Neither Naught Nor All

Review of THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF LABOR by David Montgomery

(The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925, Cambridge University Press, Cambrdige, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney and Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'homme, Paris. 1987 494 pages plus front matter.)

reviewed by Jeremy Brecher

Volume III of Capital ends with a fragment entitled "Classes." It promises to address the rather significant question, "What constitutes a class?" The last sentence notes the "infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers . . ." There follows a terse note appended by Engels: "[Here the manuscript breaks off.]"

E.P. Thompson's 1963 classic The Making of the English Working Class began a new era in labor history by focussing attention on the ways human beings experienced class, how these experiences were expressed in cultural terms, and the process by which that culture led to deliberate efforts to reshape society. Thompson asserted that "class is defined by men as they live their own history." He concluded that,

"in the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers." By 1832, in Thompson's account, the English working class "has been made."

Thompson's book helped spawn that now vast accumulation of studies of working class subcultures, work relations, and mass actions that in the U.S. goes by the name of "the new labor history." These studies opened up an exciting view of aspects of working class life that had rarely even been touched on, let alone studied in depth.

But over the past few years, even while such studies have continued to pour out, there has been something of a crisis of conscience. What is it all for? What does it all mean? Above all, there has been a call for synthesis, for integrating the various studies in a new vision of labor history, of the history of common people, or even of American history as a whole.

David Montgomery's The Fall of the House of Labor is a heroic attempt at such a synthesis for the six decades from the abolition of chattel slavery in the 1860s to the closing of mass immigration from Europe and Asia in the early 1920s. The first three chapters deal with the work and life experiences of skilled workers, common laborers, and the growing number of machine operators. The next two address workers' response to the management reform movement of the early 20th century. The final four chapters trace the

varied forms of working class consciousness that developed in the years surrounding World War I.

The Fall of the House of Labor is not a survey of American labor history in the period but rather a collation of in-depth case studies placed in an analytical framework which is not always made explicit. While a demanding book for students getting their first taste of labor history, it is must reading for anyone with a serious interest in the subject.

Montgomery starts with the problem of "infinite fragmentation" with which Marx broke off. The working class is composed of so many disparate individuals with such variety in personal aspirations, talents, and sense of self -- not to mention in gender, race, religion, and nationality -- as to defy stereotypes. Instead of listening for the "voice of the working class," therefore, Montgomery asserts that "we must be attuned to many different voices, sometimes in harmony, but often in conflict with one another."

Nonetheless, Montgomery argues, American experience in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both inside and outside the workplace, must be analyzed in terms of conflicting social classes. "The human relationships structured by commodity production in large collective enterprises devoted to private gain generated bondings and antagonisms that were, in one form or another, the daily experience of everyone involved."

Class consciousness was more than a product of daily experience; "it was also a project." Activists deliberately sought to foster a sense of unity and purposiveness among workers through every means from songs to newspapers to unions. They saw the position of workers as requiring collective action. And they promoted various versions of "mutualism" as more appropriate for workers than capitalistic competitive individualism. Montgomery commemorates the diverse forms of working class mutualism with an awe-inspiring ecumenicism.

Montgomery places the experience and action of wage earners in the workplace at the center of his story. 19th century craftsmen created work norms and trade unions that parlayed their control of productive know-how into considerable economic and social power. Largely in response, employers redesigned the work process, using mechanization and scientific management to break the skilled workers' hold over production. Workers in response developed new forms of action and organization which began to counter these -- forms which grew explosively in the crisis years around World War I, encouraging visions of radical social transformation. State intervention, after briefly supporting the expansion of the AFL, created the conditions for the "fall of the house of labor" in the early 1920s.

Montgomery places this story within a context of "prolonged deflationary crisis between 1873 and 1897," followed by a period of prolonged recovery. He describes the impact of periods of boom and bust on the year-by-year and almost month-by-month changes both in strike levels and in workers' objectives. At the same time, he emphasizes the longer-range transformation from competitive to corporate capitalism.

While these aspects of workplace and economic life fall within the customary framework of Marxist analysis, Montgomery incorporates several other aspects of social existence into his account. He discusses, for example, the way in which 20th century laborers, drawn overwhelmingly from rural areas outside the sphere of European and American industrialization, differed from the rest of the workforce: both their agricultural background and their ethnic and racial identity led to overlapping divisions within the working class. He discusses the specific culture of urban young women as a source of solidarity among factory operatives and the importance of family issues for both mainstream and socialist trade unionists. He focusses both on the political activities of working class organizations and the changing ways the state tried to suppress or coopt the labor movement. And he addresses broad cultural shifts, such as the rise early in the 20th century of a confident progressivism that, while accepting the existing class

structure, celebrated "public" over private interest and management over unregulated drift.

This book is undoubtedly the closest we have to a "synthesis" of the new labor history. Montgomery takes the categories of Marxist class analysis as the basic framework for interpreting American society in his period, while recognizing that other factors, such as race and gender, must also be taken into account; accordingly, the primary focus is on the workplace (and specifically the large capitalist workplace), while other spheres are addressed where necessary to tell the workplace story and to explain differences among different groups of workers.

Obviously this is better than simply ignoring non-class factors; but the question remains, whether thus "privileging" class relations and the workplace doesn't still illegitimately "reduce" gender, race, national, ideological, and other identities and relations to class ones. The question is hard to answer, however, because you can't beat a paradigm with no paradigm; until we have an effort similar to Montgomery's but based on different premises, the question will remain open.1

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1 Various studies which integrate class and gender perspectives, such as Cynthia Cockburn's Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change (London, 1983) provide some starting points for such an effort. Michael Mann's The Sources of Social Power (Cambridge, 1986) presents a useful example of a theoretical framework which includes class analysis but is not subsumed by it.

Among the calls for "sythesis," some have specifically asked for a national synthesis, an answer to the question, what does all this "new labor history" tell us about American history? Montgomery shows that, while for some purposes one country may be the appropriate focus, for others it clearly is not. He emphasizes, for example, the existence of an industrialized "core" in western Europe and the American East and Midwest, surrounded by a "periphery" impacted by the expanding cash nexus but not itself participating in industrialization. He similarly emphasizes how the unfolding of war in Europe affected every aspect of American class struggle. Since networks of economic and social relationships cut across national boundaries, synthesis cannot be limited to a national framework.

Was the American working class "made" in the sense that Thompson claimed the English working class was? Montgomery wisely avoids a definitive answer. But he gives a characterization for 1916 whose "buts" and "despites" evoke the continuing tension of a class struggling to make itself but never fully made. The reorganization of American industry after the 1890s had broken the partitions between craftsmen, operatives, and laborers, "but the homogenization had not unified the working class." The diversity of daily experience among women and men, the different races, the many nationalities, the toolmakers and the machine tenders, the construction workers and the dockers continued to

produce a plethora of attitudes and interests; nonetheless, "Militant unity was possible on a massive scale despite that diversity."

After noting that the working class was a formidable fact of American life, Montgomery goes on to add that "Despite the recognizable grounding of Gompers's craft unionionism, middle-of-the-road building-trades practice, socialism, Catholic action, syndicalism, and feminism in the same soil of working-class experience and the same celebration of mutualism over competitive individualism, these ideologies and the institutions in which they were embodied were often bitterly antagonistic toward one another. Moreover, the antagonists were not minuscule doctrinaire sects but large, historically influential bodies of working people."

The "project of class consciousness," one might conclude, was real, but in this period at least its aspiration to unify the working class was not achieved. The working class was neither naught nor all.

Although in 1916 the working class was "a formidable fact of American life," by 1923 the "House of Labor" had fallen, defeated by mass unemployment and a government-backed employer offensive. The divisions Montgomery explores help explain why each union "stood alone during the brutal strikes of 1922." In the metal trades, for example, amalgamation of craft unions "posed a clear threat to both

the offices of many craft-union leaders and the occupational and ethnic enclaves that their members had managed to secure."

Montgomery's tragic story inevitably calls to mind today's labor movement and the terrible price working people are paying for the fall of our contemporary "House of Labor." Perhaps the ultimate contribution of the new labor history, in which David Montgomery has played such a formative role, will be to reveal both the importance of the divisions among working people and the devastating consequences of not building wider solidarities to bridge them.