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Retrospective

David Montgomery: A Labor Historian's Legacies[1]

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Editor's note: Although an inspiration to the "new labor history" of the 1970s–80s, David Montgomery (1927–2011) seemed at the time to transcend that movement or any school of thought, for reasons that his student and friend, Shelton Stromquist, explains in this retrospective essay. His work took advantage of the determinedly historicized approach to analyzing class developed by his friend, the English historian E. P. Thompson. Montgomery, however, avoided pitfalls of those who read Thompson in a less-disciplined way. In the hands of those who raced through these ideas too quickly, class could become a concept so malleable according to time and place that the means of production could seem only accidently related to it. The special freshness, concreteness, and force of Montgomery's scholarship attracted an outstanding group of students. Through them, his influence on the history of industrial society remains formidable. Like Montgomery himself and a number of his students, Stromquist came to labor history after his own time as a social activist. Montgomery's writing retained an intensity and vividness derived from that background, and he appreciated others for whom work and working-class life remained tangible experiences.

Contexts

When David Montgomery sat down for an extended interview with editors of the *Radical History Review*, Mark Naison and Paul Buhle, it was the spring of 1981. His career as an academic historian was on the ascent. He had moved from the University of Pittsburgh to a named chair at Yale. He was editor of what was becoming the foremost journal in the field, *International Labor and Working-Class History*. His studies of workers and Reconstruction and his explorations of workers' shop floor world had catapulted him to the front rank of practitioners of the "new labor history." And he was deeply into what would probably rank as his masterwork, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, published six years later. But much of the interview

[1]The author wishes to thank Julie Greene and Jim Barrett for their very helpful suggestions.

as published dwelt on his background in the Communist Party USA and on his own shop floor experience as a militant rank and file machinist during the 1950s. His observations on the internal life of the party, as someone who did not hold a leadership position, were perceptive. But perhaps more telling for his own future work as a historian were his comments on the growing gap in the 1950s between the party and lives of workers. Vital as the "connection to the everyday struggles of Americans" may have been, he also recognized the value of "styles of social analysis that were rooted in the hard and complex realities of experience and away from phrase-mongering and dogmatic abstractions."[2] As the party unraveled in the 1950s and the leadership grew more isolated, he noted, "at my level of activity we continued from day to day doing our thing":

> We had to base every analysis and every decision we made on the realities of daily life that we saw around us. If we tried to conjure up some notion out of our heads, above all in a period of retreat, we were going to get smashed. The fact of the matter is that it was still possible, in the early fifties, to play a role of some influence among large numbers of workers. But this could be done only if your discussions and analysis were thoroughly down to earth as you could possibly make them … on the shop level we had to apply the slogan one of my good friends came up with: "Stick close to the working class even when they are throwing you out the shop window."[3]

As a militant rank and filer in the 1950s, Montgomery witnessed a world of shop floor activism that took on new forms. He developed a capacity to decode workers' consciousness even in a period of ostensible reaction. He spoke of the renewal of wildcat strikes in the 1950s and "the revival of all sorts of unofficial struggles among workers" in the 1960s and 1970s. "But notice," he observed, "how seldom those movements had a political ideology of any coherence. Militancy was there, fighting the boss on the shop level, but the sense of political direction, which would virtually have always been there in any rebel movement down through the 1930s, was lacking." He rejected "most of what is written in academic literature about the inherent conservatism or passivity of American workers." He became aware "of the

[2]Interview with David Montgomery in *Visions of History*, ed. MARHO (New York, 1984), 170 [hereafter "Montgomery interview"].
[3]Montgomery interview, 170–71.

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peculiarly opaque character of working-class life. American workers are not going to use a totally different sort of language than everybody else, but they give a very different meaning to that language that they pick up from the television, newspapers, and so forth."[4]

Theory

For all the theoretical significance of his scholarship, Dave Montgomery was not a historian whose inclinations ran toward high theory. His Marxism was empirically grounded, an expression of his own political practice and his capacity to listen to the voices of workers, past and present. His historiographic pronouncements were often guarded and oblique, not frontal assaults. When he chose to generalize, he did so cautiously, for the most part, but with a classic simplicity. In *The Fall of the House of Labor*, he argued that it was "imperative to analyze American experience ... in terms of conflicting social classes." And those classes were "the human relationships structured by commodity production in large collective enterprises devoted to private gain [that] generated bondings and antagonisms that were, in one form or another, the daily experience of everyone involved."[5] This perspective echoed a classical Marxist rendering of class but, although Montgomery drew inspiration from Marxism, he did not engage in extended theoretical discussion in his historical work.

But, if class was in his view the irreducible foundation of society, Montgomery consistently saw in the experience of workers—and the ways in which they articulated *their* understandings—a subtle, pragmatic, but fundamentally mutualist consciousness of class. This mutualist consciousness made workers capable of adaptation and revitalization in the face of ever-changing economic and social conditions fabricated by a capitalist order that enmeshed but never wholly controlled their lives. Again, he captured that understanding in relatively few words in the early pages of *The Fall*:

> The history of American workers has not been the story of progressive ascent from oppression to securely established rights, nor has it offered us a past moment of democratic promise that was irretrievably snuffed out by the consolidation of modern capitalism. Their movement has grown only

[4]Montgomery interview, 174.
[5]David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York, 1987), 1.

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Figure 1. David Montgomery around the time of his retirement as Farnham Professor of History at Yale University. Courtesy Jon Butler.

> sporadically and through fierce struggles, been interrupted time and again just when it seemed to reach flood tide, overwhelmed its foes only to see them revive in new and more formidable shapes, and been forced to reassess what it thought it had already

> accomplished and begin again. The taproot of its resilience has been the workers' daily experience and the solidarities nurtured by that experience, which have at best encompassed a lush variety of beliefs, loyalties, and activities with a common commitment to democratic direction of the country's economic and political life.[6]

In 1989, the journal *Labor History* assembled a group of labor historians to discuss *The Fall*, and Montgomery was stunned by the misreading of his book. He wrote with some disbelief that, contrary to the general presumption that new labor historians operated from a common framework, "the sharp criticisms leveled at *The Fall of the House of Labor* by various authors in this symposium make it clear, however, that we have no common theory of history. We represent no one school of thought. On the contrary, we bring sharply divergent, and often mutually exclusive, conceptions of society to bear on the study of the workers' past."[7] Most troubling to him were two lines of attack on his work. The first by Sanford Jacoby and Robert Zieger stressed the improvements brought to workers' lives by managerial reform and the liberal state. To this, Montgomery responded in various ways by reiterating "the central topic of the book"—that is, "the agency of workers in the reproduction and transformation of social life." For him, "class conflict" lay at the heart of the story, not "managerial bureaucracies, and the cost and promise of new technologies" nor workers' supposedly rising standards of living. He saw a different picture in which "qualitative change in American industrial life had been wrought by the interaction of antagonistic groups in a context that had not been chosen by any of them."[8] His focus remained on what workers saw and felt and how they acted within the constraints they faced.

The second line of attack, most forcefully put forward by Michael Kazin, offered a new consensus reading of labor's history. Kazin argued that "we" (by implication, Montgomery) must "come to grips with the abundant evidence that white wage-earners found more to celebrate than to curse in the achievements of a liberal state." To which Montgomery could only respond, "What liberal state in 1925?" For Montgomery the most troubling

[6]Ibid., 7–8.
[7]David Montgomery, "Class, Capitalism, and Contentment," 125–26, in "A Symposium on *The Fall of the House of Labor*, *Labor History* 30 (Winter 1989): 93–137.
[8]Ibid., 126–27.

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misunderstanding was Kazin's assertion that his book had an "underlying tone" of "pessimism and despair." He challenged what appeared to be a "deep immersion in Disney World" and a belief "that life for most people has been bright and has become brighter in this century." Far from despair, he argued, "no matter how many and how serious their defeats, working people have consistently generated new attempts to improve their lives based on the new circumstances in which they have found themselves."[9]

Montgomery's understanding and use of class was fundamentally that of a historian immersed in sources that give voice to workers and that illuminate workers' understandings of the world. Through their agency and their capacity against long odds, they sought repeatedly to reshape their world based on a "changing sense of what was possible."

> The impulse to mutualism, which arose from workers' daily experience on and off the job and which inclined them toward group bondings, rather than individualism, often accommodated attachment to existing society, rather than rebellion against it.

But, for those who would see only working-class quiescence in the 1920s, he said simply, "Remember also how short a time labor remained quiescent."[10]

Outlining a "new labor history"

Dave Montgomery's work has other claims to originality. They were evident from the outset with the publication of *Beyond Equality*. In that work he set a course for the "new labor history" that would persist into the 2010s. Montgomery's impatience with the historiographic blockage he confronted when inserting workers into the history of Reconstruction was twofold. He found it relatively easy to dismiss the expiring distraction of the Beard-Beale thesis of Reconstruction as a conspiracy of northern businessmen. The second—the core work of John R. Commons and Selig Perlman—lay more squarely in the path of a new history in which the postwar working-class activists, like William Sylvis and Ira Steward, would be represented as something other than "anti-industrial romantics." The imprint of Commons/Perlman's "bifurcation of types of labor leaders into wage-conscious trade unionists or anti-monopoly

[9]Ibid., 129–30.
[10]Ibid., 131, 134.

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reformers" still colored much of the history being written of working-class activism from Sylvis's National Labor Union (NLU) forward into the era of the Knights of Labor and beyond. Montgomery's new work challenged that dualism and in so doing opened doors to a richer, more subtle rendering of working-class experience that he and others would pursue.[11]

For Montgomery, as for much of the new labor history, the local context was critical. If, as he asserted, "class conflict . . .was the submerged shoal on which radical dreams foundered," that reality must be uncovered "in the industrial towns of America, rather than in congressional debates." The challenge then was to find "the national patterns embedded in a mosaic of local histories."[12] That approach would be one that he pursued in each of his major books, and that others taking up the challenges of working-class history would hone in wide-ranging local studies.[13]

Excavating Cultures of Control—The Shop Floor

It should not be surprising that Montgomery's quest to document the formation of working-class consciousness in an American context should focus on the workplace and the role of skilled workers. By his own account, the experience of the "plant floor, in the shop" was where he found solidarity kept alive in the 1950s.[14] Driven from that world in Minnesota by the blacklist in the late '50s,

[11]David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1967), vii–x.
[12]Ibid., x.
[13]In *Beyond Equality*, Montgomery revealed places such as Fall River, New Bedford, Chicago, and Brooklyn as crucibles for the struggle for the eight-hour day. Likewise, in his workers' control studies, locals of skilled workers in iron and steel in Homestead, Pittsburgh, and Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and Columbus, Ohio, provided the models for rule-based workers' control. In *The Fall of the House of Labor*, he examined laborers in New York, New Orleans, and San Francisco and "operatives" in Chicago, Pullman, Haverhill. Fall River, and Lawrence. Montgomery's ability to range across so many places influenced a generation of historians of the working class to undertake local studies that carried national implications. This analytically broad approach to local or regional studies remained apparent in the work of students such as James Barrett, Peter Rachleff, Bruce Laurie, John Bennett, and Peter Gottlieb.
[14]An abundance of evidence suggests how important and largely unacknowledged was shop floor militancy in the 1950s. See, for example, Stan Weir, *Singlejack Solidarity* (Minneapolis, 2004); and Martin Glaberman, *Punching Out and Other Writings*, ed. Staughton Lynd (Chicago, 2002). Also, Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of Working-Class Consciousness* (New York, 1973); Alice and Staughton Lynd, *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston, 1973); and oral histories such as "The World of the Shopfloor in the

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Montgomery carried with him a profound sense, which would resurface in his workers' control studies, that shop-floor relations had extraordinary importance "because on-the-job workers must define their own world for themselves."[15] His detailed and, one might almost say, loving reconstruction of nineteenth-century skilled iron workers' rules provided an entrée into the culture of skilled workers. Montgomery underscored the world of conflict that surrounded the assertion of traditional claims to control of production, threatened by employers emboldened to claim *their* authority. "This glimpse," as he called it, into the minute books of one iron rollers local in Columbus, Ohio, and other local union records, confirmed a framework that echoed his own experience as a skilled machinist, long after the supposed triumph of "scientific management." Such evidence provided a key to understanding the resilience of skilled workers' radicalism even in the Age of Gompers:

> Within the context of mechanized industry and hired wage labor, some skilled craftsmen exercised an impressive degree of collective control over the specific productive tasks in which they were engaged and the human relations involved in the performance of those tasks, and these same workers stamped their own distinctive mark on the character of the labor movement of the age.[16]

But even as he made claims for these practices as a species of workers' control and drew analogies to the phenomenon of the revolutionary shop stewards movement in wartime Britain, he called himself back: "To make that analogy is to run too fast." Nonetheless, in the 1870s those claims were new, not vestiges of a preindustrial past; they were subject to constant employer attacks; and they were "defended by the craftsmen's own disciplined ethical code."[17]

No historian of the working class has had a better feel for and insight into the cultural world of the skilled worker than Montgomery. He took the subject far beyond the Commons/

1950s" in *Solidarity and Survival: An Oral History of Iowa Labor in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Shelton Stromquist (Iowa City, 1993), 187–214.
[15]Montgomery interview, 174–77.
[16]Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 13.
[17]David Montgomery, "Workers' Control of Machine Production in the Nineteenth Century" in Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, 1979), 12. Montgomery originally published this article in *Labor History* 17 (Fall 1976): 485–509.

Perlman simplistic notion of skilled labor's "scarcity consciousness" as the foundation for their trade union practice. In their codes of mutualistic behavior, in their work rules, in their self-respect, even in their stylized grand balls and sense of propriety, Montgomery saw the ingredients of an autonomous and assertive working-class movement, one that looked outward more than inward.

These views had been foreshadowed in a paper he never published, "Trade Union Practice and the Origins of Syndicalist Theory in the United States," one version of which he presented at an informal gathering of his students and those of Herbert Gutman and assorted faculty, including Eugene Genovese, at the University of Rochester in the fall of 1972.[18] If he felt he had "run too fast" in elaborating the political implications of skilled workers' control (and therefore did not publish it), the paper nevertheless reflected a reckoning with the complex culture of skilled workers that would resurface in his 1976 "Workers' Control" essay and in *The Fall of the House of Labor*. It offered an underlying argument about the *political* significance of skilled workers' control that he would come to qualify but not abandon in those later works. That tension between a culture of workplace control and its political implications would be evident in his 1981 interview as well. When asked about how the "dynamics of class struggle" had changed from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, he talked about the "discoveries" he and others had made about "changes in class struggles."

> I would learn, from evidence that I was studying, that the dynamics around which workers' movements developed—especially shop-floor relationships—in the nineteenth century were just fundamentally different than anything I had ever experienced. And the question then emerged of how to understand that epoch so that I could compare it with what I had gone through myself.

But, even so, Montgomery held firm to the revolutionary implications that his nineteenth-century findings might hold. Responding to a question about the New Left's indifference to "proletarian prospects" and its hostility to rules, he argued unqualifiedly,

> When working people replace capitalism with their own society, they will create not a world without

[18]David Montgomery, "Trade Union Practice and the Origins of Syndicalist Theory in the United States," unpublished paper [c. 1972], in the author's possession.

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> rules, but one based on rules they have made themselves for their own welfare. This is precisely why workers' own ethical codes hold so much interest for me.[19]

It was those ethical codes that came through so brilliantly in the unpublished essay and in more qualified ways in his subsequent published studies of "workers' control."

Although the paper may have had rough edges—the quality of a think piece—it described a world of skilled labor at odds with the reigning portraits in both AFL orthodoxy and IWW caricature. Across wide-ranging sources, Montgomery teased out a perspective that for "labor aristocrats" was commonplace—"the idea of direct workers' control of industry operated through the union .... was a simple, logical extension of their daily trade union practice." In Montgomery's view, the IWW's syndicalism, or what Bill Haywood called "industrialism," gave a revolutionary twist to a decades-long culture of control that envisaged the "emancipation of labor" by evolutionary means. "Self-government" through the trade union provided the means for labor to control the rules governing production and the leverage to erode the power of capital and eventually institute a "cooperative commonwealth." In Montgomery's rendering of this tradition, "the cooperative commonwealth was imagined as the world governed by union meetings ... the concept developed without the help of intellectuals, on the basis of the craftsmen's personal experience of controlling the productive process."[20] Even here, he acknowledged more radical and conservative strands of this tradition, the undertow of a defensive racism and at times a suffocating sense of respectability and decorum that must have made lodge meetings "dreadfully boring" and grand balls seem to mimic high society. Still with these traditions under fierce assault from capital in the late nineteenth century, many trades turned not to deeper craft exclusiveness but to embrace a more "universal brotherhood of labor."[21]

What appeared first as sketch and provocation matured into a path-breaking essay and fully orchestrated book in the grand narrative tradition that reached back in its scope to the multivolume history of American labor by Commons, Perlman, and their

[19]Montgomery interview, 177, 179.
[20]Montgomery, "Trade Union Practice and the Origins of Syndicalist Theory," 3, 7, 19, 25.
[21]Ibid., 6, 13.

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contemporaries.[22] If not reaching for the same chronological comprehensiveness, Montgomery nonetheless presented a richly contextualized working class for the period 1870–1925, in which the skilled workers of the metal trades were now joined by the growing numbers of "common laborers" and "operatives" of multiethnic origins, male and female, and diverse races. Distinctive work rhythms and life courses intersected in burgeoning cities and industrial towns that dotted the landscape. Montgomery demonstrated the importance of such interactions in workplaces transformed by new, labor-displacing technologies and managerial hierarchies. He memorably sketched a transnational "industrial core, throbbing with manufacturing activity at continually rising levels . . . [and] surrounding that core . . . a vast agricultural domain in which capitalist development shattered long-established patterns of economic activity." And almost as an aside, he noted, "[modernization] appeared on the periphery more as an alien, destructive force than as an integrated pattern of growth."[23] Nothing before or since provides as compelling and comprehensive a portrait of the American working class of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as those opening chapters of *The Fall of the House of Labor*.

The succeeding chapters of his magnum opus put this multistranded working class into motion, as managers mounted a frontal challenge to craft union control, especially through the introduction of scientific management and the parallel development of personnel departments and sociological investigations. Conflict—around work, community, and politics—became the organizing thread of the remainder of the book. His flair for the local settings of that

[22]Montgomery, "Workers' Control of Machine Production in the Nineteenth Century," and Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*.

[23]Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 70–71. He drew inspiration from the path-breaking essay by Frank Thistlethwaite, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *XI. Congrès international des sciences historiques. Rapports* (Stockholm, 1960), 5:32–60. Thistlewaite's essay also became a staple of his graduate seminars and a foil to the theoretical literature on "modernization." Like E. P. Thompson, Montgomery targeted those iterations of modernization theory in which class conflict would resolve in progressive, formulaic stages. This shared critique of modernization theory led to an incident that people at the University of Pittsburgh remembered for decades. Thompson spent a semester in residence in 1975. After his departure, Julius Rubin, one of the Pitt department's most zealous modernization theorists, circulated a critique of Thompson's essay, "The Moral Economy of the Crowd," which itself attacks the assumption that modernity was necessary to generate values and customs that enabled working people to mobilize in their interests. Seeing a copy of this well after his departure, Thompson wrote and circulated a devastating and biting seventy-page critique of Rubin's use of modernization that the English scholar titled "Don't Tread on Me."

conflict—the Tri-Cities (later Quad Cities in Illinois and Iowa); East Pittsburgh; Ludlow; Schenectady; and Pittsfield, Massachusetts; and for colorful protagonists like the Civic Federation's Ralph Easley; Fabian socialist Herbert Casson; trade union militant Fred Merrick; or the Colorado Fuel and Iron brain truster Mackenzie King and his nemesis Frank Walsh, chair of the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations, enriched the narrative. These places and characters gave a richness to the text reminiscent of *Beyond Equality*. Although the working class had become "a formidable fact of American life" by the onset of the Great War, "homogenization," in Montgomery's account, had not produced unity. Working-class ideologies were not simply diverse but "often bitterly antagonistic toward one another."[24] The house of labor's "fall" came in the postwar period after the collapse of mass strikes in 1922, the extinguishing of debate and experimentation around competing notions of "industrial democracy," and political conflict between a newly energized but still anemic Left and a broader coalition of labor progressives. But, in classic Montgomery fashion, he saw in this disarray the outlines of a new era of insurgency. "No historical resolution of the conflict between wage labor and capital … has enjoyed a permanent lease on life," he wrote, and the 1920s were no exception.[25]

Class Formation—Preindustrial Explorations

Because the scope and impact of Montgomery's books have possessed such lasting significance, historians often overlook or underestimate the value of his published essays, which, with the exception of some of his early writing on workers' control, are not directly related to the major books. Indeed, when examined as a collection in their own right, they sketched wider frontiers for labor history and new directions that others would explore. I can only examine a handful here, but each in its own way reflects the capacious understanding of class and the centrality of conflict to the historically contingent processes of class formation and re-formation.

As a case in point: just a year after the publication of *Beyond Equality*, Montgomery moved back in time—no doubt influenced by his direct exposure to E. P. Thompson and his own sojourn at Warwick—to examine the "working-classes" in early American cities from the Revolution to the Jacksonian era.[26] Impatient with

[24]Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 327–28.
[25]Ibid., 464.
[26]David Montgomery, "The Working Classes of the Pre-Industrial American City, 1780–1830," *Labor History* 9 (Winter 1968): 3–22. He regularly taught a graduate

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the state of analysis of class relations before the Civil War and of preindustrial culture, distracted as it was by "a fixation on the clash of 'agrarian' and 'industrial' values," Montgomery offered a set of hypotheses and questions to shape future research.[27] Focusing on the changing labor supply, and in particular the migration of rural peoples from the hinterland and skilled artificers from Great Britain to U.S. cities after the Revolution, he called attention to the early appearance of urban manufacturing alongside commerce in the coastal ports. He also drew attention to the myth of "harmonious personal relationships among masters, journeymen, and apprentices" in the face of early formation of journeymen's societies and "chronic disputes over wages." He found the presence of conflict in urban areas compatible with a degree of upward mobility and significant wage/price disparities between cities and the countryside in the new world and in Britain. The growing armies of casual and laboring workers alongside artificers of different grades gave the urban labor market a striking fluidity in a preindustrial economy marked by declining per capita income. And he highlighted the appearance of a factory workforce of women and children in both mill villages and cities that was a byproduct of the shifting dynamics in preindustrial rural and urban economies.[28] These insights both reflected and anticipated major works by younger scholars who would test, revise, and bring to life antebellum worlds of labor that lay largely undeveloped in the existing literature.[29]

Montgomery's other major foray into the world of antebellum labor came in a very different form—a case study of the nativist riot in Philadelphia in 1844 that revealed deep cultural divisions within an urban working class at the end of a severe economic downturn and in a period of intensive Protestant evangelizing.[30] But for him the

seminar on antebellum working-class history that became a key venue for studying a vast array of primary sources that he was exploring in his own work.

[27]Ibid., 21–22.

[28]Ibid., 5–6, 7, 10–11, 13–15, 17–20.

[29]Some of the influence of Montgomery's work on studies of the antebellum working classes came directly through his own students, like Bruce Laurie, whose *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia, 1980) began as a dissertation with Montgomery at Pittsburgh. Some of his influence was indirect, evident in a wide-ranging set of new works that appeared over the next two decades and beyond. Writing in the late 1960s, Montgomery based his challenge to the reigning orthodoxies on a rich body of primary sources that ranged from Joseph Tuckerman, Matthew Carey, Henry C. Carey, and Frances Wright to the texts of journeymen's conspiracy trials, and an array of memoirs, newspaper accounts, and registers.

[30]David Montgomery, "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844," *Journal of Social History* 5 (Summer 1972): 411–46.

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key to understanding these tumultuous events was not the economic impact of the depression per se, but in workers' divided "reactions to the political demands made by evangelical Protestantism: the moral content of education, liquor licensing and prohibition, Sabbath closing and the suppression of popular 'lewd and tumultuous' conduct." The destruction of the weavers' trade unions may have been a precondition, but it was the "[magnified] importance to artisans of the temperance and public education movements that determined the collision course that pitted Protestant and Catholic working people against each other.[31] The article signaled to other labor historians the importance of cultural (and ethnic) conflict as a crucial feature of working class life, while at the same time affirming the underlying nature of class relations in antebellum society. "By their very nature, evangelical demands fragmented the working class as a political force in antebellum Philadelphia and thereby created for historians the illusion of a society lacking in class conflict." Other historians would indeed take up the challenges to consider seriously the cultural and religious tensions that animated working-class life and complicated the homogenizing processes of industrialization.[32]

Synthesizing from Below: Strikes and Class Consciousness

By 1980, just a year before his interview with the MARHO editors, Montgomery had achieved such a level of visibility and influence in the field he had done so much to inspire that he felt able to cast a synthesizing eye across the literature and define new directions, albeit within a framework of his own construction.[33] Two essays, published in 1980, reflect most powerfully his efforts at a large overview—though he shied away from the then-fashionable term

[31]Ibid., 411, 421.

[32]In addition to Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850*, which covers some of the same ground, Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riot of 1844: A Study in Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, CT, 1975); William Sutton, *Journeymen for Jesus: Evangelical Artisans Confront Capitalism in Jacksonian Baltimore* (University Park, PA, 1998) also highlights the aggressive role of evangelical Protestantism in the face of a growing urban, Irish Catholic working class. For a later period, Ken Fones-Wolf, *Trade Union Gospel: Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865–1915* (Philadelphia, 1989), would take up the challenge of "bringing religion back in" to the study of working-class life and politics; also Jama Lazerow, *Religion and the Working Class in Antebellum America* (Washington, DC, 1995).

[33]For all the frustrating features of the debate over "synthesis" during these years, the imperative to find some ways to assemble the particularities of local- and trade-specific studies into an intelligible whole was widely shared. The "synthesis conference" at Northern Illinois University in 1984 was symptomatic of both that impulse and its frustration; see J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler Harris, eds., *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb, IL, 1989).

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synthesis.[34] They both build on his own work and that of his students and others, but also prefigure the breadth of *Fall of the House of Labor*.[35]

Montgomery saw strikes as collective actions that "tear the tissue of 'normal life'" and provide "revealing glimpses of class relations and attitudes, which arise from but are disguised by the daily production and distribution of commodities." They were occasions in which workers had to "reorder relationships among themselves" and in accord with "their own social code."[36] But analyzed over time, he argued, they revealed significant changes in behavior and consciousness. Strike studies were numerous, as were theories to explain their incidence. As in other work, Montgomery contested the notions of modernization theorists, who saw a progressive transformation and a gradual accommodation to the existing social and industrial order reflected in more rational and orderly industrial relations. With Eric Hobsbawm and Michelle Perrot, he saw a different "natural history of the strike" that witnessed increasingly sophisticated tactics ("learning the rules of the game") and mass mobilization to challenge the existing order.[37]

Strikes, in his view, evolved as a form of collective action out of popular protest and crowd actions of the preindustrial era, through a period of transition in the United States between 1845 and 1865 that involved new types of workers, to more mature if nonetheless destabilizing forms of strike activity in the later nineteenth century. They involved increasingly organized workers, frequently in large enterprises, and with a growing ability to coordinate local and national struggles. Their demands for uniform wage scales were

[34]David Montgomery, "Strikes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Social Science History* 4 (Winter 1980): 81–104; and Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America, 1860–1920," *Le Mouvement Social* 111 (Apr.–June 1980): 201–15. Two other essays published the same year also reflect Montgomery's synthesizing tendencies, an extended review essay, "To Study the People," *Labor History* 21 (Fall 1980): 485–512, and "The Irish and the American Labor Movement" in *America and Ireland, 1776–1876: The American Identity and the Irish Connection*, eds. David N. Doyle and Owen Dudley Edwards (Westport, CT, 1980), 205–18.

[35]Significant studies of strikes in particular communities, economic sectors, or periods were already underway or had been recently published. My own dissertation and then book, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana, IL, 1987) grew in part from our shared interest in strikes and their local and social context.

[36]Montgomery, "Strikes in Nineteenth-Century America," 81.

[37]Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964); and Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève: France, 1871–1890* (Paris, 1974).

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also accompanied by the rising importance of strikes over nonwage issues such as work rules, the right to organize, and what he termed the "ethical standards [that] should govern the workplace."[38] And, in his view, most tellingly, sympathetic strikes rose dramatically as the period progressed, reaching a crescendo in the 1890s.

Montgomery stressed repeatedly that patterns did not follow a simple linear trajectory. Strikes could acquire an insurrectionary quality, as they did in different ways in 1863 and 1877. They could pose a challenge to state power, or seek to "redefine the polity," or on occasion attempt to coerce employers to obey existing laws. Strikes for the eight-hour day, through the "habit of solidarity" they engendered, posed a threat not only to the culture of "acquisitive individualism" unleashed in the Gilded Age but on occasion to the "wages system" itself. Most dramatic were the mass strikes of the period in which a new spirit of audacity animated collective action on an unprecedented scale—in 1877, in 1886, and in the coal and railroad strikes of 1894. Such actions disordered not only statistical trend lines that modernizers might impose on strike activity, but also their theories that prescribed orderly progress toward stable and quiescent industrial relations. As in so much of Montgomery's other writing, workers' actions and the consciousness that underlay them could only be understood by close attention to changes in the fabric of workers' lives on the job, in the community, in the union hall, and "in the context of the changing totality of class conflicts, of which they are a part."[39] The essay provided a template for analyzing the evolution of collective action in relation to workers' own understandings of their world and the strategies available to enforce their own ethical codes.

If Montgomery's attempt to provide a new synthesis for understanding workers' collective action was fundamentally rooted in nineteenth-century evidence, the other 1980 essay, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America," sought to conceptualize the discontinuities between that nineteenth-century world and developments in the early decades of the twentieth. Like the work on strikes, this effort built on burgeoning research that reinterpreted the place of the Knights of Labor within nineteenth-century labor, a key project in defining the new labor history. The essay also

[38]Montgomery, "Strikes in Nineteenth-Century America," 86–93.
[39]Ibid., 95–100.

foreshadowed a more complex understanding of the conflicts that would precipitate "the fall," however temporary, in the 1920s.[40]

The project he undertook, then, was nothing less than the reconstruction of the "articulated ideology (ideologies) of the workers' movement" or "the making and remaking of class consciousness" between the Civil War and the end of the Great War. The "sketch" in the essay he provided would give form and even language to the conceptual framework for *The Fall of the House of Labor*.[41]

Three factors, according to Montgomery, had "shaped the outlook of the labour movement": the triumph of a northern bourgeoisie in the aftermath of the Civil War, the prolonged deflationary cycle that sent workers' incomes and employment plunging periodically, and the national integration of a capitalist order. What was most noteworthy about Montgomery's conceptualization was not just the diverse impact of these developments on different "ethnic, racial, sexual, and age groupings" with their comparably diverse "forms and objectives of struggle," but what he termed the "moral universality" that infused workers' efforts "to impose economic order on deflationary, competitive capitalism." This "mutualistic ethic" may have had roots in pre-capitalist, republican values, but it reached beyond those traditional trappings to repudiate the "egotism" and acquisitive individualism that marked the Gilded Age, and it animated an alternative movement culture of producers in cooperatives, boycotts, social gatherings, labor temples, songs, and poetry. The scope of that culture—at whose center stood the more than 15,000 local and district assemblies of the KOL—was without precedent. Abolition of the wages system seemed to entail a strategic contradiction. It could not be done without "redemption

[40]The revised picture of the Knights of Labor that challenged the interpretations of the Commons school—most notably Selig Perlman and later Gerald Grob—had been in evidence at a Newberry Conference in 1979 commemorating the centenary of the founding of the KOL. Montgomery and Herbert Gutman presided at the conference, and the work of their students and others at various stages of dissertation work was on display. Presenters included Jon Garlock, Susan Levine, Leon Fink, Richard Oestreicher, David Brundage, Frank Couvares, Peter Rachleff, Greg Kealey, Bryan Palmer, Marjorie Murphy, Julie Blodgett, Clare Horner, John Bennett, Alan Dawley, and myself, among others.

[41]Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America," 201–02. In terms that reappeared in revised form in the introduction to *The Fall of the House of Labor*, Montgomery spoke of an "ethic of mutuality," which "daily experience nurtured at work, in the residential neighborhood, and to some extent in the family." He also spoke of class consciousness as both a product of those experiences and "a project" carried forward by working-class activists and others.

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of the state," but "neither could it be accomplished by the state." The result was a dual emphasis on self-organization and political mobilization.[42] Montgomery did not neglect "two important variations," a socialist political movement (SLP) with strong German immigrant influences committed to government control of the economy, and an anarchist movement (IWPA), itself internally divided, whose "mission was not to capture the state, but smash it."

The second half of the essay portrayed a very different world of working-class activity, shaped by a new, concerted collectivism among *employers*, the growth of monopoly capitalism, a capitalist "octopus" that "extended its reach from a continental to a global scale," and working-class recomposition through expanded immigration from new corners of the world. In phrasing that anticipated a similar discussion in *The Fall*, Montgomery wrote, "In short, southeastern Europe had become part of the American industrial economy."[43] With racism and patriotism on the ascent, workers were hardly immune. And socialist and syndicalist activism vied more openly and contentiously with an AFL now more dedicated to craft conservatism and political accommodation. But the intensity of class conflict hardly subsided. Indeed, during the critical years 1909–22—before, during, and after the Great War—that conflict "involved more people than ever and often met more violent resistance from employers and the state than ever before." Reaching for the contrast that pivoted around the crisis years of the 1890s, he argued:

> It was the moral universality of the working class that had been ruptured, not its militancy. No single set of values, no commonly accepted vision of the redemption of the republic, any longer guided the many streams of working-class struggle into a single-minded flood of protest.[44]

These two essays, then, mark off the parameters of the massive, synthetic work that would follow. They affirmed the fundamental insights that guided his scholarship from the outset: an affirmation of workers' self-activity and experience as the starting point for understanding class and class consciousness; a focus on the

[42]Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America," 206; this seeming contradiction was perhaps most fully developed in Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, IL, 1983).
[43]Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America," 203–04, 206–08, 210.
[44]Ibid., 211.

workplace as the crucible of class formation, though with increasing attention to community, neighborhood, and family; and an unwillingness to isolate politics from economic collective action or radicalism from reform. But they also signaled, however subtly, a new effort to situate the story of the U.S. working class in a global, transnational context. That effort would come to fruition, though as yet not fully realized, in the final published essay of his life. The direction was, however, unmistakable.[45]

The Global

When graduate students worked with Montgomery—at least in Pittsburgh—they routinely did a required field in what he termed "Comparative Labor History." The readings waded deeply into the social and labor history of Britain—Thompson and Hobsbawm, of course, but also the Webbs and the Hammonds and a host of younger scholars. Germany, France, and Russia/Soviet Union were well represented on the menu, as were, to a lesser degree, Spain and Italy. At this stage—in the early to mid-1970s—absent were Latin America, China, India, Africa, and the Middle East.

Montgomery's commitment to transnational and comparative history was not a new, fashionable undertaking for him.[46] He had edited the journal *International Labor and Working-Class History* (ILWCH) during a critical period. He had engaged with historians worldwide from his early sojourn at Warwick with Thompson to later stints in Italy, Brazil, France, The Netherlands, and back in England. He had been intimately involved in assorted projects with Marcel van der Linden and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.[47] A number of his students had embarked on transnational and comparative projects of their own, as the new labor history itself developed a more international focus.[48] And imperialism,

[45]David Montgomery, "Workers' Movements in the United States confront Imperialism: The Progressive Era Experience," *Journal of the Gilded Age & Progressive Era* 7 (Jan. 2008): 7–42.
[46]Julie Greene, "The Global Montgomery: Assessing the Place of the World in David Montgomery's Historical Writing," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 10 (Spring 2013): 57–63.
[47]Marcel van der Linden, "David Montgomery (1927–2011)," *International Review of Social History* 57 (Aug. 2012): 163–67.
[48]See, for example, Julie Greene, "Historians of the World: Transnational Forces, Nation-States, and the Practice of U.S. History" in *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink (New York, 2011), 12–17; Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York, 2009); and Greene, "The Labor of Empire: Recent Scholarship on U.S. History and Imperialism," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1

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particularly its American version, had been a growing presence in his scholarship and teaching. His last essay, in this very journal, charted the shifting currents of the American labor movement's internationalism and the AFL's own transition from vocal anti-imperialism to a quiescent and ultimately more aggressive handmaiden of American expansionism, particularly in Latin America and Canada, before and during World War I. But Montgomery offered not an Olympian view of these developments—though the broad implications were clearly delineated—but a characteristically gritty account of local engagement between the AFL and national and local labor movements in Puerto Rico, Canada, and Mexico.[49]

Like so many new turns in his scholarship, the transnational grew from a deeply rooted and conceptually capacious grasp of the development of capitalism in local, national, and transnational contexts. In the 1980 MARHO interview, he had stepped back to consider the trajectory of his own work. "Although my specialty is working-class history, the subject I am trying to get at is the history of capitalism. From this vantage point I have as much respect and esteem for the study of the economy or of foreign relations as for that of working people."[50] His powerful presidential address at the St. Louis OAH convention in 2000, framed as it was by the principled struggle he led against the discriminatory practices of the Adams Mark hotel chain, outlined a global capitalism whose roots lay in the African slave trade and an insatiable search for cheap, dependent labor. But, even as he called for historians "to incorporate slavery into our histories of immigration and labor," he also cautioned that we "exercise care when we do so," by not conflating slave "migration" with a history of immigration based on European or even Asian models.[51]

(Summer 2004): 113–29; Shelton Stromquist, "Municipal Socialism and the Contested Politics of Everyday Life, 1890–1920" in *Interventions: The Impact of Labour Movements on Social and Cultural Development*, eds. David Mayer and Jürgen Mittag (Leipzig, 2013), 219–44; Stromquist, "Claiming Political Space: Workers, Municipal Socialism, and the Reconstruction of Local Democracy in Transnational Perspective" in *Workers across the Americas*, ed. Fink, 303–28; Stromquist, "Railroad Workers and the Global Economy: Historical Patterns," in *Towards a Global Labor History in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Jan Lucassen and Marcel van der Linden (Bern, 2006), 623–48; Yevette Richards, *Maida Springer: Pan-Africanist and International Labor Leader* (Pittsburgh, 2000); and Neville Kirk, *Comrades and Cousins: Globalization, Workers and Labour Movements in Britain, the USA and Australia from the 1880s to 1914* (London, 2003), among others.

[49]Montgomery, "Workers' Movements in the United States Confront Imperialism."

[50]Montgomery interview, 176.

[51]David Montgomery, "Racism, Immigrants, and Political Reform," *Journal of American History* 87 (Mar. 2001): 1260.

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Montgomery took the occasion to sketch, as he had done so often in the past, the outlines of a new history of capitalism in which workers—enslaved and free, people of color and white, male and female—remained in some fashion agents of their own lives and destinies. However constrained they were, workers of all sorts constructed solidarities from below, often fragile and conflicted; and played a role, at times decisive, in shaping politics and economic institutions far beyond the local worlds in which they most often acted.

> The struggles of migrants of every clime and complexion have transformed American life in every generation within limits set by that age. They remind us that capitalist economic development has relentlessly created social formations from which popular struggles have sprung and subsequently wiped those formations off the face of the earth, usually leaving the goals for which working people acted at best only partially realized, but never leaving society and politics unchanged.[52]

This was quintessential Montgomery, gathering material from the widest imaginable range of sources, integrating the pathbreaking work of other historians, but giving the larger story the stamp of his own understanding and experience. No one said or lived it better than David Montgomery.

[52]Ibid., 1274.

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