtenburg, “The Pertinence of Political History; Reflections on the Significance of the State in America”, *The Journal of American History*, 73 (1986), pp. 585–600; Samuel P. Hays, “Politics and Social History: Toward a New Synthesis”, in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life*, pp. 161–179; Christopher Tomlins, “Review of Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor*”, in *Labour History*, 55 (1988), pp. 97–98; Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “The Political Crisis of Social History: Class Struggle as Subject and Object”, in Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), pp. 179–212.

²³ For a comprehensive overview, see: Lois Rita Helmbold and Ann Schofield, “Women’s Labor History, 1790–1945”, *Reviews in American History* (1989), pp. 501–518.

²⁴ The past several years have witnessed attacks on Herbert Gutman’s suggestive essay on black union organizer Richard Davis and the racially egalitarian strands within the United Mine Workers of America in the late nineteenth century. Herbert Hill and David Roediger have charged Gutman and his “followers” with privileging class over race, ignoring racism, and romanticizing the history of the labour movement. See: Herbert Hill, “Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers

The list does not end here. Writing in a supportive vein in 1979, David Brody recommended a synthesis that takes as its point of departure the “common ground applying to all American workers” – namely, an economic approach that begins with work and the job and “broadens out from there”. Deploring the “paucity of economic analysis in recent writings on labor history”, the following year, David Montgomery called on labour historians to enter into dialogue with political economists involved in exploring labour-market segmentation; more recently, Nick Salvatore and Brody have echoed that call. In 1989, Andrew Gordon suggested that U.S. labour history has much to gain “simply by transcending the single-nation focus and spending some time reading the history of labor outside the First World”. What is needed, he argues, is for U.S. historians to “cultivate a broader comparative sense of problem, as well as a more acute sense of theory”.²⁵ Philip Scranton, in a recent scholarly controversy in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, has faulted labour historians who focus on workplace social relations for failing to conceptualize “technology” (as well as a host of other concepts) properly. Impoverished by their distance from vibrant trends in social theory – including critical geographers and historians of technology – labour historians risk a “numbing descent into revived institutionalism and interpretive squabbling”. The solution is complex: a “re-entering [of] the theory stream”, a problematization of an “array of received concepts and dichotomies, reworking them from static universals into differentiated elements of complex, contingent dynamics”, and a reorientation of labour history “towards studies in the history of capitalist relations”.²⁶ Lastly, liberal political historian Alan Brinkley, ap-

of America”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 2 (1988), pp. 132–200; Hill, “Race, Ethnicity and Organized Labor: The Opposition to Affirmative Action”, *New Politics*, 1 (1987), pp. 32–82; Dave Roediger, “Notes on Working Class Racism”, *New Politics*, II (1989), pp. 61–66, and “‘Labor in White Skin’; Race and Working-Class History”, in *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (London, 1988), pp. 287–308. For challenges to Hill, see Stephen Brier, “In Defense of Gutman: The Union’s Case”, in “Labor, Race and the Gutman Thesis: Responses to Herbert Hill”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 2 (1989), pp. 382–395. In *New Politics*, 1 (1987), see: Nick Salvatore, “Workers, Racism and History: A Response”, pp. 22–26, and David Brody, “Hill Discounts Larger Context”, pp. 38–41.

²⁵ Brody, “The Old Labor History and the New”, p. 125; David Montgomery, “To Study the People: The American Working Class”, *Labor History*, 21 (1980), p. 493; Nick Salvatore, “Introduction” to “Labor History and Industrial Relations: A Symposium”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 43 (1989), pp. 5–6, Brody, “Labor History, Industrial Relations, and the Crisis of American Labor”, pp. 7–18; Andrew Gordon, “An International Perspective on Technology and Theory: A Response to Philip Scranton”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 35 (1989), p. 31.

²⁶ Philip Scranton, “The Workplace, Technology, and Theory in American Labor History”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 35 (1989), pp. 3–22. Also see Scranton, “None-Too-Porous Boundaries: Labor History and the History of Technology”, pp. 722–743; Williamazon, “The Breaking of the American Working

preciating the “richness of the new labor history and the extent of its achievements to date”, thinks that “perhaps it is time for the field to display more of the diversity and the disagreement it has so successfully revealed in the lives of its subjects”. A “greater ideological diversity” would lead practitioners to ask a new set of questions: “What effect did industrialization have on the material well-being of American workers? What difference would it make to our view of labor history if it could be shown that the decline of ‘workers’ control’ was accompanied by a rise in their standard of living?”²⁷

The list of proposed new directions and cures for labour history’s ills, then, is long: less sentimentalism and nostalgia, more politics and attention to the state, new frameworks that place race and gender at center stage, a re-entering of the stream of theory and sharper analysis of technology, a focus on work as a unifying feature of working-class life, dialogue with economists and industrial relations specialists, comparative and internationalist perspectives, and ideological diversity. It seems to me that labour history can accommodate – and is already accommodating – many of these challenges. It appears to be learning from its earlier mistakes, and profiting immeasurably by heeding, at least to some degree, these various calls for action. Undoubtedly, our understanding of the past will be the richer for it. But suppose that not all issues are negotiable. What if the criticisms or charges of misdirection are so fundamental that labour history, as it is constituted, cannot stand up under the scrutiny and remain intact? Zeitlin has offered a critique of this nature in Great Britain. One such challenge has already been raised in the U.S. as well, and the sides are being drawn up. At issue is not politics, technology, the workplace, gender, or race, but ideology, the very character and contours of workers’ beliefs.

A cornerstone of the new labour history has been the recovery of an alternative set of values and practices rooted in working-class communities in the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries. Those values include mutuality; a rejection of acquisitive individualism and the values of a naked, unrestrained marketplace; a diffuse if sometimes acute sense of class; adherence to a republican ethos (with its emphasis on economic and personal independence, political autonomy, a labour theory of value, manliness, and identification with the American Revolution and the nation’s ostensibly democratic institutions); a resistance to managerial or corporate practices designed to degrade labour, and, at times and in certain groups, an impulse toward control over the labour process. Objections to this

Class”, *Reviews in American History*, 17 (1989), pp. 277–282.

²⁷ Alan Brinkley, “The World of Workers”, *The New Republic*, 8 February 1988, pp. 35–38. The piece is a review of Gutman’s *Power and Culture* and Montgomery’s *The Fall of the House of Labor*.

framework flow not only from the word-processors of liberal and conservative historians I referred to earlier, but from those of some labour historians as well.

The most vocal critic of these dominant themes is Michael Kazin, who finds problems analogous to those found by Zeitlin for the British case. In a number of book reviews and essays, Kazin has objected that “class struggle still occupies its historiographic throne” in U.S. labour history. “The most influential writings of the new labor historians have been organized around the presence or absence of class consciousness, with the clear implication that U.S. labor history has been an unfolding tragedy because workers have, by and large, spurned the Marxist dream.” Labour historians have “failed to evaluate what workers did and did not want and accomplish in their own terms”.²⁸ Workers’ goals, according to Kazin, were more conservative than most labour historians would assume (more leisure time and an escape from working-class status, among other things). And more important than loyalties of “class” were those of “family, race, gender, ethnicity, region, and nation”.²⁹ Labour scholars, he concludes, “have not [. . .] come to grips with the abundant evidence that white wage-earners found more to celebrate than to curse in the achievements of a liberal state and civil

²⁸ Kazin’s dislike of *Segmented Work, Divided Workers*, authored by three Marxist economists, David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, is apparent when he concludes that the “neglect of the cultural and ideological aspects of workers’ lives is a step backward for the synthetic project”. He assumes, of course, that the “synthetic project” is a good idea whose time has come, and that a study – even a schematic one as *Segmented Work* – that fails to capture the totality of workers’ experience and priorities is fatally flawed. These standards are indeed high. On the other side of the divide, Gordon, Edwards and Reich lamented labour historians’ failure to “integrate economic analyses of the dynamics of capital accumulation with historical analyses of the complexity, totality, and specificity of working-class experience” – a criticism that rings as true for many studies today as it did in 1982 when *Segmented Work* was published. Historians and economists may have a great deal to teach each other, but the learning process will require a degree of tolerance for the peculiarities, methodologies, and objects of specialized study of the respective fields that we have yet to witness. See: Michael Kazin, “Struggling with the Class Struggle”, *Labor History*, 28 (1987), pp. 507–508; David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (Cambridge, 1982), p. xi.

²⁹ While labour historians have not explored working-class conservatism to Kazin’s or Zieger’s satisfaction, the subject has hardly been ignored. See Alexander Keyssar, *Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts* (New York, 1986); Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory-City* (New York, 1978); Tamara K. Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship Between the Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (New York, 1982); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill, 1987); David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875–1925* (Urbana, 1989), and Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*.

society". Kazin is not alone in his doubts about workers' consciousness of class and outlook toward industrializing America. In a roundtable response to Montgomery's *The Fall*, Robert Zieger offers the assessment that Montgomery and his followers have been "less responsive to the problem of apparent working-class support for American capitalism".³⁰

Is it even possible to speak of a single American "labour history" at all? One could argue that these charges represent caricatures of a complex, multi-faceted field that is becoming even more so each year. The range of questions posed, subjects explored, and conclusions reached is by no means as monolithic as Kazin asserts. It is always possible, of course, to pull out individual works that slight important questions, but as a *field*, labour history is not guilty of these charges against it. Yet stripped of its reductionism, the portrait contains kernels of truth and highlights crucial differences in approaches. Labour historians have devoted a disproportionate percentage – though by no means all – of their work to studying class relations, on and off the shop floor, and class conflicts do figure prominently in many studies. Labour historians who study workers or who attempt a "social history of the working class" are operating out of one branch of social history. While the boundaries of labour history have expanded dramatically over the past generation, and are coterminous and often overlapping with those of a more broadly conceived social history, labour history rightly remains its own field, with its own distinct traditions, historiographies, focuses, and agenda.

Disagreements clearly exist over interpretations of workers' ideologies.³¹ Further empirical research, undertaken from a variety of perspectives, will broaden our knowledge of working-class aspirations and struggles. But the current focus on conflict and upheaval, a concomitant view that social consciousness grew out of the social relations of industrial capitalism, and an accounting for the "presence or absence of consciousness" is not evidence that labour historians evaluate the past as an "unfolding tragedy",

³⁰ Kazin, "Struggling with the Class Struggle", pp. 507–510; "Limits of the Workplace", *Labor History*, 30 (1989), pp. 110–113; Robert Zieger, "The Many Mansions of David Montgomery", *Labor History*, 30 (1989), p. 124. Also see Kazin, "A People Not a Class: Rethinking the Political Language of the Modern US Labor Movement", *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggle in the 1980s* (London, 1988), pp. 257–285. Approaching the matter from somewhat different perspectives, see John Bodnar, "Immigration, Kinship, and the Rise of Working-Class Realism in Industrial America", *Journal of Social History*, 14 (1980), pp. 45–65, and Nick Salvatore, "Response to Sean Wilentz, 'Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920'", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 26 (1984), pp. 25–30.

³¹ Also see, for example, Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 26 (1984), pp. 1–24, and responses by Nick Salvatore and Michael Hanagan in the same issue.

because American workers have spurned some ill-defined “Marxist dream”, as Kazin contends.³² If more than a few labour historians who prefer to find working-class unity have been unable to find it, or have sought explanations for workers’ failure to create or sustain an effective, common front against capital, this does not mean they impose unfairly a presentist agenda on the past. Nor does it mean they necessarily distort American workers’ own history. Just as historians must not place words in the mouths of their historical subjects, neither should they be bound by categories suggested by the subjects themselves. And even if U.S. workers constituted a “people not a class” – a point Kazin has asserted recently – it does not mean that class analysis has no value. Applied with subtlety and skill, class analysis can address not only questions of class formation, capital accumulation, and the labour process (the “hard”, economic side of workers’ experience), but issues of culture, ideology, and consciousness (conservative and radical) as well. It remains an important tool in labour historians’ arsenal for exploring the past.

How do we explain both the sense of uneasiness and crisis pervading labour history’s practitioners and the calls for reformation, redirection, and reconceptualization? First, the dynamics of academic production and the publication process encourage scholars to differentiate their work from others in the field.³³ In a highly competitive marketplace of scholarly ideas and a labour market glutted by recent Ph.D.s (the highly touted labour shortages in higher education, brought on by the imminent retirement of an entire generation of senior scholars, has yet to materialize and make life dramatically different for the incoming generation of scholars), institution-

³² Neither do U.S. labour historians endow workers with some “latent reservoir” of revolutionary potential or take working-class solidarity for granted, rooting its presence or absence solely at the point of production, as Zeitlin claims British labour historians do. At the same time, few monographs ignore community, family, and ethnicity; gender relations are slowly getting more attention (though the same cannot be said for race). On the array of divisions on and off the shop floor within the American working class, see: Richard Jules Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875–1900* (Urbana, 1986); Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788–1890* (New York, 1985); Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What we Will*, and Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way*.

³³ While many acknowledge historiographical debts and some even celebrate traditions (in labour history, Thompson, Gutman, and Montgomery are routinely and respectfully cited), most also stress, sometimes unduly, what is novel. In their introductions to dissertations and first books in particular, authors take great pains to advertise their distinctive contributions, often promising revolutionary breakthroughs in conceptualization. After years of painstaking research, who would want to announce that their accomplishment consisted of merely confirming the already-known? In a process analogous to capitalism’s continual differentiation of consumer products, there is a tendency within the American academy to innovate for innovation’s sake.

al imperatives contribute to the need to criticize and condemn. But such imperatives, by themselves, hardly account for the whole story, nor do they apply only to labour history. Second, while careerism and opportunism may play some small role in the attacks upon the field, many labour historians who are impressed with the recent accomplishments remain sincerely troubled by the field's problems. And since many of the problems are quite real, the solutions suggested are useful and welcome. But the intensity of some attacks and the degree of frustration expressed are out of proportion to the problems' scope.

So from where does the crisis of labour history come? The political impotence of modern-day academics in the Age of Reagan and Bush has a good deal to do with it. One of the political ironies, and great frustrations, of being a radical academic in the 1980s has been the effective severing of the very connection between scholarship and politics that so many of us desire. Of what real consequence is the past generation of labour and social history? While presentist concerns have not guided our composite research agenda, many radical academics have carried out their work with the hope and expectation that their findings would be important, in some indirect way, to current-day politics, that a transformed understanding of the past – of actors, structures, and processes – could inform a politics in the present. But the rewriting of the past appears of little relevance in the political wasteland in which we live and work. With our historical contributions seemingly irrelevant to “real-world” struggles, it appears that the scholarly terrain has become a clear – if poor – alternative upon which to do battle. The vehemence of attacks, the high stakes attributed to potential outcomes, the veritable war of words – these have become the substitutes for effective engagement beyond the academy. Reading some of these exchanges, one would think that theory and practice, in this day and age, are so intimately connected that research agendas, perspectives, and assumptions have dire consequences outside scholarly journals and departments. For the most part, they do not.

In a constructive vein, many labour historians have diagnosed real problems in the field and have proposed a variety of solutions. And that is all to the good. Less constructive are the wholesale indictments. These remind me of the recent oat bran phenomenon afflicting health-conscious Americans. Capitalizing on the fear of high cholesterol, corporate manufacturers of breakfast cereals aggressively marketed oat bran as a nutritional panacea. Yet recent studies suggest that the oversell may be without foundation; oat bran's magical qualities may lie in the simple fact that when you're eating it, you're not eating something else that's bad for you. The cures to labour history's woes proposed in some quarters will not lead us into some historiographical promised land. At best, and followed partially, they might keep us from relying on worn categories whose explanatory value

may be reaching conceptual dead-ends. Labour history is not suffering from high cholesterol levels, but that does not mean that it shouldn't watch its diet. And there is every indication that, far from suffering from a "crisis", the field is alive, well, and growing.

No single approach or set of assumptions, no "new institutionalism", no reorientation of the field in a single direction can address the experiences, behaviours, and consciousness of the multiple historical subjects we study. In a recent essay, Patricia Cooper has posed the question: "What is our objective in studying labor history? Is the subject workers, capitalist development, power – or all three?" Her solution is an ecumenical one: What we need, she contends, is a "broadly integrative approach [. . .] that takes into account time, place, and technology [. . .] gender and race". In U.S. labour history, many questions remain unexplored. And different questions require different sources and tools of analysis. If our project is indeed "creating a social history of the working class on many fronts", as James Cronin argues it is, then there is plenty of room for diversity – room for a "new institutionalism" as well as a rank-and-file approach that centers on autonomous shop floor practices.³⁴

Labour history in the United States today reflects a diversity of subject matter and approaches. Perhaps it is premature for us to be complaining about synthesis. Perhaps, as David Montgomery has argued, labour historians "share no common theory of history" and "represent no one school of thought".³⁵ In the current debate about synthesis in U.S. history, critics of the concept hark back to past decades, when the synthetic account of the consensus school celebrated and homogenized the American experience, wrote fundamental conflict out of the picture, and excluded from the narrative those America itself had excluded – workers, women, African-Americans, and others.³⁶ While there is little risk (I hope) of excluding these previously excluded groups from our future work, there is no agreement about what should constitute the conceptual pole of our new labour synthesis. Zeitlin's pole is not Kazin's is not Montgomery's. And these are not the poles that African-American and women's historians might choose. A lack of "synthesis" is hardly incapacitating us. For all we know, within several years, we may witness the emergence of not a single synthesis but multiple syntheses. But does it matter all that much? Should it overly

³⁴ Patricia A. Cooper, "Recasting Labor History: A Response to Philip Scranton", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 35 (1989), p. 23; James E. Cronin, "The 'Rank and File' and the Social History of the Working Class", p. 84.

³⁵ David Montgomery, "Class, Capitalism, and Contentment", *Labor History*, 30 (1989), pp. 125–126.

³⁶ See Nell Irvin Painter, "Bias and Synthesis in History", pp. 109–112, and Roy Rosenzweig, "What *Is* the Matter with History?", pp. 117–122, in "A Round Table: Synthesis in American History", *The Journal of American History*, 74 (1987), pp. 107–130.

concern us? I think not; we have better things to worry about. Rather than bemoan the diversity within labour history, we should welcome it and get on with our work.