

Injury Impoverished

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century US economy maimed and killed employees at an astronomically high rate, while the legal system left the injured and their loved ones with little recourse. In the 1910s, US states enacted workers' compensation laws, which required employers to pay a portion of the financial costs of workplace injuries. Nate Holdren uses a range of archival materials, interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, and compelling narration to criticize the shortcomings of these laws. While compensation laws were a limited improvement for employees in economic terms, Holdren argues that these laws created new forms of inequality, causing people with disabilities to lose their jobs, while also resulting in new forms of inhumanity. Ultimately, this study raises questions about law and class and about when and whether our economy and our legal system produce justice or injustice.

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Cambridge Historical Studies in American Law and Society

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*Workplace Accidents, Capitalism,
and Law in the Progressive Era*

NATE HOLDREN

Drake University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-44866-6 — Injury Impoverished
 Nate Holdren
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
 It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108448666
 DOI: 10.1017/9781108657730

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First published 2020
 First paperback edition 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

NAMES: Holdren, Nate, 1978– author.

TITLE: Injury impoverished : workplace accidents, capitalism, and law in the progressive era /
 Nate Holdren, Drake University, Iowa.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY, USA : Cambridge University Press, 2020. |

SERIES: Cambridge historical studies in American law and society | Based on author's thesis
 (doctoral – University of Minnesota, 2014) issued under title: 'The compensation law put
 us out of work' : workplace injury law, commodification, and discrimination in the
 early 20th century United States. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2019051255 (print) | LCCN 2019051256 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108488709
 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108448666 (paperback) | ISBN 9781108657730 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Workers' compensation—Law and legislation—Social aspects—United States—
 History—20th century. | Industrial accidents—Law and legislation—Social aspects—
 United States—History—20th century.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC KF3615 . H55 2020 (print) | LCC KF3615 (ebook) |
 DDC 344.7302/1809041—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019051255>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019051256>

ISBN 978-1-108-48870-9 Hardback
 ISBN 978-1-108-44866-6 Paperback

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And even after the new society shall have come into existence, the happiness of its members will not make up for the wretchedness of those who are being destroyed in our contemporary society.

—Max Horkheimer, “Postscript”

If I had a list and if I only knew
I’d write down their names and sing them to you.
And when I got done, I’d sing them again
so you’d all know each one had a name.

—Utah Phillips, “Yuba City”

Yet there is hope. Time and tide flow wide.

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

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Acknowledgments

Working on this book touched all of my life, and so I wish a general thank you to everyone who is in my life, for carrying some of the weight and for your patience. I do of course want to name specific friends and colleagues who shaped this project. There are so many that I fear I've left someone out.

I thank first, and most of all, Angelica Mortensen. I am incredibly fortunate to be married to and to be friends with her. She has done more than any other person to make this project possible intellectually, emotionally, and financially. The full list of why I'm grateful for and in debt to her would run as long as this book. I will mention only that she read the entire manuscript closely, providing invaluable line edits and encouragement. Our three children, Kit, Ayla, and Charlotte, have lived with this project for their entire lives. They have asked a few times when it would be done, and have kindly assured me that while grown up books are boring, mine is likely to be less boring than most. I would like it if they read this book someday, but only if they want to. I am very pleased that they are already the kinds of people who have opinions about what they do and do not want to read.

I thank my parents for encouraging me to go to college and later to graduate school. I thank them as well, and my brothers Paul and Trent, for being supportive and proud of me even when I wasn't able to explain what I was doing and why. I also thank my mother-in-law Faith Noe for her enthusiasm and for childcare support at particularly timely moments.

My maternal grandmother, Audrey Miller, passed away while I was writing the dissertation this book is based on. She generously typed many of my papers for me when I was in high school, despite repetitive stress

injuries to wrists due to her years employed as a secretary. As usual, I did not understand the significance of this until well after the fact. I have thought of her often as I sat at the keyboard working on this book.

My interest in going to graduate school and many of the intellectual preoccupations that I still have today first arose from my time at Valparaiso University, in the Philosophy Department and in Christ College. Classes with Tom Kennedy, Sandra Visser, Kevin Geiman, and Charles Elder were foundational intellectual experiences for me, as was the mentorship provided by Mark Schwehn. Mark told me to become a historian; as with much of his advice I took a very long time to realize he was right. It was within that context that Angelica and I first became good friends (an early bonding experience we had was reading the philosopher Immanuel Kant and concluding that capitalism was fundamentally immoral; we still talk about that to this day). I also learned a great deal, and deepened my love of intellectual excitement, as a result of conversations with my friends Colin McQuillan and Tzu Chien Tho.

I became a historian largely by accident, by stumbling into courses taught by Barbara Welke and Tracey Deutsch. I have often felt that this was a kind of lottery that it was my great luck to win. Barbara and Tracey became my co-advisors, and soon afterward Susanna Blumenthal became a de facto third advisor. I benefited inestimably from working with the three of them in graduate school and ever since. They have encouraged me to take bigger intellectual risks and to work harder than I otherwise would have. I am a much better historian for it.

Barbara, Tracey, and Susanna served on my dissertation committee, as did Evan Roberts, Jennifer Gunn, and Pat McNamara. I thank all of my committee for their generous support, encouragement, and feedback on my work at multiple stages. They helped me to write and to think better, and to keep writing and thinking. It has been a great pleasure and privilege to work with them.

Christopher Tomlins has been a singular influence on me as a scholar. I have learned so much from what he has written. That has made me all the more grateful for his ongoing and multifaceted engagement with and support for my work.

The quote from Utah Phillips that forms part of this book's epigraph appears with the permission of Joanna Robinson. I thank her for that permission and her enthusiastic response when I described the book. I thank Utah Phillips as well; it was my great pleasure and privilege to have lunch with him before his passing, and to hear so many of his songs and stories. Parts of Chapter 5 of this book previously appeared as

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“Incentivizing Safety and Discrimination: Employment Risks under Workmen’s Compensation in the Early Twentieth Century United States,” *Enterprise & Society* 15, no. 1 (March 2014): 31. I am grateful for Philip Scranton’s editorial feedback and the input of the two anonymous reviewers on that article, as they improved the article and helped me to better formulate my larger project in valuable ways. Two other anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press gave feedback on my book at an especially key moment, both pressing me on points where I needed to clarify my argument and encouraging me to try to write boldly. I have written a better book for it and I thank them for that.

I have had three academic employers over the course of this project. Given the ongoing crisis of higher education employment as I write this, I wish to state clearly that in my view, employment – and thus the benefits it provides, when it does so – is distributed largely through luck, though that luck is allocated through hierarchical and unequal social structures. As the poet Bertolt Brecht once wrote, “It is true: I work for a living / But, believe me, that is a coincidence. Nothing / That I do gives me the right to eat my fill. / By chance I have been spared. (If my luck does not hold, / I am lost.)”¹ I am grateful for the luck I have had and what I have been provided as a result. I wish that everyone had similar good fortune (*omnia sunt communia*, as it were, everything for everyone) and hold out hope that eventually someday we all will.

The first of my academic employers, the University of Minnesota History Department, was a fantastic place to learn how to be a historian and how to teach, a place of vibrant but never self-important thought. The work-in-progress workshops that the Department hosted are where I learned the most about how to actually do academic writing and where I developed my ongoing love of reading work in progress. The Legal History Workshop and the community that crystallizes around it were especially important to me. It was a joy and a privilege to come back as an alumnus and present a version of Chapter 1 of this book, to an audience even more responsive, energetic, and rigorous than I had remembered.

The Center for Law, Society, and Culture at Indiana University’s Mauer School Law hosted me as a Jerome Hall Postdoctoral Fellow. The community of scholars in residence at Indiana and the visiting scholars who came to present work was mind-expanding. Being there

¹ Bertolt Brecht, “To Those Who Follow in Our Wake,” translated by Scott Horton, *Browsings: The Harper’s Blog*, <https://harpers.org/blog/2008/01/brecht-to-those-who-follow-in-our-wake/>, accessed June 10, 2016.

encouraged me to make bolder claims about the significance of my work and think more deeply about law. I am especially grateful to Ajay Mehrotra and Ethan Michelson, who directed the Center of Law, Society and Culture, while I was there; Mike Grossberg; Jeannine Bell; Ilana Gershon; Tim Lovelace; Alex Lichtenstein; and my fellow postdoctoral fellow Stacey Vanderhurst.

I have learned a great deal at Drake University's Law, Politics, and Society Department. I am lucky to have Renee Cramer, Matt Canfield, and Will Garriott as engaged, enthusiastic, generous departmental colleagues. Their interest in my work has meant a great deal to me. They are all very busy doing great things but (or maybe because) they are always willing to share their time. I am grateful as well to my students, who are across-the-board fantastic. Their willingness to work hard and to take intellectual risks has helped me maintain some degree of willingness to do so myself. Four students (now former students, as they have all graduated) bear particular mention: Kailey Gray, Phoebe Clark, and my excellent research assistants Natalie Deerr and Collin Vandewalle. In addition to Law, Politics, and Society, I have had two other core intellectual centers of gravity at Drake. One is the Humanities Center. The Center has supported my work financially and, of at least equal importance, provided intellectual community via its Humanities Colloquium events, which I have had the pleasure to both attend and present work at. The other is the faculty writing group it is my pleasure to co-organize and co-facilitate with my friend and colleague En Li, and which is generously supported by Drake's Humanities Center, College of Arts and Sciences, and Office of the Provost. In the writing group I have continued to learn about myself as a writer and have enjoyed hearing about many colleagues' writing projects and processes.

Over the years a great many people contributed to this book in many ways. Friends and colleagues have read and heard parts of this project in the form of written drafts, conference presentations, and informal conversation. Their responses shaped the project intellectually and helped me remember that I was onto something worth pursuing. Many as well offered moral support, advice on how to organize a writing life, and suggestions for how to navigate the institutional worlds I have inhabited. And many have commiserated, encouraged, and sometimes kept me grounded by writing quietly nearby. All of these contributions have mattered so much to this project and to me personally. I thank Megan Brown, Jeff Karnicky, Jen Harvey, Leah Kalmanson, Joseph Schneider, Karen Leroux, En Li, Inbal Mazar, Jeanette Tran, Chris Porter, Laura

Acknowledgments

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Porter, my dean Gesine Gearhard, Lourdes Gutierrez, Godfried Asante, Matt Canfield, Dennis Goldford, Sandi Patton-Imani, Darcie Vandegrift, Kevin Gannon, Heidi Sleister, Mary McCarthy, Art Sanders, Jody Swilky, Cameron Tuai, Sam Becker, Dan Chibnall, Josh Wallace, Ben Gardner, Bill Boal, Lynn McCool, Kevin Carlson, Evelyn Atkinson, Rabia Belt, Heather Berg, Deborah Dinner, Anne Fleming, Alicia Maggard, Dan Platt, Dave Morton, Katie Lambright, Joe Haker, Andy Paul, Brooke Depenbusch, Sam Mitrani, Chad Pearson, Rosemary Feurer, Adam Wolkoff, Kim Reilly, Umut Özsu, Rob Hunter, Chris O’Kane, Kailash Srinivasan, Marianne Le Nabat, Nick Driedger, Matthew Kellard, Eric Tucker, Kim Nielsen, Alice Kessler-Harris, Eileen Boris, David Freund, Pamela Laird, Maggie Levenstein, Ed Balleisen, Chris McKenna, Caitlin Rosenthal, Mitra Shirafi, Fahad Bishara, Dan Bouk, Emily Bruce, Ari Bryen, Carol Chomsky, Kelly Condit-Shrestha, Caley Horan, Danny LaChance, Ryan Johnson, Meg Krausch, Duncan Law, Alison Lefkovitz, Jon Levy, Nicole Pepperell, Jamie Pietruska, Gautham Rao, Raphi Rechitsky, Chantel Rodriguez, Donald Rogers, Sarah Rose, Karen Tani, Evan Taparata, Philip Thai, Felicity Turner, Tiffany Vann Sprecher, Elizabeth Venditto, and Kim Welch. Alex Wisnoski deserves a special mention, for a frequency and quality of support and communication that defies description. Judi Gibbs at Write Guru indexed my book quickly and effectively, and with great patience for my questions as a new author. I am grateful to Stephanie Sakson for her copyediting, which improved the manuscript. I also thank the Cambridge University Press team, Lisa Carter, Debbie Gershenowitz, and Rachel Blaifeder, as well as Baskaran Rajmohan.

I thank as well the institutions that facilitated some of these conversations and these relationships, especially the University of Minnesota’s Legal History Workshop and Graduate Workshop in Modern History, the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s J. Willard Hurst Summer Institute in Legal History, the American Society for Legal History for supporting the Hurst Institute, the Business History Conference’s Oxford Journals Doctoral Colloquium, the Legal Form blog, and Drake University’s Humanities Center.

Readers could understandably describe this book as a bit dour. As the long list of people acknowledged here demonstrates, the book has been created in a context of a great deal of intellectual community, which is a genuine gift and joy to be part of. Finally, and in all sincerity, thank you for reading my book.