Introduction: A Future for Labor under Communism?

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A panel discussion at the 1989 French Historical Studies meeting in Columbus, Ohio on the future of labor history became a book, but as luck would have it, only after the collapse of communism and the apparent triumph of the market (amid ethnic warfare and cultural strife). To introduce the suddenly untimely essays the editor, Lenard Berlanstein, an accomplished scholar of France, invoked labor history’s salad days, and their internal decline (not directly linked to “external” events), before praising his collection and its selected bibliography. An “excellent guide,” he suggested, to the historiography. In Berlanstein’s telling, everything crystallized with E. P. Thompson in 1963 and the discovery of authentic voices and experiences: a new labor history, history from below, songs, families, leisure—in short, a broadened agenda, energized by competing concepts of worker self-expression and social control, or more fancily, Gramscian hegemony, examined in community settings. Soon, for Western Europe and North America we were presented with the “proletarianization model,” an ostensibly universal research project and explanatory device that elevated moments of conflict to a position alongside the quiet heroism of the quotidian, to teach and inspire.

But then came Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault, and Clifford Geertz, followed by William Sewell, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Joan Scott’s autocritique. Labor as such did not necessarily define an individual’s existence or animate a worker’s dreams. Feminism was not simply about giving voice to women workers but also about dissecting gendered power structures in law and ways of thinking about female and male actors. Language, rather than the old dialectic between objective conditions and subjective experience, was deemed constitutive. The historical struggle was less among concrete classes over control of resources than around an amorphous, subjectless articulation of class. All the categories—class, work, worker, artisan, skill—became objects of investigation in the reorientation from workplace and community toward identity and discourse. We experienced the infamous “linguistic turn.”

Did the turn promise a new collective enterprise, and if so, what might
that enterprise be? There was no answer. Were fragmentation and the
deconstruction of assumed truth goals worth pursuing or merely signs of
decay, syndromes of the postmodern age? There were multiple answers.
For some the turn signified redemption, for others betrayal, and to still
others it seemed to lead from one wilderness to another. Had labor history
successfully discarded the straightjacket of its Marxism? Or unwittingly
 collaborated in its own “disciplinocide”? Or both? And did it matter?
Many people simply missed the turn. Not a few hesitated, unable to estab-
lish whether it went to the left or right.

Notwithstanding the recriminations and rethinking, countless practi-
tioners managed to do good work on labor. Not everyone became caught
up in the talk of crisis, the drawing up of sides, the sincere as well as
sanctimonious efforts at reconciliation or conceptual rescue. And even
some of those who could not resist exclaiming cris du coeur still produced
pieces of original research. Greater self-consciousness need not become
utter self-absorption. Publications on labor proliferated in the 1980s, after
all, especially on “new” areas such as Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Yet the conflict among labor historians, in light of the momentous
events of 1989–91, eventually convulsed the profession. ILWCH responded
with a roundtable challenging the notion of a disciplinary crisis (issue 46
[1994], which coincidently also carried E. P. Thompson’s obituary). At
that momentous time this journal, much like Berlanstein’s collection,
sought to face the linguistic turn, neither ducking nor fully embracing its
implications, but rather trying to bend it into a manageable intellectual
tradition supposedly still amenable to preservation and elaboration. What
labor historians really needed to wrestle with was the decline of industrial
civilization and its transformation into rust belts, which helped bring on the
change of communism and the political turn of 1989–91, in the face of which
labor historians’ laudatory efforts to marry linguistically derived insights to
a more traditional story involving “politics” could seem trifling. Labor
itself, as we have come to know it from the nineteenth century, is in crisis,
which accounts for the disarray of labor history.

To be fair, no one believes you can banish uncertainty and cacophony
with bibliography, or reclaim the comradely élan of the 1960s by repeated
 invocation. Perhaps when a field has lost its way, engaging in a little histo-
riography can serve as a kind of self-admonition to remember that we have
been in the shop for thirty years, and plan to stick around (even at the risk
of succumbing to the much-dreaded liberal apotheosis). Berlanstein’s col-
lection does contain scholarship as well as polemic. ILWCH moves along,
now at issue 50, having decided to take stock of labor under communism.

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Though scarcely noticed, the Anglo-American study of labor under com-
munism has followed a separate trajectory, in many ways the inverse of the
one outlined above. Rather than the failure of a hoped-for workers' revolution, whose non-appearance eventually gave way to methodological disorientation, under communism there appears to have been something of a genuine workers' revolution which was anticipated only by a few lonely students of East European and Soviet workers. No sooner had their moment of glory seemed to arrive in 1989–1991, however, than a sense of pervasive crisis or rethinking set in here as well.

Immediately after 1917, the Soviet “experiment” attracted positive attention among students of labor no less than those of education, government, theater, and social reform. In the 1920s, and especially during the capitalist depression of the 1930s, many foreign workers and adventurers traveled to the U.S.S.R., sometimes returning disillusioned, yet just as often full of fables. One group, however, stood out for its disapproving, factually rich appraisals: émigré Mensheviks. These left-leaning, anticommunist analysts of labor under communism built a modest-sized industry on steadfast denial of the worker-state propaganda under Stalin.

Surviving Mensheviks of the old Russian Social Democratic party revealed that Soviet factories—celebrated as “palaces of labor” by the regime and its enthusiasts abroad—were worse than the satanic mills of capitalism that had been denounced by, among others, Marx and Lenin. The Mensheviks exposed Soviet labor laws as bludgeons and Soviet workplaces as graveyards for a nearly unfathomable number of lives and limbs. They showed how Soviet trade unions enrolled the whole labor force only to engage in the employer’s (the state’s) bidding. And poverty reigned supreme. History had played a cruel trick in the first self-proclaimed workers’ state, and this handful of exiles sought to set the record straight, cataloging the subjugation and indignity.

That labor under communism had apparently come to involve unprecedented extremes of state oppression and worker dissatisfaction, manifested in low productivity and political passivity, brought special satisfaction to the émigrés. In their view, Bolshevik authoritarianism was a product of forcing a socialist revolution in a country without a substantial working class. When the industrialization of the 1930s vastly increased the proletarians’ ranks, the “raw recruits” perforce came from the peasantry. As such, they were supposedly characterized by a cultural backwardness that made them desirous of strong rule by a tsar-father and disinclined to follow their “proper” working-class interests. In a word, the socialist revolution had been “premature.” Reversing the course of history, the Mensheviks triumphed over the Bolsheviks in the literature on labor.

Such a view was expounded most effectively by Solomon Schwarz in a number of well-informed pieces on workers under Stalin that appeared in the interwar émigré newspaper Sotsialisticheskiy vestnik, published in Paris and New York. Schwarz then systematized his analysis in the first major English-language study of Soviet labor. Completed before the war, it was not published until 1951, just as the “totalitarian school” of interpreters
took shape. Thus, a European social democrat’s diligent research fortified the agenda of American cold warriors in a kind of “big tent” anticommunism that pointedly sought delegitimation of communism in the very group—workers—celebrated by such regimes. And seemingly on cue from Schwarz and his unsolicited allies, workers in Eastern Europe erupted in a series of strikes: in Germany in 1953, in Poland and Hungary in 1956. A bit later, word leaked west of a strike inside the USSR itself, at Novocherkassk in 1962, that had been brutally put down by the reformer Khrushchev.

Who needed E. P. Thompson when workers themselves seemed to be exploding the Bolshevik/Soviet assertion of worker-regime harmony and confirming the Mensheviks’ scientifically rooted contention that repression alone held the Soviet Union together? Further eruptions were thought to be only a matter of time, at least among those who followed events in Poland. When Solidarity burst on the scene in 1980, a few heads nodded knowingly and speculated about the time frame for the formation of an alternative union-cum-civil society in the USSR. Fulfillment of such prophecies, if delayed, seemed to arrive in the strike wave among Soviet miners in 1989. Then, suddenly, before too many questions could be asked, it was all over: the strike wave and communism.

Postmortems assigning credit for the collapse began almost immediately, and although some commentators absurdly nominated the minoritarian Soviet miners, Poland’s Solidarity received a lion’s share. In the elucidation of the phenomenon of Solidarity, however, familiar tensions arose over the relative roles played by workers and the dissident intellectuals who wrote the histories and retrospective analyses. Excoriating these intellectuals for their alleged attempt to highjack a workers’ movement, Roman Laba, who conducted painstaking research among Gdansk workers during the heat of battle in 1980, demonstrated the powerful continuities in the demands and strategy of the great occupation strikes of 1970–71 and the experiences of Solidarity a decade later. He argued vehemently that workers’ struggles, not the supposed direction provided by intellectuals, accounted for the 1980 breakthrough.4

Critics took Laba to task for conflating the indisputable role of workers in building the Solidarity trade union with the broader social revolution that it made possible. Still, communism had been brought down, and at this point few disputed that workers had been instrumental in its demise—an assessment consistent with the half-century study of labor under communism dating back to the Mensheviks. But once in power Solidarity appeared to disintegrate, and at the same time people began to ponder the fact that in the former USSR only the miners had been militant (and moreover that it was not so obvious what the striking miners had fought for). Truth be told, no one was much interested any longer in workers’ potential or real opposition to communism, since it had ignominiously imploded. Anyway, most people finally realized that not workers but communist elites, wittingly and unwittingly, had brought the beast down.
When the consensus on interpreting labor under communism unraveled, an alternative view, already developed, attracted the spotlight. Back in the 1980s, just as the sense of crisis began to envelop traditional labor history, the linguistic turn and E. P. Thompson’s reinvention of the popular were simultaneously introduced to the study of labor under communism: community studies and discourse; history from below and the category of class; charivari and the unstable operation of power.5 Such vistas were inconceivable to the social democrat Schwarz or his American Cold War bedfellows preoccupied with the uncompromising rejection of the communists’ self-presentation.

Post-Schwarzians, at times shamelessly mixing Thompsonian oil with Foucauldian water, have sought to investigate the idea that although Stalinist regimes were brutal and repressive, many workers perceived and realized opportunities to become integrated into their societies. Sure, the trumpeted creation of new heroic working classes was a sham, yet to many if not all post-Schwarzians, there did appear to be a degree of mutual interest—call it social welfare, call it job security, call it marriage-like familiarity—between workers and regimes.6 A few people began to posit the existence of an unwritten “social contract.” And sure enough, in the aftermath of shock therapies, former communists began to be returned to power. Guess what? The workers’ state was a joke, yet it wasn’t a joke.

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Juxtapose the above depictions of two separate labor histories. We see that the aftermath of the great conjuncture of 1989–1991 brought a noticeable escalation in the long-building anxieties of traditional labor history; at the same time it accelerated the belated mobilization of both E. P. Thompson and Jacques Rancière for a major revision of the study of labor under communism. For North America and Western Europe, there was panic about whether one should, or even could, study labor any longer; for the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, a rush to acquire ever more tools for a job whose enormity had finally hit home. Between the East and West lie contrasting experiences with Marxism and the labor-centered, worker-centered universe that Marxism both seeks and rests on.

In the case of Western Europe and North America, Marxism provided an intellectual framework for highlighting the otherwise lowly status of work and laborers as well as specific methods for studying—and it was hoped, arousing—workers. Marxism never provided the defining notions of these societies as a whole, or even of that part of these societies encompassed by the terms “labor force” and “labor movement.”7 In the Western context, Marxism remained at best an aspiration, a kind of ouvriériste counterdiscourse in which labor history, among other oppositional trends, found space to assert itself. Wonder about the long quest for relevance by labor history in Western Europe and North America? Look at the margin-
alism of Marxism in non-Marxist societies. Some might say there has been a lack of relationship between the past and present struggles on and around workplaces in Western Europe and North America and the political sensibilities of those engaged in supposedly politically informed studies of labor.\(^8\)

By contrast, in the USSR and Eastern Europe, Marxism was in power; that is to say, regimes ruled in the name of workers and working classes, and labor was understood as the purpose and measure of existence. Workers did not live well, but metaphysically and even corporally, workers remained at the forefront of how communist societies defined themselves. Worker interests were proclaimed universal, ignored, overridden, and occasionally defended—yet always and endlessly discussed. Workers got both sick of and accustomed to the prattle, which was somehow both meaningless and not meaningless.

Meanwhile, workers’ overall proportion within the population was vigorously expanded. If in the 1920s heavy industry made up about twenty percent of the USSR economy, by the 1980s the figure was closer to eighty percent. Almost seventy million people were employed in heavy industry on the eve of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Relative to the rest of society, this was by far the biggest working class, as Marx understood the term, that the world had ever seen. In Eastern Europe, too, creating working classes was a fundamental aim of Marxism in power. The communists hurriedly built Nowa Huta outside Cracow not only because they wanted to raise steel production but also to generate an “appropriate” social base, a Polish working class, countering the influence of the large Catholic intelligentsia, or so it was hoped.

In the USSR, Poland, and the rest of Eastern Europe, even Romania, the communists got their working classes and all that came with them, including industrial output, idling, job turnover, drunkenness, and expectations of social welfare. But the workers also acquired a powerful sense that they ought to have, ought to be, the very things that communists were so enamored of haranguing them about. Despite the ambiguities in their position, the state’s repression, and the general two-facedness of communism, these people were workers. Work was a defining element of their identities. They did work in large-scale factories. However stratified and set against each other, collectively they did constitute a working class, and the authorities secretly feared them for that very reason.

And so we see, because communism showed it more clearly than anyone would have imagined, that Rancière, Foucault, Geertz, and all that they have pinpointed are precisely what makes E. P. Thompson’s workers and their world possible. Not language per se, nor a disembodied, magical discourse, but a panoply of articulated ideas and practices, customs and institutions, technologies and microprocedures, often arising independently, can be brought together by political pressures and the humble instrumentalities of everyday existence to form contestational arenas from
the ground up, in which not just lives but socioeconomic regimes, even states, are invented and reinvented. Worlds of labor, no less than labor history, are artifacts of power, resistance, competing discourses, and transposed techniques, rather than merely the preserve of several dozen artisans, or the vocation of committed scholars who happen to be advancing in age.

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Since 1991, neither the industrial/infrastructural legacy of communism, nor its ideational/discursive legacy, has been fully disbanded. Thousands of Gary Indians and YoungstownOhio still stretch across a dozen time zones from the Elbe to the Pacific. Most remain in operation, albeit below capacity, and for all we know, a good many may continue, furnishing a wheezing context, in tandem with historical memory and enduring rhetoric, for the further investigation of work and workers. For a while yet, the study of labor under communism may have a future that the study of labor under capitalism will come to envy.

And yet, the current state of studying labor under communism bears an uncanny resemblance to noncommunist labor history. Both exhibit a sometimes muddled potpourri of traditional worker-centered concerns and postmodern savoir/pouvoir. The link comes from the shared fate, east and west, of industrial civilization, the decline of which is irreversible. But that decline is not yet total, and as a result its implications remain underappreciated. Ours is a moment of semicoherence of uncertain duration. One thing has become clear: We no longer find it possible to hope for the redemption of humankind through labor.

At some point, new vocabularies and new rationales will be found in the language and experience of laborers to take the labor history of communist and noncommunist countries beyond the epoch of fossil fuel industrialism in which that history was born, along with Marxism, socialism, syndicalism, and much else besides. In the meantime, billions of people work, and many tens of millions more would like to. It is not their fault that in the study of their predecessors, many labor historians claim to be baffled, not to say discouraged.

**NOTES**

Thanks to Cynthia Hooper, Philip Nord, and Andy Rabinbach for their comments.

2. See the exchange in International Labor and Working-Class History 31 (Spring 1987):1–36.

6. One dissenter is Donald Filtzer, who, like Schwarz, characterized Soviet regime-worker relations as inherently antagonistic (thereby also obviating the need to investigate actual worker or regime attitudes). Filtzer modified Schwarz, however, showing that because of the absence of unemployment, workers under communism exercised considerable control over the production space. He could thus explain the seeming paradox of a state willing and able to use massive repression yet unable to get its way on the shop floor and raise productivity. Filtzer, Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928–1941 (Armonk, 1986).

7. Much of Western Marxism gave up altogether on productionism and concrete workers’ struggles without, however, abandoning a sense of totality or universal interests. Some Western Marxists retained the concepts of class consciousness and even of the proletariat while refusing to interest themselves in living workers or labor. See the review essay by Anson Rabinbach, “Science, Work, and Worktime,” International Labor and Working-Class History 43 (Spring 1993):48–64.

8. In this regard the extensive and highly sophisticated literature on prerevolutionary Russian labor stands out for its engagement, even exhilaration, as well as for its reflection of dreams and aspirations for the United States and Great Britain that went unfulfilled. For space reasons I omit consideration of these voluminous writings, a topic given extensive coverage in previous issues of ILWCH. My views can be found in Stephen Kotkin, “One-Hand Clapping: Russian Workers and 1917,” Labor History 32 (1991):604–20.

9. For a luminous elaboration and demonstration of how imaginings are rooted in material culture and in turn make material conditions “real,” see Richard Biernacki, The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914 (Berkeley, 1995).