After World War II, U.S. labor history continually changed, reflecting the Academy’s adaptation to decolonization’s reordering of global political and economic relationships. Initially, labor history was neglected. During the late 1940s and the 1950s, the Academy’s conservatives resisted changes in the emerging world by embracing the Cold War, whose ideology pushed history away from the class-based analysis of the New Deal and toward an analysis of a class-less American society. In the absence of class and class antagonism, history left the study of labor to other disciplines and became dominated by the Consensus School. The Consensus School proved insufficient to answer questions in a world wracked by revolution and rebellion. In the struggle to understand the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, a new labor history provided ways to frame issues that helped to understand a more rigorous inspection of change over time. By the 1980s, history turned to new subjects and postmodern theory to better investigate human experience. The new theory discarded economic causality, and with it labor history, until the turn of the century. The fin de siècle saw a synthesis of methods that reincorporated labor to more fully contextualize increasingly scrupulous study. Labor and its examination of class conflict proved an axial source for both narrow and broad analysis of power relationships from the Consensus School through postmodern history.

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Old labor history, known as the Wisconsin or Commons School, developed at the turn of the twentieth century. This school studied the actions of institutions, law, and elites. It was, properly speaking, not history but a branch of economics. John Commons was a labor economist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the construction of economic knowledge was his primary goal. He and his students developed a mighty archive of American labor history through exhaustive research on unions and law as part of their project to “contest classical economics in the academy and…its pernicious message that collective action by workers constituted an inadmissible

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interference with the free play of the market.” Their archive is still essential to the study of working people today. His students were trained to see institutions, such as unions, legislatures, and government programs, as the actors in labor history. The Commons School viewed workers as objects acted upon by larger forces and “for all that they contributed to our knowledge of the labor movement, left us otherwise nearly ignorant of the history of the American worker.” Nonetheless, they remained the authoritative view on the study of labor through the middle of the twentieth century, when the study of labor history was virtually abandoned by the Consensus School.

After World War II, Richard Hofstadter and the Consensus School assumed the mantel of guiding American history. Hofstadter rejected the thesis that fundamental class conflict determined American history, which was a radical shift from the Marxian thinking of the early twentieth century. Although Hofstadter did not address labor history explicitly, his understanding of class formation, or the lack thereof, guided historians writing about negotiating power relationships. Under Hofstadter’s leadership, political action was seen through larger structures, like populism and progressivism, and not through the conflict of workplace or union actions.

Hofstadter believed that in the place of conflict, contending groups “shared a belief in the rights of property, the philosophy of economic individualism, the value of competition ... [and] accepted the economic virtues of a capitalist society as necessary qualities of man.” Ironically, Hofstadter’s strength lay in challenging existing consensus on their uncritical interpretations of America’s past. In *The Age of Reform*, Hofstadter problematized myths about contending groups, like the Populists. For example, he demolished the popular notion of the yeoman Populist longing for a pre-market self-sufficiency. By criticizing previously accepted beliefs and more rigorously interrogating sources, he raised questions about received knowledge of American history. In his review of *The Age of Reform*, Alan Brinkley said that Hofstadter “helped to introduce ‘complexity’ to the study of history.”

New Labor historian Melvyn Dubofsky claimed that he came to labor history through reading Hofstadter’s questioning of power relations. Hofstadter utilized a more critical and complex analyses of workers’ milieu, but in the end he was still researching “great men.” A watershed in finding the voice of working people came to American history through a British study of English workers.

Edward Palmer Thompson was a British historian whose 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, influenced the rise of New Labor History. His book traced the creation of workers as a group and placed them into a distinctly capitalist society through the actions of the workers themselves. Thompson drew on multiple sources of social influences to construct the lives of his actors. For example, he saw religion as a formative influence on workers self-conceptions as workers whose interests diverged from employers. Also, he explicitly tried to write a history created by workers: “I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘Utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.” This was a radical change from Commons, who was uninterested in the lives of workers. Thompson provided a template for U.S. historians interested in digging into the lives of workers. It was his treatment of class, however, that was most transformative.

Traditionally, class had been seen as a static category. For example, both Marx and Smith held that the “laborer” was an essential component of capitalism as an interchangeable widget. Thompson smashed the traditional architecture of class by describing it as a fluid phenomenon under constant creation. The theoretical category “class” became the workers’ daily participation in creating working class culture. By wresting that component from teleological orthodoxy, Thompson forever assured that critical analysis of people’s lives would attend the study of capitalism and of social histories in

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3 David Brody, “The Old Labor History,” 112.
4 Ibid., 112.
American universities doubled in the post-World War II period and saw a refinement of historical study. New Labor History was a development of Social History. Social upheaval during the 1950’s and the early 1960’s sabotaged assumptions of consensus, and re-directed inquiry towards the causes of that upheaval. Between the end of World War II and 1963, the number of women and blacks enrolled in American universities doubled. With the influx of students from the G.I. Bill, the composition of students and graduates repositioned the axis of scholarly exploration away from conservative institutional themes and toward new models centered on questions about social change. History “from the bottom up” attempted to answer questions provoked by changes in both society and in the academy that had either not been addressed, or had produced unsatisfying work.

This history “from the bottom up” created new labor history to answer new questions about social forces surrounding fundamental power relationships. As social historians began sifting through archives, they discovered the American worker and began to find other neglected actors and the ways they shaped the American story. Among the vanguard of new labor historians was Herbert Gutman. In 1971, Thomas A. Krueger wrote that Gutman was “outstanding; someday, he may do for the New Labor History what John R. Commons did for the old.” Krueger was right, as Gutman’s name came to be synonymous with New Labor History.

New Labor Historians contested authority over not only who represented, who spoke for, and who comprised the working class, but also how the story of the working class would be told. The story of slavery, for example, had traditionally been about the institution itself, and generally contained the slave owners’ or abolitionists’ point of view, since it was their materials historians relied on. Gutman, however, was interested in researching slaves, as opposed to slavery, and how they constructed their lives. Using new organizational paradigms and scrupulous re-examination of archived materials, he was able to tell slaves’ stories.

One of Gutman’s organizational paradigms was “the family,” a model newly spawned by Social History, and a subject in its own right. Gutman employed familial relations as a pathway to discover the way slaves lived and thought, and what social factors they participated in to construct their lives. For example, Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman’s 1974 work Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Slavery, although using the new technique of cliometrics, was written about the institution of slavery. In Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross, Gutman used records of sales, childbirth, and slave marriages to show that the tendency toward stable family structure among slaves was self-determined, rather than imposed by slave owners as was postulated in Time on the Cross. He asserted that slave owner influence was antithetical to slave family cohesion. To contest claims about slave upward mobility and access to skilled jobs, Gutman cross-referenced data on free workers.

Slavery and the Numbers Game reveals a sea change in how the concept of “worker” was understood. Even Thompson had limited his research to types...
of artisans and wage workers. The traditional tenets of Smith and Marx had held slaves outside of capitalism and the “laborer” component essential to capitalism. They both maintained that free wage labor was a part of capitalism and thus different than slavery. In *Slavery and the Numbers Game*, Gutman implies the interchangeability of free and slave labor participating in labor markets—a specific component of Smith’s and Marx’s definition of capitalism. Here is where we see a marker for radical change in history through the study of labor. Gutman breaks down statistics on free white immigrant labor to show how previous data on slaves was erroneous. This presupposes an equality of place in economic agency that makes the slave and the free worker interchangeable as representatives of the working class. While he did not explicitly challenge the Marxian foundations of labor history, Gutman participated in unsettling the established canon. At the same time, other New Labor Historians continued to address traditional labor topics, collective bargaining for instance.

Robert Zieger’s 1977 book, *Madison’s Battery Workers, 1934-1952: A History of Federal Labor Union 19587*, for example, could be called traditional. Writing about a union, rather than workers, Zieger emphasized a traditional view of organization from the top down. It clearly qualified as a new history, however, for its use of oral sources, which push against an archive limited to official documents that had favored elite construction of history. It also followed E.P. Thompson’s idea of rescuing unsuccessful and unsung workers from obscurity.

As the title implies, Sean Wilentz’s 1984 *Chants Democratic: New York and the Rise of the American Working Class* also paralleled Thompson’s work by exploring how artisan work transformed into wage labor, and how artisans negotiated that change. *Chants Democratic* showed how multiple social forces—industrialization, republican ideology, ethnocentrism, and the rise of party politics—combined to create workers with new relationships to production, and influenced their understanding of that relationship. Wilentz firmly grasped New Labor History’s prescription for researching workers instead of institutions and placed those workers within a net woven of temporal shifts in cultural beliefs, paternalist structures, and technical innovations. It was New Labor History, but was it new enough?

*Chants Democratic* suffered from some old-time maladies. For example, Wilentz defined the change he examined as “the emergence of modern bourgeois society and the working class.” As we have seen in Gutman’s work, by 1975 Thompson’s artisans had become an insufficient definition for who “workers” were. From Gutman on, the growth of history required more complexity in how the “working class” was defined. Furthermore, Wilentz saw nineteenth-century capitalism as responsible for “the destruction of plantation slavery” and the reordering of “formal social relations to fit the bourgeois ideal of labor, market, and man.” If Gutman was working with an unsettled distinction between slave and free white labor in a plantation society, Wilentz, writing ten years later, surely should have incorporated some qualification for the mass of workers in early nineteenth century New York who were not, nor had ever been, artisans, to be part of working class formation. As Nell Irvin Painter pointed out, Wilentz also failed to “imbed race in his analysis, which, given the place that racism occupies in American culture, is necessary in labor history.” By 1984, history was changing fast: new subjects, new archives, and new theories were passing “new” labor history by.

Although New Labor Historians challenged previous historical canon, the ferment of social history to which they belonged never ceased spawning new histories which eventually came to challenge the place of labor history. Influences from new radical disciplines, such as women’s and ethnic studies,
had shared labor history’s quest to tell the subaltern’s story, but they eventually

dislodged the Marxian scaffolding on which labor history was founded. The
work of redefining whom history was about bumped up against the limitations
of the archives - both material and conceptual - and suggested new interpreta-
tions of existing evidence, as well as new sources. Rooted in a Marxian frame-
work, labor history began to wane in the 1980s as economic-based history gave
way to new histories based on race, sex, psychology, environment, and religion.

In an annihilation of economics, these areas of study not only used new meth-
ods, but also embraced new ontological conceptions of knowledge. Central to
this new program were the postmodern ideas of discourse and deconstruction

Because traditional historical archives favored recording actions of only small numbers of elites from their own point of view, the archive it-
self came into question. Using discourse and deconstruction to bring out the
histories of non-elites, historians of the late twentieth century re-examined both traditional sources contained in the archive and the way sources were
used and interpreted. Two major impulses fueled this radical reorganization
of the discipline. First, new histories based on discourse revealed both how
much more there was to learn and the limits of the traditional archive. Sec-
ond, previous paradigms seen as regressive, such as white supremist, patri-
archal, and hetero-normative, were rejected. Labor history, with the linger-
ing specter of John Commons (an elitist and racist who, for example, held
that Asian labor undermined the value of white labor and was responsible
for wage disparity), and with its Marxian structure, was powerless to defend
itself against post-structuralism’s deconstruction of class or the linguistic
turn’s elimination of its agents. In the wake of the discourse crusade, labor history moved to the periphery to re-formulate its own raison d’être.

Work was done at the periphery, however. History is a complex
conversation of many voices involved with its own negotiation of discovery. At the turn of the twenty-first century, labor history was supported by its own bastions of labor and working class interests, such as labor jour-
nals, union publications, and schools of labor and industrial relations. These

sources of scholarship adopted the new paradigms and methodologies de-
veloped by the new histories even when focused on ‘old’ labor issues such
as labor legislation and union organizing. Once new histories began shifting
the discipline’s locus away from elitist discourse, class re-emerged as an es-
sential ingredient in attempts to paint a more complete picture of the past.

An example of a more recent labor historian is Jacqueline Jones. At
the heart of her work she synthesizes newer epistemological paradigms that
focus on race, gender, and labor, but structures are absent. From there, she
easily redefines not only who a worker is, but in what milieu they work. In A
Social History of the Laboring Classes from Colonial Times to the Present, published in 1999, Jones presents “the worker” as anyone who participates in “any activity that leads to the production of goods or services.” Gone is the artisan as an emblem of the worker. Gone, too, is the unskilled free wage worker, as well as the restriction of meeting at a delineated workplace. The phrase “any activity” finally incorporates all actual labor. But what is that labor for? Does the disposal of labor condition its meaning? In American Work; Four Centuries of Black and White Labor, Jones states that “jobs are never just jobs; they are markers of great real and symbolic value.” Here we arrive at another cardinal signpost - the intersection of worker agency and discursive meaning. Work’s “symbolic value” creates meaning for labor and the laborer within a culture’s discourse. Jones builds on Fredrick Douglass’s statement about work
determining how men are valued: “at stake was not work alone, slaves for
example never looked for jobs, but [for] the legal and social status of workers.” This was what gave meaning to people’s work. Meaning resided in
text. Labor history could now rise on new scaffolding to build its arguments.

Seth Rockman’s 2010 book, Scraping By, is a fine example of an explicit
labor history rising once again. He takes a less discursive approach than Jones
yet keeps the freedom granted by newer labor history, no longer chained to the
antique dogma of Marxian structures. Rockman claims that women, children,

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23 The “linguistic turn” is an idea that the past does not exist outside of our textual
representations of it. There is no “real past” that can be reported in “objective facts”.
24 Jacqueline Jones, A Social History of the Laboring Classes From Colonial Times to the Present
26 Ibid., 13.
and unfree workers did most work in early Baltimore. Therefore, artisans represented a minority of workers who were peripheral to the lives of most workers, and their perceived self-interests. The street scrapers, laundresses, and residents of the almshouse Rockman studied did not march with artisan mechanics in parades or share their aspirations of social intercourse with employers. Rockman also includes unfree labor at the center of working class formation in order to complicate antiquated questions about slavery’s role in capitalism.

Rockman shows that slavery suited capitalism’s need for a flexible work force. To an employer, slaves-for-hire functioned on the same terms as free wage labor. Rockman argues that there is an absence of conceptual antagonism between free and unfree labor in the process of labor commodification, and the idea of slave bodies as capital made slavery compatible with capitalism. From the contractor’s standpoint, the contracting of slaves functioned identically to the hiring of free wage labor. The prosperity brought by developing capitalism in Baltimore was directly linked to the labor of those workers on the lowest rung of society. Free labor was no longer tied to paternalistic customs but was sold in a marketplace where unequal power relationships allowed employers to extract work under predatory conditions. For slaves, conditions of work found no improvement under capitalism and the added prospect of an increase in the trade of bodies loomed on the horizon of economic expansion. Rockman makes a very strong case for both the expansion of capitalism leveraged on the backs of workers, and for a growing capitalist system with slavery as a fellow traveler. He presented continuity without a north/south, free labor/slave labor paradox. Using labor as an organizational model, Rockman developed a greater understanding of American history.

Conclusion

The descent from authority is the rise of complexity. A single shining luminary monopolizing the final word in the discipline gave way to complementing and contending voices, dissecting neat and tidy narratives to produce messy, more satisfying history. Old labor history was so firmly associated with John Commons that the Wisconsin School had an actual geographic center to its study and location of its archive. Herbert Gutman is the first name referenced in discussions of New Labor History, but he saw himself as one of many, and rightly so. No “School” was named after him, although his was the last emblematic name of a demarcated labor history. There was no newer version of labor history during the early 1980s as the page turned and approaches to History became increasingly sophisticated and subtle in order to address forgotten or neglected vistas. Radical new organizational paradigms, like women, families, and the senses, came to expand the discipline’s explanatory power and further rescue the subaltern from the enormous condescension of posterity. Without labor to provide the vehicle for agency, and a way to contextualize central power relationships, analysis of new paradigms was insufficient. Class, relegated to obsolescence during the latter part of the twentieth century, became embedded in the historical analysis of these new radical subjects in the twenty first century. An historical analysis of gender power relations, for example, lacks context without exploring the economic pressures and parameters associated with work. It is in the synthesis of class with emerging new methods like gender analysis that better history will be written and the future of labor as a vital method of historical investigation will be assured.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Inquisition
Nobody expected it!
Now we laugh at them

Witches are the worst
She turned me into a newt
Burn’em! Burn them up!

Monks are dirty too!
With fellatio and farts
Marginalia fun

Earthy solutions
The derivative of faith
God be with our souls

-Olivia Ward