

Garth Massey

*Department of Sociology
University of Wyoming, Laramie*

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LABOR ACTIVISM AND THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE: SOME REFERENCES TO THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE UNITED STATES

SUMMARY

The paper examines the changing political economy in which the immigrant worker to the United States was thrust in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Immigrant workers' involvement in the American labor movement — as examined through the reactionary/elitist, liberal, and progressive perspectives — has been contrasted to the oft-cited conservatism and patriotism found among immigrant groups. Only the latter perspective adequately addresses the structural conditions in which workers, native and immigrant alike, sought to attain industrial justice. In so doing it departs from the others in its conclusions about the reasons for the demise of American labor as a movement and the rise of bread-and-butter unionism. The paper examines political restructuring in the half century following the Civil War (especially the triumph of Northern business elites), changes in methods of industrial production and management, the evolution of a symbiotic relationship between business and government, and the utility of accommodating labor so long as it abandoned notions of industrial democracy. In this way the paper demonstrates that the role of immigrant groups was largely circumscribed by forces far more powerful than whatever associations or ideologies they might have aspired to.

Recent immigrants to the United States have played a visible and important role in the history of labor activism. This is especially true for the formation and conduct of workers' organizations between 1890 and the Second World War, a period when labor activism was at a high point in the United States.

The 'ordeal of assimilation' into mainstream American society encouraged several different patterns of activity among immigrant groups. These patterns were conditioned by, among other things: the experiences of migrating groups in their location of origin; the opportunities and obstacles of the new locale into which they settle; the circumstances of the political economy of the United States confronting them at critical junctures of the adaptation process. The size of the ethnic, nationality or language group, the skills the people bring with them and the utility of those skills in their new situation, the ideational and cultural armaments of each group, and opportunities for reversing the decision to emigrate also played significant part in the particular way immigrant groups reacted to life around them and ultimately shed their immigrant status.

Conservatism versus activism

For years social surveys of political attitudes and behaviors have tended to indicate a conservative bent in first and second generation immigrants. This is reflected less in party affiliation (The Democratic Party, usually considered more progressive and open to change, invariably has won the allegiance of most new urban immigrant voters) than in attitudes toward economic and social issues. It is also shown in responses to changes that threatened the pillars of the immigrant community: church and family. As a rule these survey data tend to show that immigrants and their children as a general rule sought accommodation with the existing *status quo*. They tried to take advantage of the opportunities offered by their coming to - in Seymore Lipset's words - »The First New Nation«, and have often avoided drawing attention to themselves in ways that would demonstrate displeasure with major features of American society. With some notable exceptions in the First World War, immigrant leaders have frequently been visible supporters of patriotic causes, including the wars in which the United States has participated. To some observers this posturing is even seen as a means of deflecting suspicion about the origins or loyalty of the immigrant; viz. they become »more American than Americans.«

A lack of visibility in the roles of critic and organizer of movements embracing change, however, has not been widespread by any means. In the history of American labor many of the most outspoken leaders, pamphleteers and active participants were immigrants or first generation Americans. The movement for social justice through the extension of the rights of labor found thousands of participants from among new arrivals or persons who had come to the United States in their own lifetime. Some who had been unable to participate in labor organizing and activism in their home country saw an opportunity to forge a worker's democracy in America. More often, through direct experiences newly arrived persons concluded that only by joining and supporting workers' organizations would they be able to improve their lot as members of the laboring class.

Three schools of thought

Reactionary writers and intellectuals often painted immigrants who followed one of the more radical movements (e.g. the Industrial Workers of the World) as dupes, ignorant of the traditions and processes of the United States and consequently easily aroused to inflamed actions by virtue of their gullibility. Such theses, lacking in empirical support, are seldom voiced today, especially as the daughters and sons of immigrants have become the historians and sociologists of renown in this area of inquiry.

More mainstream scholarship has argued that immigrant workers sometimes failed to recognize that the laboring class was no place in which to remain. The argument hinges on a »grace period« during which time committed activists and ideologues could rely on immigrants' unfamiliarity with opportunities for social mobility in order to recruit and use the energy of new arrivals. Miserable living conditions and rampant abuses of economic power are openly admitted in these theses, but are considered to have been temporary phenomena. Once the lives of immigrant workers began to improve, often because of their having moved out of the working class, or as they began to anticipate such a move (and anticipatory socialization becomes a force here), they either abandoned the labor movement or preferred more

modest goals and pacific strategies. In short, they sought personal mobility rather than group solidarity, and within the working class they accepted bread-and-butter unionism rather than social transformation.

There is little doubt that the shedding of distinctive ethnic identities corresponds in the life of immigrant families with a lessening of their commitment to radical ideologies about the rights of labor and the role of the working class. Such a correspondence involves the adoption of three assumptions: 1) ownership and control of the economy are somehow naturally and inextricably linked, 2) workers depend for their well-being on the successes of their employers in the marketplace and that, in a (quasi)syndicalist fashion, workers are therefore partners with owners in the battle against other enterprises and the government, and 3) by virtue of their 'lower aspirations' workers deserve the more lowly status, lesser remuneration, and more constrictive work environment accorded them as laborers. Each of these assumptions is important to what evolved into conservative political ideology in twentieth century America. It is far from certain, however, that they were adopted whole cloth by immigrants or their immediate progeny with speed and devotion.

It is not particularly useful, however, to deny out of hand that immigrants found in their new lives a range of opportunities that could be pursued individually rather than collectively. It is also important to recognize that — as Ivan Berg, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis and others have shown — in the experiences of their children (usually in public schools), a great deal of effort was expended to ensure the adoption of patterns of thought and behavior congruent with the needs of capital.

The emphasis on immigrant attitudes and behaviors, however, can lead to a failure to recognize the critical features of social, political and economic life in which they found themselves as new arrivals. As well, by addressing the question of labor activism within the context of immigrant studies, there can be a tendency to concentrate on who these people were, from where they came and the particular 'baggage' with which they arrived (especially, their ideologies and organizing skills). To some extent the issue of acculturation versus accommodation is framed within this context. The questions become ones focusing on the immigrants themselves, possibly to the neglect of analyses of the structural constraints and shifting political economy that fundamentally (though not absolutely) determined the roles immigrants played in the history of American labor activism.

The question of the immigrants' experience remains significant for those persons who regret the decline of labor activism and resent the emergence of a bread-and-butter unionism which had no place for the notion of a workers' democracy. Though not in the mainstream of American scholarship, scholars who have adopted this position are increasingly visible and their theses are given serious reading not only by professional historians but by students and scholars in contiguous disciplines, by the media and the wider public. Among the critical questions for these scholars that have not been answered in either conservative or mainstream research are:

To what extent was the immigrant experience critical to the structure and practices of the American labor movement, and vice versa?

Despite the gains of labor that accompanied the first term of the Roosevelt presidency, did the sellening of immigration in the 1920s signal the onset of the more halcyon days of the American labor movement in subsequent decades?

What does the immigrant experience contribute to our understanding of why a bor Party never took hold in the United States as it did throughout Europe and in Australia?

This paper is an effort to provide some balance to the usual emphasis on the immigrants themselves in forging answers to the first of these questions. By its method and perspective it seeks to offer an option to those persons seeking answers to the other and additional questions. The emphasis is on the political economic context in which immigrant groups found themselves, and the ways the shifting demands of this context confronted groups of individuals who had recently come to the United States.

Political structuring after the Civil War

As Barrington Moore has shown, the motives behind much of the conflict between the states in the Civil War concerned the nature of economic activities to take place in the yet unincorporated territories of the West. The issue of slavery was less one of humanitarian concern than an effort to ensure the allegiance of workers in the North for a cause highly favorable to the emerging industrial class. In simple terms, the Civil War was fought, in part, to decide what kind of agricultural economy would exist in the new territories: estates relying on slaves or small holdings of independent proprietors. The attraction of the latter to Northern workers is obvious, especially given the increasingly miserable lot they were expected to endure as members of an industrial labor force. The 'Party of Lincoln' was thus able to bury itself in the hearts of small farmers and emerging industrialists alike, less by the supposed commonality of enterprises shared by each (both being owners) than by the compatibility of interests that led to the pursuit of the United States' most costly war. The consequence for American labor was that the expansion of the frontier could continue for several more decades, in part as an outlet for injustices and thwarted ambitions in industrial America.

Norbert Wiley describes a more complex picture of America's class politics, however, that deserves mention. In this period of history several facets of the political economy cut across groupings of common political interest and created cross-cutting loyalties. Wiley describes these as 'markets': the labor market where the labor of individuals is purchased so as to pursue private gain for the purchaser; the credit market which provides operating capital; and the commodity market of goods and services which expanded dramatically with the growth and complexity of the industrial division of labor in this period. Farmers and industrialists were both interested in high commodity prices, while workers sought the opposite. But industrialists and workers shared a common interest in low food prices, putting them at odds with agricultural producers. Farmers and workers were both at odds with industrialists who, in addition to controlling industry, controlled credit and the entire banking system.

It is not unusual that there would be, during this period, several attempts to build viable third and fourth political parties, despite the overwhelming obstacles to this that are built into the American Constitution. It was a period in which active social movements flourished, including the Progressives, the Populists, and (most unfortunately) the Ku Klux Klan. None were successful, however, in wresting power from an industrial elite which was laying the foundation for future successes that would transcend political discourse.

The victory of the North in the Civil War insured the supremacy of industrial interests against any serious threat from the hinterland. This was first accomplished by disabling the South through widespread destruction and indemnification, the abolition of slavery and then by carpetbagging politics. It continued with the creation of freeholders throughout the central and western states whose economic survival depended on terms of trade set down and controlled in cities hundreds and thousands of miles from their farms and ranches. Grain, produce and animal markets operated on terms with which industry was conversant and to the advantage of financial interests, but which had little to do with the needs of particular agricultural systems or the desires and aspirations of the rural population.

The impact of this on the immigrant worker was both direct and highly significant. The supremacy of industry meant that it would be the focus of capital expansion, thus creating millions of new jobs over several decades. It also meant that the unavoidable cycles of boom and bust predicted by the classical British economics a half century earlier would be severe. This not only resulted in recurrent periods of unemployment and hardship for workers. It enfeebled labor organizations that found their efforts to build solidarity regularly eroded by ferocious competition for the fewer remaining jobs in times of economic depression.

Perhaps most significantly of all, it meant that the industrial elite became the undisputed power in all things political, enacting legislation to solidify this power, using agents of coercion when necessary and the courts when convenient or unavoidable. The use of this power was not spared when efforts at building alternate political action groups (most notably, workers' organizations) looked as if they might succeed in challenging capital.

Nor was the ideological front overlooked. In this period, as Ben Bagdikian and others have shown, newspapers became highly reliant on the good will of advertisers for operating revenues. The interests of capital were shrouded in a pseudo-philosophical concept that years later Walter Lippman venerated as objectivity, a position adopted by journalists who could be counted on to avoid deep criticism of emerging monopoly capital or to expose the more serious abuses of the industrial system. The need for a workers' democracy, or any other alternative form of political economy, was simply not a matter of public discourse.

The expansion of urban America was accompanied by considerable human suffering and the growth of social problems on a scale even a well-heeled press could not overlook indefinitely. The »yellow journalists« (e.g. Jacob Riis, Lincoln Stephens) found an audience in their heartbreaking and sometimes lurid accounts of the underclass and provided progressives with evidence of the need for social welfare legislation. The American penchant to draw contrasts between the wholesome rural setting and the depraved city was fueled by such accounts, as were rural-based movements and those joined by small proprietors. The labeling of some of America's most powerful industrialists as »robber barons«, the exposure of certain business practices (most frequently those that skirted or blocked competition), and the apparent collusion between businesses enterprises and the government persuaded many people that changes needed to be made in how business was done.

Absent from most discussions, however, was a consideration of a significantly different relationship between labor and capital. Abuses, problems, scandals and corruption were seen as the fault rascals and frauds. In the political arena there were serious discussions of financial practices and the

role the federal government should take in monetary matters. But, it was assumed that the United States was a land of entrepreneurship and that the greatest needs was to restore opportunities for this where they had been preverted. It is hardly remarkable that workers should see a better future for themselves in the realm of small business. Hundreds of thousands took this path. For many millions more it became a fallback ideology that was more in the realm of possibility than the more radical notions of the labor movement.

The decades between the Civil War and World War I were formative ones for the political economy of the United States in the modern era, including the relationship between political parties and economic interests. As the organization of political parties crystalized they began to find ways to take advantage of the opportunities of an expanding economy, just as businesses began to recognize the utility of a growing governmental system both in terms of favorable regulations and lucrative contracts. This involved the development of a complex, massive patronage system that provided jobs to political supporters. It also evolved into the »machine« politics so adroit at insuring the election of individuals favorable to business interests. Both of these practices had consequences for the labor movement, beyond the staffing in government offices of individuals hostile to workers and their demands for more power and a greater share in the returns from their work.

The problems of urban America, as these impacted on the lives of workers and their families, were met with only the most minimal response by local governments, and even less at the state and federal level. The need for help was not overlooked, however, by the extra-legal practices of the urban political machine. Robert Merton describes these practices as latent functions, as if they were unintended by-products of a political system struggling to serve the populace. In fact, the constellation of economic interests found in the need for help of thousands of poor and working people a readily-available means for insuring political domination. Without adequate social services, no avenue to redress social injustices and effective roadblocks to community political organizing, the only alternative people had for solving many of their problems was to obtain help from the agents of the wealthy and powerful: ward bosses and their staffs. In return for voting, parading and conforming according to the political script, people could sometimes get the help they needed in housing, jobs, medical treatment, schooling and other spheres of life neglected by official governmental bodies.

This took away from the labor movement one of its strongest reasons *d'être*. Commitment to a movement is possible only when it is expected that, in time, the benefits requiring that commitment will be forthcoming. The labor movement could be successful only when its members saw it as the best means for improving their well-being and were willing to forgo immediate short-term gains for more substantial gains at a later time. The urban political machine, though operating in an informal and often arbitrary manner with little accountability or public scrutiny, took care of the needs of loyalists. It was also able to provide some benefits to a broad stratum of the population, including recent immigrants who had only recently obtained political enfranchisement. This was its part of the deal, in return for political support and favorable election results. The political machine did not affect the conditions which generated personal problems, but it sought individualized solutions to immigrants' problems. In so doing it undercut appeals for solidarity and weakened the case of those who counseled structural change.

The changing practices of American industry

The American Labor Movement constantly tried to hit a moving target. It is no wonder that its tactics often seemed to be out of step with the most recent developments in management strategy, corporate planning and the needs of workers. In a general sense this problem can be seen in three aspects: the growth and diversity of the corporation; the deskilling of jobs and the adoption of Taylor-inspired mass production techniques; and the increasing mutual interdependence of government and business.

While entrepreneurs founded many of the businesses that came to dominate the American landscape by the 1920s, the majority of these had become corporations of enormous size, governed by boards of directors and policed by managerial staffs. The complexity of the enterprise often put workers out of touch with one another, in both a physical sense and in terms of common experiences which might give rise to collective action. Most obviously, corporate growth was accompanied by a reduction in the proportion of the work force devoted to skilled and semiskilled labor and a corresponding increase in white-collar employees. Working conditions could vary enormously across an enterprise, as could wage and salary differentials, benefits, vacation allowances and the basis for hiring, promotion and firing. White-collar jobs also offered an outlet or the appearance of a ladder to be scaled by those individuals dissatisfied with their situations in blue-collar jobs. Again, personal effort over group solidarity seemed to present itself as a viable strategy.

The CIO response of organizing on the basis of workers' jobs rather than trying to organize all the workers (white and blue collar alike) in a particular enterprise was a bold response to this trend. Its approach had the effect, however, of homogenizing grievances and could hardly address itself to demands for greater control of particular enterprises on the part of workers. As well, it meant that the union itself, would become a large, remote bureaucracy rather than an immediate instrument for wielding workers' power.

Harry Braverman and, more recently, Richard Edwards have convincingly shown that industrial strategy throughout the period of interest here was committed to the deskilling of jobs. Knowledge of the work process had been the most important thing earlier craftspersons took with them into the factory. This knowledge gave workers a power to determine as least some of the conditions under which their work would be performed. All of this had changed by 1915.

Though too complex to ever be fully adopted, the Taylor method sought efficiency by creating, as much as possible, routine jobs that would replace the multifaceted activities of craftworkers. By breaking complex jobs into simple actions that could be performed by almost anyone and arranging these in assembly-line fashion, management scrutiny was enhanced. Most importantly, however, skilled workers were replaced by diligent workers, while knowledge and control of the production process became the exclusive province of management.

For the immigrant worker this meant that many skills which they brought with them were of no value. For many more, however, whose rural background could have been a hindrance to their entrance to industrial work — especially production and assembly work — this meant that they were ideally suited for the new factory. They could be trained quickly and easily replaced. It increased the potential pool for labor enormously, thus creating greater competition between workers for the lower wages that could now be offered.

Finally, the corporation was finding in government, especially with the militarization of the United States that began with the Spanish-American War and continues through the present day, a major customer for its goods. Its financial giants became the government's creditors. Its agencies and regulatory commissions became the gatekeepers to new businesses venturing to compete with the old.

The maturing of capitalism and its accommodation of labor

By 1920 it was apparent to American capital the enormous benefits of having a larger, more active federal government to help lessen the kinds of frequent economic depressions that preceded the First World War. However, with a lessening of the 'natural means of disciplining labor' new methods were required to insure the subordinate role of labor in industry. The Red Scare of 1919—1923 was part of the effort on the ideological front (previsioning the McCarthy-led Red Scare that followed the Second World War). The farm crisis of the 1920s also played a useful part by creating the forced relocation of hundreds of thousands of farm families off the land and into cities where their labor could be used for industry. Not only did this new supply of unskilled labor depress wages. Most rural-to-urban migrants brought with them no traditions of labor solidarity and were only too happy to have any kind of a job. Where necessary the well-tested tactic of hiring strike breakers who were racially or ethnically different from workers on strike inflamed prejudices and ensured drove wedges of hatred between members of the working class. Such tactics were often accompanied by violence and, though the state as the agent of coercion could be counted on to support the interests of capital, the politics of confrontation were less and less desirable to all parties.

Ever higher investments in fixed capital made it economically unwise to have this go idle due to labor disputes. Additionally, the enormity of business enterprises required long-range planning that could ill afford random labor stoppages. The prospects of coexisting with a bureaucratized labor movement that could be made a 'partner' with capital seemed preferable. As long as basic relationships were not challenged, the federal and state governments could be expected to respond to labor as one of many interest groups. Capital would take its chances in these arenas as a far more powerful interest group. In short, labor was able to win rights to organize, exist and be occasionally victorious in ways that capital would not have preferred, but within a context that firmly settled the earlier questions of its place in the capitalist system. A more mature capitalist economy and a state that, if not at the sole disposal of capitalist interests, at least firmly backed the basic tenets of capital as the dominant interest in society, could live with organized labor as a social reality if it was henceforth no longer a social movement.

Concluding comments on immigrants and labor activism

This paper has attempted to contextualize some aspects of the work experience of the immigrant to the United States in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has emphasized the historical conditions which confronted workers of all stripes in the process of seeking the realization of the rights of labor. In its formative years capitalism in America was required to battle for its dominant position in society, first against a from of agriculture

to which it would be an equal or lesser partner, and then against the urban working class. A civil war was fought to win the first battle; decades of strife resulted in its winning the second. In due course any idea challenging the underpinnings of capitalism were universally treated as radical and un-American.

That many people from the immigrant population initially involved themselves in labor activism and later withdrew, or that their children did not remain committed to the sacrifices which the American labor movement required and the ideal it espoused is not surprising in light of the historical movement outlined here. That the events of American labor might have been different is indisputable. The fact that they were not had a profound effect on future generations of immigrants and non-immigrants alike. It is hardly sensible, however, to seek the reasons for this circumstance solely in the conditions of the people who were vanquished by forces far more powerful and determined than themselves.

DOSELJENICI I POLITIČKA EKONOMIJA RADNIČKOG AKTIVIZMA U SAD

SAŽETAK

U članku se razmatra promjenljiva politička ekonomija u koju su bili bačeni radnici-doseljenici u Sjedinjenim Državama krajem 19. i početkom 20. stoljeća. Njihov angažman u američkom radničkom pokretu, razmotren kroz reakcionarnu/elitističku, liberalnu i progresivnu perspektivu, kontrastira se sa često citiranim konzervativizmom i patriotizmom što se susreću u doseljeničkim skupinama. Samo je progresivna perspektiva adekvatno usmjerena prema strukturalnim uvjetima pod kojima su radnici, i domaći i strani, stremili za zadobivanjem industrijske pravde. Na taj način ova se perspektiva odvaja od drugih u svojim zaključcima o razlozima za smrt američkog radničkog pokreta, kao pokreta te razvitak unionističke (sindikalne) politike zadovoljavanja minimalnih radničkih potreba. U članku se razmatra političko prestrukturiranje tijekom pedeset godina nakon građanskog rata (osobito trijumf sjevernjačke poslovne elite), promjene metoda industrijske proizvodnje i uprave, evolucija simbiotskog odnosa između »biznisa« i vlade, te korisnost udovoljavanja radnoj snazi dokle god ona ne prihvata pojmove industrijske demokracije. Ovim se člankom tako pokazuje da su ulogu doseljeničkih grupa uvelike ograničavale snage daleko moćnije od svih mogućih udruženja ili ideologija za kakvim su doseljenici možda težili.