A Conversation with David Montgomery, May 27, 2011

Geoffrey Field
Purchase College, State University of New York

Michael Hanagan
Vassar College

MICHAEL HANAGAN (MH): What we're basically looking for is a little bit of the origins—the birth of *ILWCH* and its early years.

DAVID MONTGOMERY (DM): Well, you may know—probably know—*ILWCH* started as a newsletter, and it began really as the work of a group of Europeanists on the West Coast. Bob Wheeler was the spark plug of the whole thing … the people around him included a heavy concentration of experts on Germany, which is not surprising, that was his field also. And they created a newsletter just to inform each other of what was going on and wrote—solicited a great many long review essays, that was the original heart. I think one of the biggest differences between the review essays of that period and later on is that, of course, many of the review essays [then] were very negative about the books that they reviewed. Denunciations were more common then than they are now.

But from the very beginning they were clearly very much interested in two things that might be easy for us to forget. The first was social theory. They were picking up many concepts from sociologists, some good, some bad, some indifferent. There [was] a lot of modernization theory that got in there. And Clark Kerr's notions had quite an influence, I think, on the early editors of the journal.

But also very noteworthy is from day one there was a lot of interest in women's history. And so it's not something you have to wait for a movement to come along later on, I think, for this group of Europeanists to pick up. This is before the great formulations and influence of feminist theory, but in the role of working-class women, I think there was considerable interest and attention right from the very beginning.

Wheeler, as you may know, was a graduate student at Pittsburgh. And he came there and worked with Dick Hunt and Bob Colodny and others. They all thought he was a most unusual historian of socialism and workers for the early 1970s because he was in the Marine reserves. He went to a small Catholic college. When everybody else was looking all shaggy, he came to Pittsburgh like he was ready to stand review in appearance. But [he] very quickly demonstrated that he had the enormous tenacity and enormous determination to learn everything possible. When he went abroad to Germany to do his dissertation, he

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 82, Fall 2012, pp. 15–25
© International Labor and Working-Class History, Inc., 2013
doi:10.1017/S0147547912000300

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

took three years at it, not wanting to miss a single archive around Germany. Well anyway, this was the kind of expertise that, you know, the kind of personality, I think, that helped Wheeler attract a great many other very good people to work with him on that newsletter.

I never taught him when he was at Pittsburgh. His interests were all in Europe, and I had just arrived. But I was there at the same time as he was. So when he went back to southern California, as you know, he died in 1977 … and some of his West Coast colleagues looked around for quite a while to find some way to keep the journal going. They raised a fund of money to keep the newsletter going, raised money. And finally a couple of 'em came to Pittsburgh, which was logical in large part because that's where Wheeler had done his graduate work. So they came and asked me if I would take it on. And I signed on.

I thought that the newsletter should be kept going and indeed expanded into a journal because there was real interest multiplying around the land in working-class history around the mid- and late 1970s, as you may know. Well, this is maybe getting too far off things, but you may remember that a number of institutions gathered large numbers of excellent students who wanted to study labor history. We had at one point, I think, twenty-one graduate students at Pitt, twenty of them were studying labor history.

GEOFFREY FIELD (GF): That's amazing!

DM: Binghamton had a large group of students, and at Pittsburgh we worked out sort of semiannual or biannual exchanges, in which either we would go to Binghamton and meet everybody there …. There were people like Brian Palmer and Greg Kealey and so forth, studying with Mel Dubofsky. And then the other year the Binghamton group would come down to meet with us.

But anyway, we had a very lively place, and the university agreed to put up a little bit of money to keep the journal, or to convert it into a journal. And at the same time, a big collection that had been taken up by friends of Bob Wheeler just turned over all their funds to us to get us going as a journal.

So in this sense the Pittsburgh connection did not just come out of the blue. They knew that there were a good many fine students here and they all [were]—Wheeler knew much of the faculty there and had worked with them—very close knit. And they all had great admiration for him.

MH: Well David, this was a very productive period in your academic life. And one of the questions I'd like to ask is why at this point did you feel that a priority should be taking over a journal, editing a journal?

DM: Well, I think that I was persuaded largely by two things, one was that I thought then and I still do that working on history is basically a collective undertaking. Many individuals write fine books and articles and so forth, but it's the direction, the help, and indeed the conflicts that we develop with each other, I think that is important. And I thought that a journal that could emphasize international developments, and could help develop cooperation with other existing

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

groups of historians, could be very useful in precisely this period because there was such an interest around the country.

And as you may remember, two journals linked up with us very early on. One was *Le mouvement social* in Paris, and—

MH: *International Review [of Social History].*

DM: —and Madeleine Rebérioux used to write regular reports on the French scene for the journal. And the other journal that linked up with us was *Labour/Le Travail* in Canada, from the old Binghamton connection that came in useful. So I think that we had a very good group of people gathered there who could all contribute something to this journal. We built an editorial board, much of which, especially on the European side, had already been started out on the West Coast. And we had these other international connections.

By the way, the year that I finished up *Workers Control in America* I was actually on a one-year leave of teaching up in SUNY Buffalo. The workload was light there, so this was a relatively easy time. I think … really [it was] when I came back to Pittsburgh that we put together the first issue that was published under my name. It actually only had one year in Pittsburgh. The year after that we moved up to Yale.

MH: What sort of experience was it to start a labor history journal at Yale?

DM: Quite different. There were first of all a great many students much interested in labor history. As a matter of fact my first years there I had to break my seminars into two, sort of an afternoon shift and a night shift because there were just too many people to carry on the discussion. On the faculty end there was quite little interest in international history or labor history. But there were a few people who did pitch in: Ivo Banac (who now has gone back to Croatia), Emily Honig on Asian history, and Emilia Da Costa [on Latin American history] were basic people. … Michael Denning, who is so helpful nowadays, he was one of the students at Yale at the time when I started this. So it was not a very helpful faculty, but we had good facilities to work with and I think, again, largely because of student interest and the connections many students made in other parts of the country and of the world in fact.

GF: And you also had the New York connection very close by to New Haven.

DM: Yeah. And that grew stronger and stronger as the years went on. Then after a while Helmut Gruber became sort of coeditor of the thing and … he would shuttle back and forth [from] New York very frequently.

MH: Let us move on to talking about … larger questions of labor history.

GF: We were thinking that when the journal was founded, basically the journal was expanding enormously into all kinds of areas and that in some ways the period of the late 1970s and into the 1980s was one of fragmentation. And one of the things that historians have been concerned about, it seems to me, in recent years is how can we refocus labor history or working-class history.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

And a few of the things that we came up with we wanted you to comment on. One was identity studies, another was globalization. And still another one was recent studies of capitalism as a kind of overarching theme … I wanted you to comment on some of those.

DM: I think that identity theory came to *ILWCH* largely out of some early discussions of women's history. The earliest things that we did were all like the [Joan] Scott and Louise Tilly piece on family. And there were some contributors who objected vehemently to our always burying women's history in family history and thought that we ought to take on gender in ways that opened up more questions than that. And I think rather quickly we did that.

We then really came into the middle of the famous linguistic turn, which in my memory had a rather short period of generating discussion around *ILWCH*. [By] short period I mean just two or three years was all that we had. The work coming largely I think out of England first of all took the enormous influence that E.P. Thompson had had on the way we thought about social consciousness in language and turned it into … took his notion one huge step further, basically to make discourse the shaping influence on all human behavior.

We had a few vigorous controversies about this. And then rather, it seems to me, left close attention to the way things were framed in discourse. But [we] lost interest in bringing it forward as the determining factor, the great shaping factor in historical development. [But] identity is still with us.

MH: Indeed.

DM: And I think [identity theory] has produced some very worthwhile studies and some rather more questionable ones, it seems to me. But I think the general controversies that we have around identity theory were and remain rather creative ones.

You know, I think the big thing that we had to worry about through the 1980s was that we tended to get more and more European oriented, too much to the exclusion of other parts of the world … . We had some occasional good pieces on China. But I think Zachary Lockman really opened the Middle East up for us, [with] his work on Egypt. And he and Don Quataert had, in my memory, a very influential role—I know on me personally. But I think also on the journal, because they brought to our attention a situation in which the notion of the development from artisan activity to small factory, from small factory to big business and labor movements, just moving corresponding to that simply did not work for three-fourths of the globe. And their work on Egypt and Turkey, I think, was very important in bringing to us, first of all, the crucial importance of foreign workers, usually not at the bottom of the heap as they would be today in the Near East or were in the United States, but rather the most skilled.

You know, why did locomotive engineers all over the British and French empires turn out to be English and French? And what sort of politics did they then bring with them? But at the same time what would soon come to be called "informal economy" … being so large [so] you cannot begin to study

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

what was developing in Cairo or in Istanbul or something simply by looking at the big factory, which among other things, by the way, was almost always foreign owned. Then how did that fit in with the local economy and with the state? And I think that Lockman and Quataert's work did a lot to help us draw attention back to the everyday life of ordinary people, many different kinds of everyday life . . . beginning with the crucial role of the state and in this case capital, foreign capital.

MH: Today we hear a lot about the need to build transnational, international, global labor histories. On the other hand, I think some people—labor historians—are deeply suspicious of such projects as involving modernization theory, as Whig theories of progressive history. What are your own feelings about the need to build a global or international transnational labor history?

DM: Yeah, first and foremost I think that much of what we have done in that area has been very good and owes a lot to [Marcel] van der Linden and the [International] Institute [of Social History] in Amsterdam. Where could you have a more logical place to do international history, starting from early modern times on than Amsterdam? It has been [central] you know, will be for a long time to come.

So I think the contributions that were made by him and by people connected with the Institute or contacted by the Institute have a lot to do not only with giving us something of a worldwide vision, but also drawing our attention back to some of the early periods of European expansion especially.

GF: What you just said reminded me that when we look at the work of the Amsterdam Institute, they usually take say a two-hundred- or three-hundred-year span and analyze a problem over that. Josh [Freeman] and I were just doing an issue on labor and the military and they're doing something similar in Amsterdam, but they're taking a five-hundred-year span. And I wondered what your thoughts were about whether or not *ILWCH* should be doing more of a kind of *longue durée* and going back to dealing with a longer period of history. We've largely been focused, it seems to me, on the nineteenth and the twentieth [centuries] and most recently on the very recent past.

DM: Yeah, yeah. I think it certainly shouldn't devour everything else in the journal. But I think this kind of a *longue durée* emphasis can be very useful. . . . After all, we now have a remarkably large number of journals on labor history around, despite the decline of labor movements in the capitalist world. And I mean two, dedicated [journals] and both *Labor* and *Labor History* have broadened their scope to include, especially, pieces on Latin America, which I think is quite good. So there's no shortage of places for good work to be published. The question is, can *ILWCH* play a distinctive role in this? And it does seem to me that one of the places that it can is in developing this long view.

With [regard to this] long view, I find it difficult to think [it] necessarily becomes modernization theory, let alone Whiggish. We sort of started out in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the 1970s surrounded by modernization theory. Some of it is in some of the phraseology I used that makes me blanch when I look at some of my [early] writings sometimes. But it was, after all, in the Kennedy years the dominant ideology that shaped American foreign policy, economic policy, the way academics were thinking about the world, that there was this phenomenon called modernization that seemed to have just one direction in which it could possibly go. And I think we've largely escaped that … and in my own view, I find it hard to consider studies of the *longue durée* necessarily Whiggish. In fact in our times it gets harder and harder to be optimistic sometimes. So the notion that every day and every way we're getting better and better seems to me sort of unpersuasive and not the conclusion that theories of the *longue durée* are bound to present, especially if you deal with the varieties of development of capitalism in the world, of capitalism and of socialism …

GF: It did seem to me that in some ways with the … culturalist movement of labor history, especially in the '70s and the '80s, that economic historians sort of left the field and migrated into economics departments. This refocusing on capitalism is in part obviously a reflection of our contemporary world. But it may also be a way in which one can bring back business history, economic history, political history, labor history into some kind of unity. And I wondered what your thoughts were about that?

DM: [I am for] unity, or at least a very creative and fruitful interaction between them. I'm rather fortunate here. I'm just about eight or nine miles away from the Hagley Institute, which is a major center for business history and which runs monthly seminars with people giving work on business history. And I've found a number of them include an awful lot on what the working people themselves are doing, by no means all, but —in fact the two people who are really in charge of that seminar are both labor historians …. So yes, I think that we do need to get back to that. And there was a period in which business history had considerable influence on the writing, at least, of US history and French history, too.

GF: And in the US now, obviously Judith Stein, but also Nelson Lichtenstein and the work on Wal-Mart and so on.

DM: Yes, indeed.

MH: As editor of a journal called *International Labor and Working Class History*, how do you think that the journal can promote, encourage international articles, essays, work in this field?

DM: Part of it is the way that we've long been doing, having people making reports on conferences and scouting out good work that people are doing in conferences and bringing them together. We have to get some new folks. We really miss Quataert's impact on this. There is a lot of extremely interesting work going on in China that makes us think in new ways about the process of capitalist accumulation and of workers' struggles and labor migration. And I think tapping into the good people who fortunately are in the New York area, because there's a lot of good historians of China right at hand.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

There has been—I think there could be a lot more—interest in India, which is so important. Then, there's the work of Laura Tabili on merchant seamen and migration. . . . And I think there are a good many people doing very interesting work on Africa. I think recent issues have really had some good articles. And somebody else who did very interesting work on Africa is Irwin Wall . . . So I think the question is [how to] think of questions that might be able to draw people of this type together and, you know, who could be useful, in framing scholarly controversies on a global scale.

GF: David, I wanted to come back to a question that Josh [Freeman] had, which was, given the status of the labor movement today in North America and elsewhere for that matter, how does this affect the task of an *ILWCH* or an editor of *ILWCH*? And how is it different, in a sense, to be the editor of such a journal today as opposed to when the journal began on the kind of crest of the wave or a mounting wave?

DM: Yeah, the crest of the wave in at least two important respects. One is we were starting out in an age where in the industrial parts of the world workers were more heavily unionized than ever before in history. But that was already slipping away from us. The second was a period of very strong criticism of what unionism and social democracy (what was then often called "corporate liberalism") had developed into that helped produce a great many studies and good ones of rank-and-file activities, of new ways of looking at labor movements.

When I came back from England to Pittsburgh, I found all these good students waiting for me. [There was also] the New York Post Office workers' strike: Suddenly here was a great big rank-and-file movement that broke all rules of the service workers and so forth at the time. And it had some of them on picket lines no longer just saying, "Ah, unions." You know? They'd become part of the enemy. So a new interest in organized labor developed. . . one that also tended to focus very heavily on US history in the nineteenth century. That's almost disappeared now. Everything is twentieth century I think . . . .

But Josh had something else of interest that he wanted to know. Is interest fading away? . . . We used to in those days have people at labor history conferences that were basically run by trade unions. And in the Pacific they almost always still are. . . the North Pacific and the Southwest Labor History Society. Others like Pennsylvania have gone to the other extreme, overwhelmingly trade unionists who mainly spend their time giving each other plugs. You know? That actual stimulation of local research and interests and so forth, it's not there. But I think that in one sense it's clear that the upheaval in Wisconsin brought a lot of this back. I mean we were getting our reports in the newspapers [by] labor historians at the University of Wisconsin and in Milwaukee and that this should be something of a general public interest, I think. And that so many students came out there to join so many workers in battling against the Wisconsin budget. Student support was not reproduced every place else in the country, to say the least, but it did help stir this interest back up, and I think that keeping in touch with these local societies is one way for us even to see what can be done.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

MH: Just one sub-question and that is you've probably noticed the very determined assaults going on around the country against the teaching of labor studies in universities … About four or five years ago there was a commission that investigated throughout the whole country and found [out] which labor studies institutes were basically management schools and which ones were deeply involved with the labor movement. And the question was to shut down those involved with the labor movement and keep intact the others that were basically management schools.

DM: This came to a head recently, as you probably read, in Missouri where two people from the Labor Studies Institute of Missouri were singled out by Fox News, and [there] were demands that the university fire them because they were preaching violence. And this man [Andrew] Breitbart had taken his television cameras into the room and photographed lectures and doctored the lectures around to use just the right clippings on Fox News and say these [professors] were a danger to America. Fortunately there was enough of a rebellion against this that both of the people involved … both of them were finally reinstated.

But in any case it is possible to mobilize questions [and] action around the labor movement today. And I think this will be one place where the interest can be maintained. And if we go back to the globalization question there are many other parts of the world where labor movements have remained quite vigorous with some extraordinary developments, like the dock workers union in western Australia talking about a merger with Cape Town, South Africa. Because of so much communication between them, the South Africans have sent their workers over to Australia and the Australians send workers over to Cape Town. So each one could get a sense of the work culture of the other group and how they lived.

And Latin America is certainly starting to have no shortage of struggles to write about. Now I think what we need to think about again then is some of the different frameworks in some of the very important interchanges among unions in different parts of the world, both those that are successes and those that are flops [or] end up in conflict with each other. So I won't say that interest in the labor movement is dying away, maybe it's just cultural lag, but there's still some interest and plenty of it there, I think, for us to work with.

MH: Well, to what extent do you think that as the blue-collar jobs and manufacturing jobs have moved south, that labor movements have also began to become more important in other areas of the [global] South rather than in areas of the North?

DM: Yeah, well I think very much so … when was it, around 1998 or so, a United Nations study came up with a figure that 78 percent of the workers in manufacturing in the world are found outside the old industrial countries. This is mind boggling to think of, how much of it has moved out around the world. And it's also true that often having moved it, you keep moving. As soon as the workers in one place begin to become organized, something like Jeff Cowie

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

described inside the United States with RCA, is also happening on a kind of global scale today.

But I do think that this means workers' movements and sometimes means a very expansive definition of workers in Asia, Africa, even the Near East. Workers played a big role in Egypt and Tunisia. But, as Quataert would remind us, always keeping in mind the power of the state and its influence in those movements.

MH: When you and Helmet Gruber were coediting *ILWCH*, two innovations I think you introduced [were] the idea of thematic issues and the idea of controversies. And I think they've been very successful for *ILWCH*. And first I'm just wondering if there are themes that you think that we should deal with that we have not dealt with?

DM: Yeah. I've been thinking about that . . . it is difficult because we've actually dealt with an amazing variety [of themes]. So maybe some of 'em could be dealt with in a different way or a different angle taken on the subject. One I would think is religion. We've had one good issue on religion that focused largely on Europe, the United States, and Strickwerda's notion of where Catholic action had its historic roots across central Europe, [which] I think was very useful there. But there are things we've paid attention to on religion, and that issue in particular, I think, was a very good one.

I've never ventured beyond Christianity and Judaism. What about the impact of religion and the interactions between them, and what sorts of changes? I mean, after all, you think back, the Catholic union movements in North America, Quebec in the extreme case, reformed largely as very conservative insurgents. In the 1960s, the Catholic unions in France and Italy and Quebec went wild, and they went way to the left of the old left-wing unions that were there. There may be—I don't have any off the top of my head—but there may be some comparable questions in Muslim or archetypal secular countries, China, you know, that I think could be well worth looking at this kind of interaction.

And I think that the public workers have certainly brought themselves into the center of attention. And especially with all of the cuts that the World Bank world trade organizations have been demanding on what public workers starting with teachers are paid. But here again, and I think we could look beyond the confines of North America and Europe to see what's happened in that sphere.

MH: Yes. There is also the question of controversies. Do you have any suggestions or things we can—people can fight about?

DM: Well, one of them you've already suggested. Is an interest in globalization simply a new Whig history or modernization under another name? . . . You are much more in the center of arguments about this question than I am today. Is this even worth thinking about, thinking about the issue head-on?

GF: Can we ask you a little about what work you're doing yourself today?

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

DM: I've been working very slowly on a study of workers' movements largely from the industrial part of the world and imperialism. And I completed a section on the Second International in the First World War, with an enormous debt to Georges Haupt.

And also it was that work that got me into looking into the background of the famous 1920 Baku Congress of the Third International. And finding out that the bulk of the workers in the Baku oil fields were Azerbaijani who were largely—this one really tickled me to discover–largely illegal immigrants. Now all of us have friends who can tell about illegal immigrants *out of* Czarist Russia, but illegal immigrants *into* Czarist Russia, I think, is something worth thinking about. And because, of course, they get shaken down by the border guards on both sides…

But this led me to think of some early migrations out of the Third World that had a big role, I think, in shaping the way the Communist International was to question the imperialists. Then I completed and actually published an article, a chapter on the American Federation of Labor and imperialism, mainly with its relations with Canada and Canadian unions; another one was Puerto Rico and Mexico.

What I've been working on more recently is the revolt against colonialism. But I've been slowed down by dozens of other things to do. I did quite a bit of research before I came here, but not much more since that time.

GF: Colonialism in India or—

DM: Well, Africa, India, and in one sense there's much in China that's crucial on this. This is something that really Lockman and Quataert got me thinking about. You know, the place—this by the way is not so heavily about the Third International as these remarks would suggest. The Third International was important, but after 1919 much of their strength lay among maritime workers on the Pacific. And China was a major focal point of this. Well, the Chinese workers from the great international port cities, Hong Kong and Shanghai, first rose in enormous strikes in sympathy with the May Fourth Movement, [which was] basically a student revolt against the League of Nations giving the Shandong peninsula from Germany to Japan, instead of back to China.

Well here again, it's hard to imagine in Europe or the United States an issue of international treaties and borders having that much effect on a workers' movement in the shape that it took in China itself. And in fact the workers' movement, as you know, got stronger and stronger through the 1920s in China until General Chiang Kai-shek took Shanghai and shot everybody. But that period … it may be too big a subject for a single chapter. I called it in my mind originally "Baku to Bandung."

I'm not daring to go on past that point.

GF: It sounds like your trajectory has actually mirrored that of *ILWCH* in some ways, which was moving from American and European dominantly to truly a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press

kind of global and non-American, non-European focus almost, or integrating the two, or bringing them together, let's put it that way.

DM: Yeah.

MH: David, I think we covered a lot today. Are there questions we should ask that we have not asked? What do you think?

DM: No. I think you've come up with good ones.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547912000300 Published online by Cambridge University Press