Critical Dialogue

America's New Working Class: Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in a Biopolitical Age. By Kathleen Arnold. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008. 256p. $45.
doi:10.1017/S1537592708081954

— Anna Marie Smith, *Cornell University.*

In her timely and provocative book, Kathleen Arnold examines the super-exploitation and disenfranchisement of the "new working class"—low-income immigrants, African Americans, and women workers—and utilizes these phenomena as a catalyst for sharpening our critical understanding of American governance in our globalizing conditions. She contends that the neoliberal state is deploying deregulation and massive policing interventions simultaneously. The latter range from the exposure of welfare mothers to the rigors of workfare to the war on drugs, post-9/11 domestic security operations, mean-spirited attacks on the homeless, and the crackdown on illegal immigration. Arnold proposes a sobering diagnosis that is loosely based upon Giorgio Agamben's theory of bare life: As the state operates outside the law on a frequent and even systematic basis to reduce these target groups to a subhuman status, we are witnessing the triumph of prerogative power in American society today.

The sort of interdisciplinary work that Arnold performs in this book is extraordinarily ambitious and demanding. Moving back and forth between sociological data, legal documents, scholarly theories of labor discipline and exploitation, macro-level and transnational economic analysis, poststructuralist models of power and resistance, and normative philosophy is like dancing on a high wire without a safety net. The prudent author finds some support in the works of "bridge builders": seasoned veterans of interdisciplinary borrowing who have managed to pull these almost untranslateable specialized languages together to form coherent and persuasive wholes. Arnold makes an excellent choice in this regard, having leaned on Zygmunt Bauman in just the right ways throughout the book.

By the same token, the very strength of *America's New Working Class*, namely, its ambitious design, has placed challenges before Arnold that she has not quite met in all respects. Take, for example, the promised synthesis among so many different empirical analyses. She tells the reader that she will show us how the disempowerment of the new working class fits together with the American government's policies on poverty, homelessness, terrorism, immigration, drug trafficking at home, and narcoterrorism abroad. With such a broad agenda for the book, it becomes quite difficult for the author to offer a convincing overall argument and to break new ground in any one of these areas. Feminist students of welfare politics may be disappointed by the fact that Arnold does not explore the work/caregiving nexus, reproductive rights, or developments in family law, even though she attempts to situate her labor discipline analysis within a biopolitics framework.

Arnold is right on the mark when she claims that American workers are being increasingly disempowered on the job and in the political arena. In too many passages, however, it is not clear exactly how she views agency: Does she think that the global economy "requires" this type of disempowerment? Where she argues that prerogative power "serves the needs" of a global economy, the reader could reasonably place her in the functionalist camp that has been so thoroughly undermined by many critical thinkers. In a functionalist argument, difference tends to disappear, the guilty parties are hidden by the looming structure, and the possibility of agency becomes problematic. Similarly, there are moments in the more deterministic and eschatological Marx in which agency is defined according to a millenarian scheme as the working out of the essence of the proletariat, a potentiality that is only fully actualized at the apocalyptic transition to the next world. Critics of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (Paul Passavant and Jodi Dean, eds., *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, 2003) have pointed to the practical shortcomings of this sort of leftist apocalypticism. Arnold respectfully documents several resistance struggles, but she seems to have ruled out their immanence in advance insofar as she also describes the social structure as a complete totality.

Arnold also notes that whereas the American economy responded to global pressures with deindustrialization, the expansion of the low-wage service sector, the attack on unions, and irregular employment—part-time, temporary, and seasonal work, freelance and homework, and so on—Western Europe has taken a completely different route. The Blair government's poverty policies, for that matter, were much better than those of the current Bush

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administration. These are all developed capitalist societies, and all of them have opened themselves, more or less, to global competition, and yet they have somehow arrived at different solutions. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (*Regulating the Poor*, 1993) argue that these sorts of regional differences are in fact substantial and that they have emerged and become solidified because the business class and its allies within the American political system have gained and exercised an unusual degree of political power in the United States since the mid-1970s.

In their cutting-edge socioeconomic research, Aihwa Ong (*Neoliberalism as Exception*, 2006) and Lourdes Beneria (*Gender, Development, and Globalization*, 2003) suggest that even within a single country, economic sector, and workforce stratum, we can find a rich multiplicity in labor discipline regimes. Arnold, by contrast, tends to privilege a one-dimensional analysis. In some ways, the "feminization" of service-sector labor certainly has homogenizing effects. However, we can also observe management's construction of status hierarchies and labor market segmentation even among the lowest-paid workers; male fast-food workers, cleaners, and call-center operators, for example, earn higher incomes and are given more supervisory duties than their female counterparts. This multiplication of differences may contribute to further disempowerment insofar as it perpetuates "divide and rule," a racialized, ethnically complicated, and gendered approach to labor management whose long and prominent history in the United States has been carefully documented by scholars such as Ronald Takaki (*A Different Mirror*, 1994). It is precisely because these differences pose significant challenges to union organizers that they deserve our close attention.

Arnold's appropriation of Agamben is, in many ways, suggestive. In several moments, the ascendant business class has successfully weakened the laws that serve the interests of the most vulnerable workers: The federal minimum wage has been kept well below the living wage, affirmative action has been rolled back, unions have been undermined, and government agencies like the National Labor Review Board and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have been eviscerated. To a great extent, the lowest-paid workers are forced by harsh labor-market policies and by the massive reductions in poverty assistance to seek waged labor without adequate legal protection. Undocumented immigrant workers are extremely vulnerable to maltreatment by their employers. Within the realm of welfare reform, the already inadequate degree of due process that was achieved by the poverty rights movement has been whittled away as administrative procedures take the place of court hearings and "streamlining" becomes the order of the day.

It is one thing, however, to say that there are authoritarian and totalistic moments in the imaginaries conjured up by reactionary forces. It is quite another to say that the law has actually been suspended. From an advocacy point of view, it is extremely important that we not take right-wing rhetoric at its word by overstating the case in our empirical descriptions. The fascist suspension of the law is not the same as the deliberate attempts by ruling elites to weaken an already inadequate and uneven liberal democratic law, especially when those attempts are still being contested at every step of the way. The Constitution does extend meaningful protections to the most vulnerable among us, from the Guantánamo detainees seeking to exercise their habeas corpus rights to the needy mother who demands a fair hearing at her local welfare office.

Arnold seems to want to have a rigorous Agamben and a loosely defined Agamben at one and the same time. She acknowledges the vast difference between his ideal typical case, the concentration camp, and the contemporary American treatment of the undocumented worker. She states that she prefers historical specificity in favor of Agamben's ontological schema, but then she does not carefully show us exactly what is left of his thought, beyond sensitizing gestures, once she has made that choice. Where Agamben wants to argue that we are all vulnerable to the state's relentless and one-dimensional bid to reduce humanity to bare life, Arnold's text consistently reveals the stratified nature of insecurity in American society; it is the historically disempowered who are rendered worst off in the midst of neoliberal restructuring and crises like the Katrina hurricane. As she admits, labor only appears in Agamben's ideal type as useless and unprofitable drudgery. From his perspective, the only work that matters is state-coerced labor performed by the inmates within the concentration camp, and concentration camp work is utterly unremarkable in that it is but one sadistic technique among many that can be imposed upon those who have been reduced to bare life in order to secure their total subjection. The Marxist theory of exploitation that Arnold seeks to integrate into her argument sits quite awkwardly next to Agamben's theory of bare life. Arnold does not tell us exactly how the two objectives, that of capital accumulation and that of constituting state power by reducing humanity to bare life, can be made compatible in an imaginary space, let alone how they are being made compatible and mutually reinforcing in the context of the contemporary American labor market. Marxists and post-Marxists have long debated the much simpler question of the relationship between capital accumulation and the modern state and nothing more; given the complexity of the issues at hand, it is unlikely that they will arrive at a consensus.

Similarly, Arnold's literal reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* as a story about ascetic values that are analogous to the Protestant work ethic does not really advance our understanding of laborist ideology in America. Gilles Deleuze's interpretation, (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 1983), which stresses Nietzsche's critique of Kantian

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metaphysics, is much more compelling. Again, the challenge is to build convincing and helpful bridges between philosophical arguments and concrete historical analyses. Karl Marx himself moved back and forth between first-order questions—ontology, epistemology, the philosophy of history, and so on—and empirical sociology and politics. Perhaps Arnold's book would have been even more sharply focused and argued if she had followed his lead more closely. She is nevertheless to be commended for making such a timely contribution to the critique of neoliberalism and for bringing political theory to bear on many of the most pressing practical problems of our time.

Response to Anna Marie Smith's review of *America's New Working Class*
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— by Kathleen R. Arnold

Anna Marie Smith and I have similar concerns about the poor, racism and sexism. Yet we view political theory in different ways. Smith has focused on one set of programs and gives the reader a richly detailed view of recent welfare laws. In contrast, I have tried to do something very different. First, I use Giorgio Agamben's ideas as a foil, drawing upon Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault to supplement this reading, and I investigate the ideas of John Locke (rather than Thomas Hobbes) to understand sovereignty today. By looking at Locke, we can understand how representative government based on the rule of law and equality can coexist with prerogative power used systematically and domestically. Instead of a top-down view of power, I argue that modern power is characterized by the dispersal of sovereignty and, importantly, prerogative power (the legal suspension of the law). Thus, even as national borders have become more open (both with economic globalization and post-Clausewitzean forms of war), state sovereignty has not necessarily declined. In fact, the use of prerogative power increasingly characterizes late-modern power even as neoliberal rhetoric gives the opposite impression.

This dynamic is not just true in obvious cases such as Guantánamo Bay, but also in homeless policy and the wars on terror and drugs. I do not suggest that all of the examples proceeding from these categories are identical, but I want to show how prerogative power can operate domestically and not just internationally; is wielded by a range of political agents and not just government elites; and is deployed regularly and systematically rather than during clear-cut states of emergency. Ascetic ideas legitimate this treatment, creating discursive divisions and obfuscating how some individuals are effectively disenfranchised. In arguing these things, I investigate how older racialized and gendered discourses are being redeployed as forms of bio-power (both in Foucault and Agamben's understandings of this term).

Smith's disagreement with my approach is rooted in a methodological difference regarding how political theorists approach empirical issues. One approach is to narrow the intellectual focus and, through scholarly investigation, apply a theory to a real-life situation to see if it fits or not. The theory itself is viewed in static terms and is either used or discarded. The other method is to test the bounds of theory, asking ourselves how real-life situations challenge more established understandings of power, equality, race, and gender (and so on). This broader technique of theorizing does not have to be totalizing, as Smith contends, but can help us to understand the connections between what Foucault would call "local truths." In proceeding in this way, theories are not viewed statically but as constantly being interrogated and reread. For this reason, I see connections between Marx (his early work) and Agamben that Smith does not. I also connect Agamben's work to Simone de Beauvoir's in my conclusion, to examine notions of resistance and agency given a very new set of problems we face today in the United States.

As Smith notes in her introduction, we must expand disciplinary boundaries to understand complex political problems. A more panoramic approach does this while also testing and expanding the limits of political theory itself.

Welfare Reform and Sexual Regulation. By Anna Marie Smith. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 297p. $29.99.
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— Kathleen R. Arnold, *University of Texas*

In her book, Anna Marie Smith meticulously analyzes the racial and gendered dimensions of the U.S. welfare state and the ways in which it punishes the unmarried and imposes hetero-normative standards on all types of poor families. Smith's aim is to "expand the disciplinary limits of feminist political theory" (p. 6) by drawing on case law, public policy, and social theory. She exposes highly undemocratic practices directed at poor women and men, as well as what amounts to a eugenic project seeking to limit poor people's reproduction. Significantly, individuals of color are targeted by the state for eugenic control and moral policing. In particular, Smith points out how welfare reform and the implementation of "paternafare"—a program that forces poor women to identify biological fathers so that the state can pursue these "deadbeat dads"—do not help the one group who even conservatives agree are "innocent"—children. Very rarely are any party's circumstances elevated by this system, and most often "payers" are forced into deeper poverty. Furthermore, the state's hetero-normative stance marginalizes lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals (LGBTs) in a legal system in which their rights are already deeply compromised.

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