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Surveying the Survey Texts: Recent Works in American Labor History

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Steve Babson, *The Unfinished Struggle: Turning Points in American Labor, 1877–Present* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999)

Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles, *Labor in America: A History*, 6th ed. (Wheeling: Harlan, Davidson, 1999)

Daniel Jacoby, *Laboring for Freedom: A New Look at the History of Labor in America* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1998)

Jacqueline Jones, *A Social History of the Laboring Classes: From Colonial Times to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999)

Paul Le Blanc, *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class: From Colonial Times to the Twenty-first Century* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999)

Priscilla Murolo and A. B. Chitty, *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend: A Short, Illustrated History of Labor in the United States* (New York: New Press, 2001)

Daniel Nelson, *Shifting Fortunes: The Rise and Decline of American Labor, from the 1820s to the Present* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997)

Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture and Society Volume 1, Christopher Clark and Nancy Hewitt; Volume 2, Nelson Lichtenstein, Roy Rosenzweig, and Susan Strasser (New York: Worth Publishers, 2000)

Perhaps it was the coming of the millennium—a desire to take stock of where we have been and where we may be going. For whatever reason, there has been a recent outpouring of new American labor history textbooks. Several are revisions of older works, others promise new analytical arguments and models for interpreting the field. Not surprisingly, each has its own strengths and weaknesses, but they all reveal that American labor history is a field still struggling for self-definition.

Even the simple, and perhaps tautological, statement that labor history is the history of labor raises a host of questions that go to the heart of what may delineate this field of inquiry. How should labor be defined? Is labor the same as work; is work equal to manual labor, or wage work? This definition runs the risk of confining labor history to the study of workers as economic actors defined solely by their relationship to the means of production. Such a proposition ignores the historical experience of millions of

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men, women and children who lived in working-class communities but did not work for wages; it also runs the risk of reducing the field to the narrow assumptions of the old labor history centered on white male industrial workers and their unions.

Several recent textbooks have tried to avoid such pitfalls by going beyond wage labor and the workplace. Slaves, farmers, and housewives appear alongside the more familiar factory workers and artisans; neighborhoods, churches, and saloons, as well as union halls and picket lines, are portrayed as places where working-class life and consciousness are formed. Jacqueline Jones is the most self-conscious about reconfiguring the basic terminology. She defines work "as any activity that leads to the production of goods and services … not just wage-earning, but also caring for children and making a home, promoting neighborly cooperation, and contributing to the welfare of the community, whether local or national" (1). Jones goes on to argue that "American labor history amounts to a kaleidoscope of sort, with workers continually shifting their forms of individual and collective self-identification;" banding together at different times based on skill, skin color, religion, ethnicity, or a host of other factors. Because of this changing process of identity formation, Jones states that her book "focuses on American laboring classes, rather than a single working class" (3).

Beyond the problem of defining the field of study, these textbooks also wrestle with the question of audience. Labor historians, as scholars and teachers who often work in higher education, want new textbooks to be useful in their classrooms and to provide some fresh analytical angle on the subject. They want an intellectual road map for themselves and their students—a guide to the history of the subject and to the historiography of the field. But the desires for a survey text comprehensible to undergraduates and a study that can provide building blocks for a new synthesis may not be compatible. The politics of publishing, where even university presses are under pressure to turn a profit, mitigates against a work with bolder theoretical arguments that tries to capture the complexity of the field, and in favor of a text with a clear chronological and topical organization that will be adopted in more classrooms. Moreover, some authors see their audience not necessarily in terms of colleagues or traditional students, but as laboring people who want to read about their own history. Priscilla Murolo and A. B. Chitty describe their book as a "comprehensive survey of U.S. labor history for the general reader." They describe their audience in terms that go far beyond the academy: intelligent readers who want a book to inform and inspire them with a story honestly told, but without methodological or theoretical trappings. "We write for the people who work too hard for too little, whose families and communities are hostages to the greed and arrogance of the same privilege that deforms our humanity and threatens our common welfare. We write for the people who can change history" (xi, xii).

Not surprisingly, the very definition of what is labor history and who is the audience, in turn, shapes the basic structure of each of these books—their chronological coverage and their organization of individual chapters. The revised edition of *Who Built America?* spans pre-contact America through 2000. This two-volume text lies at the juncture of labor history and a broader reconceptualization of U.S. history as a whole. Is this a U.S. history survey text with a labor history core? Or a labor history survey set against a backdrop of U.S. history writ large? The authors state that their book "surveys the nation's past from an important but often neglected perspective—the experiences of ordinary men and women and the role they played in the making of modern America" (xiii). This is U.S. history from the bottom up, from the viewpoint of marginalized groups. Yet the authors also reveal that many of their revisions have highlighted more conventional historical narratives and toned down the book's working-class perspective.

They "have reduced the coverage of trade union history somewhat … and given more attention to the political context of U.S. history" (xvii). The sidebars remain filled with primary sources from workers, but each chapter now has a rather conventional timeline at its conclusion. This textbook still strives to integrate the history of workers (defined broadly) with a "national" history of the U.S., through a series of interspersed sections in each chapter. But are these two stories actually woven together to create a single narrative? Do students see workers shaping and responding to the political, economic, and social forces around them? Or do these accounts compete for the reader's attention as they jump from section to section, cutting from scenes of working-class life to national events without always clarifying the connections between them?

Jacqueline Jones's *A Social History of the Laboring Classes*, more than any of the other texts, shifts the concept of labor history away from its traditional focus on unions. Jones is especially interested in tracing the historical evolution of labor in its social context—she sees the change from bound to free labor, and the role that race plays in this process, as central to her narrative. Thus, though the book does span the breadth of American history from colonial times to the present, she pays particular attention to the period before the 20th century and to a variety of labor systems far beyond the factory gates. The familiar narrative about the rise of organized labor starting in the late 19th century, while not ignored completely, is given relatively short shrift in the last chapters of the book. Her chapter on laboring classes at the turn of the 20th century briefly mentions the Knights of Labor and the AFL but includes an extensive discussion of muckraking journalists and social scientists analyzing the "labor question." The chapter on the American workforce in the mid-20th century says little about the creation of New Deal labor legislation, yet has a penetrating critique of how government policy often pitted various members of the laboring classes against each other. Jones also strives, more than many other authors, to link her rich and complex analysis with a readable organizational structure. Each chapter begins and ends with the same historical figure or event, thereby giving readers a sense of connection to the key themes and core chronology in each chapter without presenting too tidy a package. But there is still the nagging question as to whether, in jettisoning all the narrative and explanatory structures of the old union-centered labor history, Jones has left out too much of organized labor's struggles from her portrait.

In *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend,* Priscilla Murolo and A. B. Chitty try to weave broader themes in U. S. history into their survey of labor. This book, intended for a popular audience, is far less formally structured than *Who Built America?* and less self-consciously analytical than Jones's work. Murolo and Chitty also portray the history of workers from colonial times to the present, with the chapters following each other in a clear, chronological progression. The first four chapters, which bring their story up to the Gilded Age, explore a wide variety of social activism and protest beyond attempts at labor organizing. Murolo and Chitty also note labor activism in the Americas outside U.S. borders and organized labor's role in U.S. foreign policy, especially in the 20th century. When the book reaches the late 19th century, the more familiar stuff of labor history—unions, strikes, labor politics, and legislation—takes center stage in the narrative; yet Murolo and Chitty retain a critical perspective on the labor movement. Their account of the 1930s contains a powerful argument about the ways in which rank-and-file militancy drove New Deal legislative reform. Their closing chapters also level sharp critiques on the limitations of the Clinton "prosperity" for most working-class households, and the failure of the AFL-CIO "New Voices" campaign to mobilize labor into a mass social movement.

Melvyn Dubofsky's latest revision of *Labor in America: A History* updates one of the classic textbooks in the field. He clearly identifies both his intentions and his audience in the preface: "I continue the endeavor … to enlighten present and future generations of college students about the history of work, workers, and worker movements in the United States" (x). After a brief excursion into colonial labor, which emphasizes indentured servants and urban artisans, Dubofsky focuses the rest of the book on organized labor. From the first journeymen's societies of the early 19th century through the initial attempts to form national trade unions and on to the Knights of Labor, the AFL, the IWW, and the CIO, Dubofsky offers what is still a clear and cogent overview of labor organizations in American history. But, even as the core of this book is rooted in the old institutional history of unions and strikes, Dubofsky is by no means an apologist for the Commons school. He studiously avoids presenting a mere litany of meetings or protests, or a simple hagiography of union leaders and their achievements. Rather, he paints complex portraits of leading figures in the labor movement and points out many instances where unions failed to seize opportunities to organize the millions of unorganized workers. Moreover, Dubofsky places the history of organized labor in its broader economic and political context by looking at changes in technology and the struggle over labor legislation. In fact, given Dubofsky's extensive publications on a wide range of topics from the Wobblies to Supreme Court decisions, his discussions of labor law, state power, and worker resistance are often models of clarity and sound judgment. As a core text for labor history classes, Dubofsky helps to give students a strong chronological and organizational base from which they should be encouraged to explore scholarship in other areas of working-class life beyond the union hall and the halls of Congress.

Paul Le Blanc's *A Short History of the U.S. Working Class* is intended especially for use in workers' education programs. As such, Le Blanc has written a short, tight presentation that captures 500 years of labor history in less than 150 pages. Le Blanc summarizes many familiar arguments about slave and free labor, the rise of industrial unions, and the current hard times faced by workers and their organizations. Though Le Blanc makes no claim for any bold new synthetic thesis in his book, several chapters reveal a keen critique of the modern labor movement. His chapter on "Corruption" sees links between the obvious scandals of rigged elections, bribery, and racketeering, and more subtle forms of bureaucratic ossification coupled with conservative, autocratic labor leadership. Le Blanc also decries the lack of a strong modern-day labor party able to challenge the current economic system and push a broader agenda of social unionism. He writes with passion about what the labor movement has become and what it should be, but other texts in the field provide a richer evidentiary and analytical base to students.

What may well be the most original, and yet ultimately least satisfying, of the new labor history textbooks is Daniel Jacoby's *Laboring For Freedom*. Jacoby bases his study on the premise that the "legacy of freedom in the United States is more central to labor history than is the legacy of unionization" (6). By putting concepts of liberty center-stage, Jacoby claims that he will move labor history away from its focus on unions and industrial workers. Though Jacoby hopes to accomplish what others also strive to do in their recent works, he ends up producing a book that is weighted down with theories of freedom, justice and power while saying little about the major events or daily experiences driving the history of American workers. Jacoby posits a trajectory of labor history encompassing three stages: the transformation of republicanism to freedom of contract in the mid-19th century; the limits of contracts and the search for "labor

justice" through the market, collective action, and legislation/court decisions at the turn of the 20th century; and the replacement of individual freedom of contract with collective rights in the New Deal era, supplanted by further protections of individual employment status in more recent years. This overall model is not new, and is often part of other scholars' narratives, though few give it such prominence or theoretical trappings. Jacoby tries to use this model to tie together a wealth of disparate material from labor history, legal history, the history of technology, and even cultural history, but the results are quite uneven. The chapter that is ostensibly about the post-bellum period barely mentions the Knights of Labor or the eight-hour movement, but offers great detail about the Knights of St Crispin (a shoeworkers' union) and the Slaughter-house Cases. One chapter focuses on the debate over public education by drawing on various popular novels; another places the Taft–Hartley Act in a "cultural" context with Jackie Robinson. While such unusual juxtapositions could be intellectually exciting, in Jacoby's hands they often confuse the thesis and the reader. In the end, what could have been a genuinely provocative recentering of the field away from the traditional cast of characters becomes an eclectic hotchpotch of material that is difficult to relate to the historical experience of American workers.

Daniel Nelson's *Shifting Fortunes* returns American labor history to the traditional definition of union history. Nelson's task is to explain the reasons behind union growth and decline in the 19th and 20th centuries—nothing more and nothing less. Therefore, he deliberately writes a chronologically and thematically confined study. In fact, he states that his "principal concern … is not *why* unions grew but *how* they grew" (ix). Nelson offers an explanation based not on standard internal accounts of rank-and-file activism or organizational leadership. Rather, he sees three other factors shaping union growth and density: the role of "autonomous workers" who use their workplace leverage to push for collective bargaining rights; the strength of employer reprisals; and the economic conditions and political climate of the organizing environment. In tracing how these factors play out in the 19th and 20th centuries, Nelson starts each of his chapters with a "perspective" on a particular strike. Some are quite familiar, such as the railroad shopmen in 1922 or the sit-downs of 1937; others are less famous, such as a miners' strike in 1894 or a railroad walkout in 1888. In several chapters, Nelson does what Jones does and uses the particular event to frame his chapter at the beginning and the end. But in other chapters, Nelson drops the event as a reference point and gets tangled in complex chronologies that often backtrack and end up in a conclusion that has little to do with the original perspective. Much of the story that can be discerned is a familiar one, though the final chapter offers an intriguing argument about the recent decline in union strength. Nelson asserts that the roots of organized labor's collapse can be seen as early as the 1940s, and that there was never any real postwar accord between big business and big labor. Union growth essentially stalled after World War II and declined rapidly post-1975 not because of the so-called new economy of high technology and service workers. Rather, in his characteristically tight and no-nonsense appraisal, the same historical factors of union resources, economic conditions, and political climate apply today as they always have.

Steve Babson's study, *The Unfinished Struggle*, is the most chronologically limited text under review. Babson begins his work with the railroad strikes of 1877, which he sees as the dawn of the modern American labor movement; that is, the mass protest of industrial workers against corporate capitalism backed by state power. After this chapter, he proceeds to a series of turning points in 20th century American labor history, including the sit-down strikes, the GM-UAW contract of 1940, and the

PATCO debacle of 1981. Babson's focus on turning points emphasizes his view that labor history is not shaped by gradual, evolutionary progress, but by a constant ebb and flow marked by strategic contingencies. Moreover, these turning points are linked to fundamental changes in work processes and economic relationships, such as the rise of mass production industries, scientific management, and globalization. Babson's model and chapter structure are clear and comprehensible, if limited in scope. Babson also believes that his conception of modern American labor history leads to an inexorable lesson: as the global market widens, so must the size and composition of the labor movement if it is to survive.

Surveying these survey texts as a whole, three questions remain to be considered. Where do these studies stand with regard to current trends and research in the field? Are these works effective survey texts for teaching purposes? And do they offer a new basis for the synthesis of American labor history?

With regard to the current state of the field, the key issue is whether these books capture central themes and ideas from the new labor history. What exactly those themes are has never been codified in any precise form, but certain common ideas inform much of the past three decades' scholarship. Put simply, the new labor history has tried to move away from the old institutional models focused solely on unions and toward a broadly conceived social history of work and workers. Some scholars, following in the footsteps of the late Herbert Gutman, have emphasized workers' culture and communities. Others, influenced by David Montgomery's pioneering efforts, have focused on workers' activism at the point of production. And recently, more historians have been heeding David Brody and Melvyn Dubofsky's advice to pay attention to the mechanisms by which politics and the state protect, regulate, and constrain labor.

Yet, after so many years of innovative research, many of these new labor history textbooks remain rooted in narratives that revolve around union-based history. To be sure, none of them are mere chronicles of organizations and strikes. All of them have some critical eye for the limitations of the labor movement, and all of them acknowledge that throughout history far more men and women have remained outside unions than inside. But with the exception of Jones and *Who Built America?* (and perhaps the quirky work of Jacoby), all of these new labor history texts keep the story of unions and collective protest at the center of their presentations. Organized labor is often set in a broader political and economic context, but community life and shop floor practices are not the focal points of these studies. New versions of the old labor history are what these authors choose to write—perhaps with good reason, because a labor history that is too far removed from collective action is a story lacking in one of the central dramas of working-class life. And a labor history based on broad definitions of community, culture, and class may reorient the field but disorient readers if it tries to capture too many disparate ideas and events in a single book.

As to which of these books are effective survey texts for introducing students (and other interested readers) to the field, part of that answer depends on the priorities of individual instructors. But several criteria may be used to judge these books as survey texts. For many teachers, a good survey needs chronological breadth and depth in its coverage of the field. Using that standard, Dubofsky, Jones, Murolo and Chitty, and *Who Built America?* offer students the most comprehensive introduction to events and actors in the field of labor across the span of American history. A good survey should also have an expansive view of topics in the field of study. In this case, the text might strive to capture the strengths that lie in both the old and the new labor history—conveying the richness and diversity of working-class life without ignoring organized

labor as an important expression of workers' discontent and aspirations. Using this rubric, Jones may veer too far away from acknowledging the role of organized labor, Murolo and Chitty may be too union-centered even as they set organized labor in a broader context, and *Who Built America?* may bring labor organizations and unorganized workers into a dynamic tension that still remains caught in the structural confines of a U.S. history survey text. Despite these limitations, these three works come closest to building bridges between old and new labor history, while offering students a readable overview on the field (as seen through each author's particular analytical framework).

In order to evaluate whether any of these books represents a new synthesis of the field, it is first necessary to acknowledge the extensive debate among labor historians as to what the term "synthesis" means. More than 20 years ago, David Brody envisioned a new conception of the field that "takes as its starting point, not culture, but work and the job, and broadens out from there." Brody was pointing in some ways to the work of David Montgomery. Montgomery himself saw the new synthesis reconfiguring the narrative and periodization of labor history based on the "evolution of American capitalism … [and] the relations of production … through which the employer and employee generate social classes." Fifteen years ago, Michael Kazin told labor historians to abandon what he saw as crude models of class struggle that workers never embraced, and develop a synthesis focused on race more than class, the language of protest, the anarchy of capitalism, and workers' own multiple ideological perspectives. And in the past decade, Howard Kimmeldorf has urged that labor historians restore the history of organized labor to a central place in any broader study of American workers. Meanwhile, Alice Kessler-Harris has argued that placing gender rather than class at the center of a new labor history narrative would radically redirect the field away from the workplace as the locus for identity formation and away from the white male worker as the normative standard for analysis.[1]

Given the fact that labor historians disagree profoundly on what a potential synthesis might look like in its basic structure and argumentation, and given the fact that many of these textbooks are still based on a more traditional concept of the field as rooted in the historical evolution of organized labor, it is difficult to make a claim that any of these works present a unified new synthesis of American labor history. Jones is the most innovative in her conceptual framework, and *Who Built America?* makes an ambitious foray into a new narrative of both labor history and American history as a whole. But a complete summation, integration, and explanation of what the new labor history has been about these past decades, a new and comprehensive portrait of American labor history, still awaits its author. Perhaps there will be such a synthetic work soon, perhaps several, perhaps competing syntheses, perhaps not. For those frustrated that such a total history has not yet emerged, some comfort can be found in the admonitions of scholars such as Eric Arnesen, Melvyn Dubofsky, and Leon Fink. They have been urging caution and attention to ongoing research while others insist that the field push toward a new synthesis. These labor historians see the very diversity of the field, the

[1]David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of an American Working Class," *Labor History* 20 (1979), 125; David Montgomery, "To Study the People: The American Working Class," *Labor History* 21 (1980), 512; Michael Kazin, "Struggling with Class Struggle: Marxism and the Search for a Synthesis of U.S. Labor History," *Labor History* 28 (1987), 497–514; Howard Kimmeldorf, "Bringing Unions Back In (Or Why We Need a New Old Labor History)," *Labor History* 32 (1991), 91–103; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Treating the Male as 'Other:' Redefining the Parameters of Labor History," *Labor History* 34 (1993),190–204.

tremendous outpouring of new ideas that defy the boundaries of any one conceptual framework, as a source of great intellectual strength and inspiration for future inquiry. The latest labor history textbooks also bear witness to some of that scholarly richness and vitality, even if they do not fulfill all the hopes for a grand new theory of the field.[2]

[2]Eric Arnesen, "Crusade against Crisis: A View from the United States on the 'Rank-and-file' Critique and Other Catalogues of Labour History's Alleged Ills," *International Review of Social History* 35 (1990–1991), 126–127; Melvin Dubofsky, "Lost in a Fog: Labor Historians' Unrequited Search for a Synthesis," *Labor History* 32 (1991), 299–300; Leon Fink, "Culture's Last Stand: Gender and the Search for Synthesis in American Labor History," *Labor History* 34 (1993), 188–189.