

## **American Labour's Longue Durée: Class Conflicts (and the lack of them) in Cincinnati**

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# American Labour's Longue Durée: Class Conflicts (and the lack of them) in Cincinnati

Leon Fink

Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890* (New York: Columbia 1985)

RECENT WORK IN UNITED STATES labour history casts a curious shadow over the middle decades of the 19th century. Studies of New York, Philadelphia, and Lynn, to make the most prominent examples, indicate the formation of a working class and attendant class culture already by the 1830s. But at least two problems remain in characterizing and assigning significance to these developments in national (even national *urban*) terms. First, the connections between local events seem muted and intrinsically weak. Secondly, a period of disintegration, at least in terms of organizational and political expression in the 1840s and 1850s, makes problematic the connections between the pioneering initiatives of the 1820s and 1830s and the post-war labour movement reaching out from the skilled trades to the factory working class. Implicitly acknowledging the problem, most studies have confined themselves to one side or other of the Civil War divide.

But what works well for research purposes retards our explanatory powers. The connections—and contrasts—between workers under commercial capitalism and early and late factory industrialization are left unspoken. The distinctions in worker ideology and language—especially the changing meaning of “republican” articles of faith—are likewise difficult to discern. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Civil War itself continues to stand “outside” of labour history, even as its significance to workers and their communities is reflexively acknowledged.

No one work, and certainly no single community study, can make up all this ground in one swoop. Thankfully, however, the most impressive ef-

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fort yet in this direction has arrived with Steven Ross's selective social and labour history of Cincinnati from 1788 to 1890. Ross explores the changing dimensions of worker economic status, labour culture, and political activity across three well-chosen periods: the age of the artisan (1788-1843), the age of manufacturing (1843-1873), and the age of modern industry (1873-1890). He offers a fascinating account (particularly in the first two-thirds of the book) of labour's relation to processes of economic growth and the creation of bourgeois culture in a city whose geographic, economic, and political importance commands attention.

A prime reason for the limits of class expression in the first period, suggests Ross, was the relative prosperity and satisfied standing of the artisanry in early Cincinnati. Compared to New York with its "metropolitan industrialization" defined by intense division-of-labor and bastardization of craft, early Cincinnati appears as something of a mechanics' paradise—at least for white protestant males. On the basis of both wage and price information (which he uses to good effect throughout the text) as well as more impressionistic evidence, Ross concludes, local artisans "found that they could enjoy the benefits of an expanding economy without, at least for a time, finding their crafts or lives adversely affected by it."

Common interests as well as common mores united merchants with artisans prior to 1840. The first big capitalist investment, for example, the local steamship industry, supported skilled artisans in numerous small foundries, boiler and machine manufactories, and metalworking shops. Ross cites the conspicuous absence of a leisure class, cross-class encounters in fire companies, taverns, women's associations, and in the daily market place, and a vigorous artisan participation in local political institutions as evidence for social harmony. The spirit of egalitarianism, he suggests, was manifest equally in young women's (about whom we otherwise hear little in this account) preference for employment in local paper mills rather than domestic service and in the refusal of a local tailor to make house calls to his wealthier patrons. Finally, July 4 celebrations offered a ritual sanctification of republican community.

Capitalist-based social divisions did indeed invade Cincinnati following the economic shakedown and depression of the late 1830s. Many from the old artisan classes followed either the cabinetmaker Charles James into the ranks of wealthy entrepreneurs or shoemaker August Roundy into economic dependency. By the mid-1840s, local production included "new" industries "which lacked any extensive artisanal tradition," "old" crafts, "which continued to produce in customary ways," and "market" crafts, "which engaged in new capitalistic ventures." Worker resentments were evident in the formation of trades unions and boycotts of "scab" employers, a window-smashing riot against local banks in January 1842, and the flash of the Working Man's Party in 1842-43. A well-developed sense of pride and place fired

the passions of one rioting mechanic who dares the military to fire upon "hardworking, law-abiding citizens" — "they [military] will learn what it is to beard the working community when roused to a sense of their wrongs." Generally well-integrated into community affairs, the mechanics of Cincinnati, one senses, seldom felt polarized as a *class*; but, when they did, they commanded considerable resources.

What distinguishes Ross's account from others is the continuity he traces from the age of the artisan shop to that of the manufactory. No longer a merely regional outpost, by mid-century Cincinnati had emerged as the third leading industrial center in the nation (ranking among the five leading national producers of pork, machinery, furniture, ready-made clothes, soap and candles, boots and shoes, wine, whiskey, and books). A homogeneous population had given way as well to large-scale, heavily German and Irish, immigration. Despite such physical transformation, however, Ross discovers a dearth of class polarization during these boom years.

His explanation is both materialist and cultural. A recasting of republicanism by civic leaders effectively implanted trade and industry (alongside farming and the artisan's shop) as venues of "hard work, savings, and reinvestment that were supposed to be the best means for individual success and for the economic progress of the country." The ideological extension for producer to manufacturer was reinforced by the number of artisans who themselves successfully forded the streams of economic mobility (Ross's data on Cincinnati in this respect recalls Herbert Gutman's findings for Paterson, New Jersey). One such intriguing figure was Miles Greenwood who grew up in the nearby Owenite colony of New Harmony, Indiana. After directing the New Harmony metal foundry, Greenwood transferred his rationalist organizational principles to private enterprise and ended up creating the most extensive, systematically arranged hardware manufactory in the country. By creating skilled jobs and stable employment, manufacturing, at least in Greenwood's eyes, pointed less to immiseration and dependency than individual opportunity and community prosperity.

Greenwood's example, in a larger setting of mixed manufacturing where factories of modest size still required many auxiliary artisan trades, delineated an economic path different from one-industry towns like Lynn or industrial monoliths like Pittsburgh. At least during its age of manufacturing, Cincinnati, in Ross's portrayal, resembles what some have labeled the "French" road to industrialization—less wrenching than the dominant "British" and "American" examples, and one which extended the status and influence of small-propertied producers. Even the classicism of the city's public buildings, argues Ross, reflected an optimistic faith by the middle class "that manufacturing and democracy went hand in hand." Growing mechanization of manufacturing did indeed lead to protective unionism among the city's trades in the 1850s, but the variety of work experiences and the very

ambivalence of economic improvement for the labouring classes ("those industries with the highest average investment in machinery per operative often tended to be the industries which paid the highest annual wages") militated against a class-wide alliance. Despite undercurrents of class as well as nativist vs. foreign-born discontent, the Queen City, at least through mid-century, seems largely to have convinced itself that it had discovered a path to industrialization with a human face.

Although the point is buried in a complex narrative, Ross's evidence suggests that the Civil War first propelled workers' grievances into a sustained challenge to the new industrial order. After decades of ineffectual economic and political organizing efforts, a powerful city trades assembly established in 1864 united Cincinnati workers across skill and ethnic lines behind the eight-hour day campaign. The movement reached its apogee with the election of Civil War General Samuel F. Cary to Congress on an independent, Workingmen's Party ticket in 1867. Aside from the destabilizing effects of the war-time economy, Ross argues that military service itself had helped to melt ethnic tensions and to embolden workers' claims on "the privileges and blessings of . . . free institutions." In an insight ripe for further development, Ross records the pattern of distinct workingmen's companies of Union Army recruits and suggests that the post-war organizational discipline shown by crafts like the molders and printers may in fact have borrowed something from their war-time experience. Both as an agent of economic disruption and social mobilization, "war had stirred to new heights the tensions inherent in the city's age of manufacturing."

The depression of the 1870s provides an entree to the "city of modern industry." At least for this reader, the argument of this final section, while still replete with insights based on solid research, loses the overall sense of control evident in the earlier chapters. The section combines a familiar story of cost-cutting, control-minded factory owners with the pursuit of complex organization-building, protest and riot, and independent politics among the industrial working class. The courthouse riot of 1884 which claimed over 50 lives, the rise of the Knights of Labor and 1886 May Day strikes for eight hours, and finally the failing efforts of the United Labor and Union Labor parties, 1886-1888, frame Ross's discussion of class consciousness and social divisions both between and among workers in a mature industrial world. What most effectively links this panorama of confrontation to the relatively harmonious earlier eras is the author's discovery of the dual uses of a law-and-order vocabulary in the mid-1880s. Initially appropriated by elite reformers as a conservative adaptation of earlier republican values, "law and order" rhetoric took on opposite and ironic meanings in May, 1886, when workers sought to enforce a weak state eight-hour statute through mass strikes. For an extended moment, Cincinnati workers "created a new public language which merged the roles of *worker* and *citizen* in new and powerful ways."

Ross's conclusion is inadequate because it tries to do too little and too much at the same time. Too much, in the sense that Ross's recurrent emphasis on the failure of a unified working-class to step to the municipal fore beats something of a dead horse: nobody expects such a creature to appear in the first place. Neither this formulation nor the question (upon which Ross also concludes) of incremental reform vs. long-term radical change connects sufficiently to the real events the book addresses. But the other reason Ross's big questions seem inappropriate is that in the end the reader cannot understand what touches off the conflagration between city authorities and workers beginning with the 1884 courthouse riot. As a community study, this is less *histoire totale* than *histoire moitié*. By the end one worries that the author has placed the actors in a box too exclusively defined by economic preoccupations. Without recourse to other aspects of urban consciousness—including those resting on the spatial configurations of the city, gender relations, ethnic alliances and assimilation, and the nature of local political machinery—it is hard to feel confident that one has truly taken the pulse of the community. From Ross's account, for example, one would have no idea that the years of class conflict in Cincinnati were also the seedtime for Boss Cox and the Republican Party of William Howard Taft.

Such weaknesses, however, should not dissuade readers from approaching *Workers on the Edge*. In many respects this is the most ambitious work to appear in labor history for some time. And, while he has not lifted all the curtains which surround the question of transition in the 19th century, Ross offers a most promising context for future work.

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