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EDITORIAL

Labour history research reached a worldwide peak in popularity during the sixties and seventies. The prevailing “Old Labour History” with its institutional focus gradually made way for a *social* history of labour. This new trend disavowed the view that labour history was a highly specialized field and attempted to place this type of historical research in the context of society as a whole. Without ignoring the role of unions and other labour organizations, a variety of new approaches gained ground that established links with subdisciplines such as women’s history, cultural history, the history of mentalities, and urban history, and applied insights from sociology and anthropology.

The field rapidly grew so diverse and complex that coherent synthesis became desirable. Unfortunately, the discipline’s decline set in before anything could be accomplished towards this goal. This setback was especially serious in advanced industrial societies. Verity Burgmann provides a characteristic description of this development in Australia:

Labour history became progressively marginalised, increasingly regarded as irredeemably specialist, guilty of all the sins of the more traditional sub-disciplines, such as intellectual history or constitutional history. [. . .] Within history departments, labour history fell into desuetude, joining religious history as an outmoded sub-discipline consigned, if not to the rubbish bin of history, then at least to the laws of natural wastage so far as staff replenishment was concerned.¹

While labour history’s popularity did not always take such a dramatic turn for the worse, it certainly did end up on the defensive in many countries.

Labour history does not truly have itself to blame for its current nadir. The field has always welcomed new trends. Instead, the reasons appear to lie with external factors. First, the worldwide political constellation has undergone a metamorphosis that has caused the evanescence of the spirit of the 1960s, the collapse of ‘socialism’ in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the crisis of many working-class parties elsewhere. Second, the advanced countries have experienced a long-term shift in relevant standards and values. Work has “been objectively displaced from its status as a central and self-evident fact of life” and is consequently “also forfeiting its subjective role as the central motivating force in the activity of workers.”²

These factors have turned historical research on labour relations and workers into an antiquarian field in the eyes of many. Both less politicized areas and new subdisciplines (such as environmental history) enjoy increasing popularity.

¹ Verity Burgmann, “The Strange Death of Labour History”, in: Bob Carr *et al.*, *Bede Nairn and Labour History* (Sydney, 1991), pp. 69–81, 70–71.

² Claus Offe, *Disorganized Capitalism. Contemporary Transformation of Work and Politics* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 147–148.

This collection of essays is a scholarly attempt to further the urgent integration of labour history in the broader discipline of social history and at the same time to highlight the field's undiminished vitality.

As previously mentioned, the plethora of perspectives from the past three decades still lacks a cohesion force, thereby creating an impression of fragmentation. Theoretical integration of the various approaches is necessary. This integrated social history of labour will have to deal with many obstacles. Some of the most important are the following:

(1) Geographical, spatial, and environmental circumstances of the developments in question have been neglected. Labour historians tend to view space as something "dead" (Michel Foucault) and therefore often fail to give ecological and locational influences on human actions the consideration they deserve.

(2) There is a contrast between the history of daily life and institutional history. It is necessary to bridge the gap between historical research on *objective* events such as labour processes, wages, and housing on the one hand and research on individuals' *subjective* experiences regarding these issues on the other. A true understanding of these developments is possible only when the objective and subjective aspects are viewed as interdependent.

(3) Research currently isolates the working-class and the workers' movement to the exclusion of outside influences. The theory that it is necessary to consider trends such as the history of entrepreneurs when writing about labour history should be applied in practice.

(4) Issues involving gender, race, ethnicity, and age are treated as separate subdisciplines. Although labour history research no longer appears to focus implicitly on young white male workers, it remains difficult to find a consistent approach to the plural identities of the working class.

(5) Misleading periodization persists. Two methods of exclusion by date have had an artificial and consequently distorting effect on labour history. Developments of the early modern period are all too often considered isolated incidents (although periods analysed are beginning to start around 1700 instead of around 1800). Labour historians are insufficiently aware of the importance of the development of merchant capitalism in places such as Florence during the *quattrocento* or the Republic of the Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Furthermore, analyses of very recent labour relations and labour movements from the past two decades are usually the domain of scholars from other fields (such as industrial relations or sociology).

(6) Labour history research overemphasizes core countries such as the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Japan. The burgeoning labour history of the capitalist periphery merits the same consideration as the labour history of core countries. Whether developments occur in

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Chile, Nigeria, India, or Malaysia, they deserve to be studied as events in their own right, rather than as early stages of or deviations from developments in highly developed countries.

The present collection of essays is a step towards carrying out this versatile programme. The authors use case studies to explore ways to integrate labour history with other historical perspectives. They focus on the first four points listed above. Topics include geography (Carville Earle), daily life (Alf Lüdtke), entrepreneurs (Gottfried Korff), race (Dave Roediger), gender (Sonya Rose), and households (Marcel van der Linden). Future publications will also examine the other issues.³

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³ The next *International Review of Social History* Supplement (December 1994) will deal with periodization.

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Divisions of Labor: The Splintered Geography of Labor Markets and Movements in Industrializing America, 1790–1930

CARVILLE EARLE

Among the various methodological prescriptions of Anthony Giddens, perhaps the most useful for labor history are his advisories on social change, on the anxieties and tensions attending a society's transition from one geographical scale to another.¹ Labor's experience in the United States offers a case in point. The nation's transformation from a preindustrial to an industrial society entailed, in addition to the inexorables of accelerated urbanization, industrial expansion, and market extension, certain fundamental changes in the conditions of labor. Industrialization restructured the geography of labor markets, revised principles of wage determination, fomented sectarian division in the ranks of labor, and soured the relations between labor and capital. These structural changes led, in turn, to the inevitable responses of, among others, worker combination, protest, industrial violence, and a splintering in the ranks of labor.

Although the contours of these momentous social changes are well known, thanks to the diligence of labor historians, we know next to nothing about their geographical particulars, about the evolving geography of labor and labor markets.² And for good reason since the methodological directives of American labor history have privileged one or another of two scalar extremes. These directives fasten inquiry either on microscale case studies of community and locale or on macroscale studies of national institutions – the axis, not coincidentally, of older and newer approaches to institutional and social labour history, respectively.³ Only on rare occa-

Any synthesis of the sort attempted here does a disservice to the literatures on which it depends for the simple reason that space precludes comprehensive citation. I trust, therefore, that my abridged set of references offers a hint of the richness of this literature and of my rather sizable debt to historians, sociologists, economists, and geographers, cited and not.

¹ Anthony Giddens, "Structuration Theory: Past, Present and Future", in Christopher G.A. Bryant and David Jary (eds.), *Giddens' Theory of Structuration: A Critical Appreciation* (London, 1991) pp. 201–221.

² Among others, Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1976); David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge, 1979); and John R. Commons, *History of Labor in the United States* (4 vols.; New York, 1935).

³ David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of an American Working Class", *Labor History* 20 (1979), pp. 111–126. On scales of analysis, various essays in Jeffrey C. Alexander, et al. (eds.), *The Micro-Macro Link* (Berkeley, 1987); Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York, 1984).

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sions do these inquiries abandon scalar extremism and attend to the richly textured middle ground (mesoscale) of an as yet unwritten historical geography of American labor.

This methodological preoccupation with the very small or the very large is especially ironic for students of social change since, as Giddens reminds us, most great transitions, and certainly the transition from preindustrial to industrial worlds, run directly through the middling scales of metropolis and region. Yet save for the pioneering efforts of Shorter and Tilly, Hobsbawm and Rudé, and a few others, students of labor history seem disinterested in this coaxial zone of mediation and translation.⁴ Eschewing mesoscale mappings of wages, worker protests, unionization, labor force, and the like has its consequences, however. And not the least of these is the obliteration of spatial context and subtext when inquiries are conducted, respectively, at micro (community) and macroscales (national institutions) of analysis.

Consider the microscale methodology of labor history. Community case studies, however insightful on matters of strategy, constraint, and action, rarely address their aptitude for inquiry. Is the case representative of all places and times, or of certain classes of places in time? Or is it a revealing anomaly? These are questions simultaneously of context and conditionalization – of positioning a case in periodic time and regional space, of typicality.⁵ Herbert Gutman, the late dean of American labor history, forthrightly addressed these issues in proposing the hypothesis of an inverse relation between a community's level of modernity and its propensity for worker protest. His strategy provided at once argument – the declension of labor power in the course of modernization – and context – a specification of discrete microscale communities in their systematic mesocale geography.⁶

At the opposite extreme, consider the surreality of macroscale interpretations of labor history, divorced as they are from spatial and temporal particulars. In cobbling together coarsely drawn state and national statistics, institutional trends detached from the places that shaped them, and anecdotal data from highly varied places and times, these interpretations obscure systematic (regional) and particular (local) variances in strategy, constraint, and action. The problem with treating macroprocesses in this fashion is that it overlooks the spatially recursive nature of social change; to be sure, macroscale processes shape events at local and regional scales,

⁴ Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, *Strikes in France, 1830–1968* (New York, 1974); E.J. Hobsbawm and George Rudé, *Captain Swing: A Social History of the Great English Agricultural Uprising of 1830* (New York, 1968); and Herbert Gutman, “The Workers’ Search for Power: Labor in the Gilded Age”, in H. Wayne Morgan (ed.), *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1963), pp. 38–68.

⁵ Carville Earle and Leonard Hochberg, “Varieties of Geohistorical Social Science”, in *Geographical Perspectives on Social Change* (Stanford, forthcoming).

⁶ Gutman, “The Workers’ Search for Power”, pp. 38–68.

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but they are also shaped by these events.⁷ The origins of the American Federation of Labor in the 1880s offers a telling case in point. The beginnings of this most important macroscale trade-union organization simply cannot be understood independently of mesoscale responses to the general strike of 1 May 1886 and the Haymarket “Riot” three days hence.⁸

Recall the scene as a handful of trade unionists in the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) formulated plans for and carried through with a general strike of all workers on behalf of the eight-hour day. The strike’s geography taught several mesoscale lessons for macroscale trade-unionist strategy. Not the least of these was the location of loyal trade-unionist constituencies in the large industrial cities in the northeastern quadrant of the nation. In short order thereafter, FOTLU’s overtures to the Knights of Labor ceased, and visions of a unified working class were abandoned. Trade unionists embraced instead their loyalist urban constituency and (for other spatial reasons soon revealed) embarked on a parochial and decentralized policy of “pure and simple” trade unionism – a policy formally ratified with the founding of the AFL in December 1886, less than nine months after the general strike. Ironically, labor history has paid little heed to the role of the general strike in enabling this momentous shift in the ranks of labor. That oversight, I submit, has a great deal to do with a methodology *in extremis*, a methodology which privileges micro and macroscales of inquiry. In the case of the general strike, however, the one is too particular and the other too general for rehearsal of the mesoscale spatial lessons which decisively deepened the schism in the ranks of American labor.

The dilemma of labor historiography, therefore, is that it sees the forest and the trees, while missing most everything in between. And it is this space in between – at the mesoscale of metropolis and region – which constitutes the peculiar domain in geography. And as it turns out, these mesoscale spaces also constitute the translational domain of social change, where national (macroscale) strategies intersect with microscale (local) actions, where structure and agency meet, and where individuals in locales creatively maneuver amidst a field of structural constraints. Which is to say that labor’s actions in place are problematic; they cannot be deduced from the macroscale structures that bind them; nor generalized from unconditionalized case studies at the microscale.⁹

⁷ Giddens, “Structuration Theory”, pp. 20–21; Allan Pred, *Place, Practice and Structure: Social and Spatial Transformation in Southern Sweden, 1750–1850* (Totowa, 1986), pp. 5–31; Derek Gregory, “Contours of Crisis? Sketches for a Geography of Class Struggle in the Early Industrial Revolution in England”, in A.R.H. Baker and D. Gregory (eds.), *Explorations in Historical Geography: Interpretative Essays* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 68–117.

⁸ The spatial lessons of the general strike are examined in some detail later in the essay; citations are reserved to that discussion.

⁹ On the limits of cross-scalar inference, see Gillian Rose, “Locality Studies and Waged Labour: An Historical Critique”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, N.S. 14 (1989), pp. 317–328.

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All is not contingency, however, in societal-cum-scalar transitions. Modernization and industrialization, for example, are not purely chaotic and disruptive processes; their advance, on the contrary, hinges on institutions which abstract and distance social relationships and thereby facilitate transitions to the mesoscale. Of the various institutions available, the market is the most obvious and perhaps the most powerful. The market is, above all, a spatial abstraction, a means for mediating the exchange of goods and services (an invisible hand, as it were) among producers and consumers unknown to one another and disjunct in space. This process of spatial abstraction, what Giddens' calls *distanciation*, traces its origins to Western European capitalism and the sixteenth-century ascendance of the market, or more precisely, a triad of markers – for products, for capital, and for labor.¹⁰ For reasons which remain unclear, the market for labor evolved more slowly than the others. Not until the nineteenth century did the pace quicken, but once underway labor markets advance swiftly through three stages of a half century more or less. A word on each is in order.

In the first of these three stages, lasting perhaps from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, rural economy sets the tone. Agrarian hegemony translates into labor markets which are dual and asymmetric. Rural labor markets are large and powerful; urban ones are small and weak. In these asymmetric markets, wages of unskilled urban workers are determined, more or less, by rural earnings and the transfer wage. The latter equals the wage which is required to induce rural workers into unskilled urban employment, and its level is defined by opportunities in the vastly larger rural labour market and by the incomes workers could earn therein. These earnings, in turn, are established by the seasonal demands for labor of the staple crops produced within the encompassing agrarian region. Put succinctly, the transfer wage varies inversely with the seasonality of labor demand in the regional agrarian system, that is, wages are low in agrarian regimes which are highly seasonal, and high in regimes reliant on labor the year round. When a low transfer wage prevails, the ranks of labor are often riven as skilled labor fears displacement by cheap, unskilled workers and machine production; when the transfer wage is high, these fears are allayed and skilled workers make common cause with their well-paid but unskilled brethren.¹¹

¹⁰ Giddens, "Structuration Theory", pp. 201–221; *idem*, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the History of Structuration* (Berkeley, 1984); John Urry, "Time and Space in Giddens' Social Theory", in Giddens' *Theory of Structuration*, pp. 160–175. On markets and the rise of capitalism, Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, 1957), pp. 163–219; Douglass C. North and Robert P. Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge, 1973).

¹¹ On early-modern markets and their contemporary analogues, Carville Earle, *Geographical Inquiry and American Historical Problems* (Stanford, 1992), pp. 173–235; Stanley Lebergott, *Manpower in Economic Growth: The American Record Since 1800* (New York, 1964); W. Arthur Lewis, "Reflections on Unlimited Labour", in Luis Eugenio DiMarco (ed.), *International Economics and Development: Essays in Honor of Raull Prebisch* (New York, 1972),

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As industrialization advances, labor-market evolution enters its second stage. This stage is characterized by the emergence of autonomous and crudely segmented urban labor markets. It begins in large urban and industrial centers, where labor markets secure their independence from the rural economy. Having achieved autonomy, these markets subdivide into two distinct classes – the first, a highly competitive market for unskilled labor employable in a wide variety of urban industries; the second, an imperfectly competitive market for skilled workers whose specialized skills bind them to one (monopsony) or at most a few (oligopsony) firms. In the former, wages are determined eventually by marginalist economic principles; in the latter, by exercises of raw power pitting “combinations” of skilled workers against the relevant firm or firms. These radically divergent strategies of compliance and resistance, in turn, reinforce the schismatics inherent in urban labor markets in this, unskilled labor’s “golden age”.¹²

Industrialization’s triumphant dominance of the economy signals the third stage in labor-market evolution. In this stage, the debate over market perfection or imperfection is joined. Skilled workers continue their struggle to eliminate market imperfections (monopsony and oligopsony) through the collective actions of “combination” and protest. Entrepreneurs, meanwhile, seek to extend these imperfections into industries with large through-put. This they do by balkanizing the labor market, by parsing the task of unskilled and skilled labor into an infinitely expansible hierarchy of semiskilled, firm-specific jobs. In accordance with the latest principles of scientific management, their aims were nothing less than the transformation of the workplace, the imperfection of unskilled labor markets, and an end to unskilled labor’s “golden age”. That their actions inspired resistance among unskilled workers – a resistance modeled on the venerable repertoire of strategies and tactics previously developed by skilled workers – is testimony to the scope and power of managerial invasion into the American industrial system.¹³

Note, contra Giddens, that the historical process of labor-market evolution involves a narrowing of the spatial extent of labor markets. The abstraction of the market is progressively particularized (instantiated) to

pp. 75–96. And more generally, Friedrich Lenger, “Beyond Exceptionalism: Notes on the Artisanal Phase of the Labour Movement in France, England, Germany, and The United States”, *International Review of Social History* 36 (1991), pp. 1–23.

¹² Of the several stages of labor-market evolution, the second is the least well known. This story of unskilled labor’s golden age therefore is pieced together from a variety of sources later cited in full.

¹³ I am prepared to argue that labor markets were transformed by the advent of new managerial practices in response to large-scale industrial production; that does not imply assent, however, to a model of societal transition from industrial to monopoly capitalism. See Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1979); David F. Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (New York, 1977).

highly specific places, firms and tasks – first in agrarian regions, next in autonomous and insular urban labor markets, and last in particular tasks in a particular place in a particular firm. And it is these spatial transitions from meso to microscales which constitute the changing field of action and reaction for workers as well as for industrial entrepreneurs and managers.¹⁴

The historical geography of American labor nicely illustrates these several stages in labor-market evolution during the course of economic development, 1790–1930. These mesoscale transformations would unfold in the nation’s northeastern quadrant – in what was to become known as the “American Manufacturing Belt” – over three periods of a half century more or less. For ease of exposition, these periods or stages divide as follows:

- (1) 1790s–1830s — frontier expansion and industrial revolution: rural hegemony over asymmetric labor markets;
- (2) 1840s–1890s — frontier closure and economic involution; the emergence of autonomous urban labor markets, more or less perfect;
- (3) 1890s–1930s — preindustrial and industrial worlds: radical labor politics, scientific management, and the imperfecting of labor markets.

These several stages constitute a scaffolding for the geography of American labor history. Indeed, the stages are themselves constructed about a set of geographic processes which define mesoscale fields of action – that changing constellation of places, small and large, in an expansive industrializing nation – as well as the abstract means (the changing structure of labor markets) for articulating, however imperfectly, demand and supply. In all this there is a double irony. The first of these is that labor-market evolution has more to do with market constriction than with market dilation; more to do, in other words, with instantiated abstractions than with Giddensian mechanisms of distanciation. The second irony, which follows from the first, is that the search for perfection in labor markets was led by workers and not by entrepreneurs (or neoclassical economists). Towards that end, American workers engaged in a series of heroic struggles; these were countered, however, by entrepreneurial adversaries who adroitly deployed various mechanisms of market imperfection. Labor exploitation, as a consequence, endures as an uncomfortable fact for capitalism’s apologists who would have us believe in (even as their actions discredit) the wonder-working powers of marginalism and perfectly competitive markets.

Frontier expansion and industrial revolution: the rural hegemony over asymmetric labor markets

No period of similar length in American history compares with the momentous changes which took place between 1790 and 1840. In that half

¹⁴ These imperfections in product and labor markets are standard fare in neoclassical microeconomics and are discussed in most texts introducing that field.