Introduction: The Conservative Turn in Postwar United States Working-Class History

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The topic of working-class conservatism in the postwar United States might seem a particularly narrow and nationally-specific theme for a journal that stakes its reputation on the broader terrain of comparative and transnational history. Yet, in so many ways, the United States—despite its recently diminished role both economically and militarily around the world—continues to be the center of the globe's economic and military power structure. To risk overstatement, the domestic politics of the United States are a central part of international politics. At the core of a nation's political culture, it might be added, are its working people, whether in dying industrial towns or burgeoning big box retail centers. Readers outside the United States might have some sympathy for the plea of British rocker Billy Bragg who included a note to his American fans in his 1988 release. "I have no vote in your Presidential election," Bragg explained as the Reagan years wound to a close, "yet its outcome will directly affect my future and the future of millions of other people around the world. Forgive me for putting this immense responsibility on your shoulders.... Remember, when you elect a President, you are electing a President for all of us. Please be more careful this time."

The problem of American conservatism is complex, richly varied, and much more deeply-rooted than the birth of the oft-cited "Reagan Democrat"—the white working-class voter who tipped the balance of power toward a new conservative coalition in the late seventies and early eighties. It is also more profound than just the problem of union decline. Recent broad-based surveys of United States' and European low-wage work conducted by a number of teams sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation indirectly shed light on this problem by examining the comparative "inclusiveness" of various labor-market institutions. Eschewing simple binary categories of "liberal" (US and UK) and "coordinated" (Germany, Sweden, and Japan) economies or the simple tradeoff between unemployment and inequality in policy making decisions, these researchers point instead to a wide range of institutional factors that shape the country-specific patterns of low-wage work. These include collective bargaining, of course, but also an array of other variables including the extension of union contracts to nonunion workers; market regulation; welfare benefits; unemployment benefits; minimum-wage laws; income supports (childcare, disability, retirement, and the like); employment protection legislation; vacation, holiday, and parental leave pay; product regulation; health insurance; and solidaristic national bargaining. Each nation puts these various

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pieces together in a unique package to create the overall "inclusiveness" of a nation's labor market. Not surprisingly, the United States comes in last place in the inclusivity of its labor market, the segmentation of which leaves a large portion of the working class outside of the main protections that one might otherwise expect to be part of the employment pact.[1] This is a more complex positioning of the problem beyond the old question of American exceptionalism, and instead see the United States on an extreme end of a basket of policy options that chooses segmentation, inequality, and fragmentation over inclusiveness. To begin to understand why that is, we need to look deeply into the political culture and longstanding patterns that produced it.

As the authors of these essays show—in outings that range from the religious convictions of working people, the weakness in the postwar settlement, the political use of the "menace" of union corruption, the complex nature of whiteness, and the continued weakness of American labor law—the problems of working-class conservatism are not only deeply rooted in the past but strongly present even at the height of the "liberal consensus" and the practice of postwar "industrial pluralism." Undoubtedly, American conservatism is no longer a historiographical "orphan" as Alan Brinkley once called it in a noted 1994 forum in the *American Historical Review*, but it still borders on that for practitioners of labor and working-class history.[2] Much of the best work on conservatism is coming from outside of labor history, a field still somewhat hobbled by its romance with the working-class ideal. As the essays collected here begin to suggest, however, much is being done to rectify the situation. The project, simply put, is to understand how working people in the United States have expressed their interests in a conservative idiom and within an inherited conservative political framework.

Long before the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Rights Amendment, or Roe v. Wade helped galvanize the evangelical political forces into the New Right's "Moral Majority," evangelical faith played an important role in workers' politics. It is fitting, therefore, that this collection begins with Darren Dochuk's inquiry into the balance of power between religious faith and economic interest in California's Second World War era "Ham and Eggs" movement. His title alone is suggestive of one of the inadequately charted problems in US working-class history: the tension, broadly speaking, between the appeal of Christ and the CIO. Dochuk's article uses what William Jennings Bryan identified as the twin pillars of American political culture: "Jefferson and Jesus"—the consistent strain of resistance to the encroaching powers of the state that appear in opposition to the local ties of community, Christian morality, and the hope of equality of opportunity in a free market not rigged in favor of elites. Adapted to the postwar moment, those principles were reshaped in a heady populist brew of evangelism, unionism, anticommunism, and antistatism that failed to find a sustained link between religious values and economic need. During and after the Second World War, as the postwar paradigm in labor relations began to crystallize, Christian workers felt compelled to choose between their class and faith commitments. As he demonstrates, these workers saw some hope for synthesis

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in the Ham and Eggs movement but ultimately chose their faith, sewing the seeds for a populist right that would eventually deliver Ronald Reagan to the California governorship and, later, the White House. Squeezed out by the labor left and the anticommunist right, there was little space for the synthesis of faith-based conviction and economic rights that originally animated the Ham and Eggs movement.

Moving directly into questions of postwar labor relations, David Anderson adds to the growing literature affirming that the postwar settlement was, for many employers (if not much of industry in general), merely a *tactical* position rather than a fundamental reorientation of American labor relations. His research into the 1955 Perfect Circle strike shows how one Midwestern auto parts supplier tried to do away with United Auto Workers by engaging a network of well-financed conservative policy organizations to defend corporate interests, promote free enterprise, and advocate for the "right to work." Taken from the angle of this firm's efforts and the lure of Midwestern small town civic identity, the "golden age" of postwar labor relations might better be characterized as something significantly more alloyed. The Perfect Circle strike could be seen as the last gasp of the old regime in labor relations or, as Anderson implies, the foundation for the new more conservative one to come. Alternatively, it might best demonstrate the strength and continuity of business interests and the powerful draw of heartland values of the type that Ham and Eggers might readily have understood.

The Perfect Circle strike, along with a similar dispute at Kohler, became central to the McClellan Committee's investigations into labor racketeering in the late 1950s. The racketeering hearings not only tarnished organized labor's national reputation but also helped launch the modern conservative movement and its godfather, Barry Goldwater. While US labor historians have spent a great deal of effort understanding anticommunism as a factor in labor's postwar weakness, David Witwer's contribution to this volume looks at the silent twin of right-wing anticommunism: the fear of the "menace" of union corruption. In the midst of Cold War America, the "racketeer scare" worked in tandem with the red scare, Witwer explains, as both appeared to be widespread internal threats to the nation's security and democratic traditions—a threat to the Jeffersonian wing of the Jefferson and Jesus dyad. The parallel nature of these movements restricted the labor movement on both its right and left flanks. Warnings about the "red menace" and the "racketeer menace" typically came from the same voices on the political right, who frequently pointed out the parallel nature of these conspiracies. Such fears of antidemocratic movements fueled the creation of the Taft-Hartley Act, drove the national embarrassments of the McClellan hearings, and finally, proved supportive of conservative vote harvesting. "Like you, I feel that this is helping the Republicans a great deal," Witwer quotes Senator Karl Mundt of South Dakota of his time on the McClellan investigations. "We have certainly put the Democrats on the spot as being the pawns of the union leaders."

The one element of US working-class conservatism that has been well established is the white ethnic backlash to the "New Politics" of the 1960s and

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1970s. Instead of the civil rights era fostering a more expansive and inclusive working-class identity, white working-class discontent was often at odds with the movements for gender and racial occupational justice—especially as the economic horizons diminished in the 1970s. Simply put, the white working class, barely more than a generation out of poverty itself, often believed it had a world to lose, its defensive posture leaving a legacy that helped to fuel the rise of the New Right. "The hippies were cursing and the blacks were threatening everything we had," as a Brooklyn craftsman told sociologist Jonathan Rieder in the baldest of terms. "We forgot we were workers and voted against our interests."[3]

Dennis Deslippe takes readers in a different direction from this very well worn path, however, exploring the stumbling attempts to transcend the limits of the problem of "whiteness" (in both real and theoretical terms). His focus on the efforts of activist Gino Baroni's attempt to meld civil rights, ethnic politics, and support for the poor and white working-class into what the author calls "ethniclass progressivism" proved limited and largely stillborn but a fascinating complication to the backlash story. The question for Baroni was not simply one of race, but also of how the larger class structure restrained the mobility of white ethnics as well as minorities. Yet the terms of the debate on which Baroni's efforts played out smacked of a sort of white ethnic "me-tooism" that, despite its intentions, tended to affirm rather than challenge the post-civil rights movement rights-based political appeal. His activities may have been too diffuse, and his plans too abstract, but they are further suggestive of the problems of static invocations of "whiteness" and the potential of a broader collective notion of economic rights—as seen, for instance, in the strike wave of the late sixties and early seventies—than has generally been noted in the literature on post-civil rights working-class history.

With John Logan's survey of striker replacement doctrine, the volume returns to the problem of the state and labor relations policy. Logan traces the origins of the single most powerful antiunion weapons in the corporate arsenal—the ability to permanently replace striking workers—to the very birth of the New Deal labor relations system. An NLRB attorney, Daniel Shortal, prophetically laid out the weakness in American labor law even before the Mackay Radio decision upheld striker replacement in 1938. Taken to its "logical conclusion," Shortal explained privately, employers' ability to permanently replace strikers "would destroy all unions, abolish all efforts at bargaining and emasculate all strikers. . . . Such a practice would put before an employer a temptation, perhaps too great to withstand." The use of striker replacement did not have the immediate effect Shortal suggested as it appeared only episodically throughout the postwar era—suggesting that, despite its weakness, there really was something we can identify as "the New Deal order"—but the time bomb of striker replacement exploded with corporations' increased use of the practice in the labor wars of the 1980s. The permanent replacement problem, never solved under the Clinton administration (which poured its political capital into the North American Free Trade Agreement instead), is also

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connected to the equally eviscerated right to organize. Together the two trends have made the Wagner Act, as historian David Brody put it, into little more than a "management tool."[4] Much like David Anderson's revelations about the Perfect Circle strike in the 1950s, we see both the continuity with the past and the advance of past practices to new levels in recent decades. We might also note the international and comparative dimensions as well. As the CEO of one transnational firm remarks in Logan's essay, the United States has "a different culture with different relationships. This country is different. The labor laws are different." Those differences, it might be added, shape behavior not just on American soil but also reverberate out into the global arena of labor relations.

The final essay for this special issue is a piece of in-depth reportage by Bryant Simon from the front lines of the neoliberal service economy, "Working at Starbucks." Simon's essay is less an exploration of conservatism itself than a tour of the world American conservatism produced—"what lattes take from the people who make them," as he puts it. Beneath the glamour of the knowledge economy are the folks who fuel the synapses of those who can afford $4 cups of coffee. Simon interviews employees both accepting and critical of their employer, not the least of which are members of the Industrial Workers of the World bent on organizing Starbucks stores, all of whom must serve up a discomforting faux cheerfulness that accompanies every cup of Starbucks coffee. The irregular hours, meager pay, physical discomfort, sketchy benefits, overbearing store managers, manufactured loyalty, and that omnipresent forced customer intimacy ("smile with your eyes" explained one manager), leaves Starbucks employees—or rather, "partners"—simultaneously working for a company with one of the best reputations in the service sector, but, as one employee calls it, a place where "nothing is as it seems." At the root of the company's philosophy is a welfare capitalism arrangement that makes those designed to win employees' loyalties in the 1920s seem amateurish. If the old economy exploited the work of the body, Simon's essay opens up the question of how the new economy works on people's very sense of mind and soul.

These essays lead us to the current day, in which the contemporary conservative alignment in American politics appears vulnerable to collapse. Even the conservative *National Review* ran a recent cover story about the "Coming Cataclysm" in conservative politics.[5] Simultaneously, there has been more discussion of the white "working class" in American political discourse in 2007–2008 than in any year since 1968 when Robert F. Kennedy promised to create that most elusive of political coalitions, a blue-black political alliance. As labor historian Leon Fink recently editorialized, however, the white working class may be back in 2008, but the term working class "has been effectively defanged of any radical, let alone subversive, intent. In fact, today's working class looks less the modernist, rationalizing force that Marx projected than a bastion of tradition—that unmoving 'sack of potatoes' he identified with the peasantry."[6] Yet it is of paramount importance to note that those disparaging characterizations of *the* "working class" have really been about its mostly white and male segments. The literature on race in the formation of

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American conservatism is well developed, but as the most significant gap in this collection suggests, it is not clear how or even if the conservative impulse works among low-wage working women or how gender might be constitutive of working-class conservatism itself. Similar questions might be asked of the new wave of immigrant workers, who may well be poised to recast the question as the previous wave of immigrants did in their coming of age under the New Deal.

Looking forward, however, it is clear that the material concerns of American workers—from the need for health insurance to levels of inequality that would make the Robber Barons of the Gilded Age blush—are just as real as the conservative threads that run through American political culture. Reconciling the contemporary economic urgency with the political legacy of conservatism outlined by these authors—finding a place for "Jefferson and Jesus" amidst a policy structure that has consistently chosen the least inclusive labor market in the advanced industrial world—may just be the most urgent work of the labor intellectual.

NOTES

1. Ken Mayhew, "Hope or Despair? The Future of Low-Paid Work in Europe and the U.S.," paper delivered at Cornell University as part of the Einaudi Scholar series, April 28, 2008; see the country-specific studies of low-wage work on the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark, and the forthcoming comparative analysis of the United States from Russell Sage; see also Peter Andrew Hall and David Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantages* (New York, 2001).

2. Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *American Historical Review* 99 (April 1994): 409.

3. Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 251.

4. David Brody, "Labor versus the Law: How the Wagner Act Became a Management Tool," *New Labor Forum* 13 (Spring 2004): 8–16.

5. Ramesh Ponnuru and Richard Lowry, "The Grim Truth: Republicans Face a Calamitous Political Situation; But They Can Act to Avoid It," *National Review*, 19 November 2007 November (2007).

6. Leon Fink, "Obama and the Unmaking of America's Working Class," *Chicago Tribune,* May 2, 2008.

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