Labour/Le Travailleur

Latin American Labour History in Comparative Perspective: Notes on the Insidiousness of Cultural Imperialism

Charles Bergquist

Volume 25, 1990

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt25cri01

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)
1911-4842 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Bergquist, C. (1990). Latin American Labour History in Comparative Perspective: Notes on the Insidiousness of Cultural Imperialism. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, *25*, 189–198.

CRITIQUES

Latin American Labour History in Comparative Perspective:

Notes on the Insidiousness of Cultural Imperialism

Charles Bergquist

THIS ESSAY EXPLORES three broad issues involved in viewing Latin American labour history in comparative perspective (that is, in the context of world labour historiography, especially that of Western developed societies). The first issue is the appropriateness to Latin American labour history of conceptual paradigms, particularly liberal and Marxist, constructed in Western Europe in the course of that region's 19th-century industrialization. The second is the application to Latin American studies of the so-called "new labour history," which has flowered in the historiography of North Atlantic developed capitalist societies, especially in the Anglo-American context, during the last 25 years. The third issue concerns the comparative advantages of First and Third World labour history in the context of the logic, as well as the special strengths and weaknesses, of the discipline of history itself. Each of these themes, I believe, illustrates an aspect of comparative labour history seldom appreciated or addressed by students of labour in Latin America and abroad: the pervasive, distorting influence of cultural forms emanating from the First (and later Second) World on the scholarship of the Third. I consider this influence an insidious form of cultural imperialism because I believe it is fundamentally negative, and because it is generally unacknowledged and thus unexamined.

Charles Bergquist, "Latin American Labour History in Comparative Perspective: Notes on the Insidiousness of Cultural Imperialism," *Labour/Le Travail*, 25 (Spring 1990), 189-198.

I

Eurocentric Paradigms and Latin American Labour History

LIBERAL AND MARXIST scholarship, since the 19th century, has defined labour history as the study of urban workers, that is, artisans and proletarians in manufacturing industry. Both traditions have posited a fundamental dichotomy between these workers and their rural, agrarian counterparts. And both traditions have postulated different cultural values, predicted behaviour, and historical tendencies for each kind of worker. In fact, on the basis of this dichotomy and its presumed historical tendencies, liberal and Marxist scholars alike have constructed universal theories that purport to explain the past, understand the present, and predict the future of the world social system. Marxists impute reactionary political tendencies to the rural "peasantry," a class incapable of self-organization, and destined to disappear in the course of capitalist development. They stress the progressive nature of the industrial proletariat, whose struggle is to lead to the overthrow of the capitalist order and bring about a socialist one. Liberals, for their part, see "traditional" rural workers slowly transformed in the course of "development." These workers then join their "modern" urban counterparts as responsible elements of the pluralist democratic order of the modern capitalist nation-state.

Whatever the accuracy of these conceptual frameworks, and of the historical interpretations they yield for the industrial core of the world social system (issues about which there is, in fact, considerable doubt), their appropriateness to the underdeveloped capitalist world, and to Latin American labour history in particular, is problematical to say the least. Latin American societies, transformed since 1880 by ever-deepening integration into the industrial capitalist world division of labour, became specialized producers of primary agricultural and mineral commodities for export. The Latin American analogue to the industrial proletariat of the core of this world order was a work force that produced such commodities as coffee, sugar, nitrates, and petroleum for export. These workers in export production, processing, and transport constitute a category for analysis, an object of study, that belies the structural dichotomies of liberal and Marxist analysis. Such workers sometimes are more "rural" than "urban," or more "agrarian" than "industrial"; they rarely conform to the European concept of a "peasantry," but often are not fully proletarianized, either. To conceptualize the labour history of Latin America during the classic era of labour-movement formation and incorporation (c1880-1950) primarily as the study of urban manufacturing workers is thus analogous to arguing that the making of the English working class revolved primarily around the struggles of agricultural workers. Small wonder that, until quite recently, the bulk of Latin American labour studies, by academics and activists alike, concluded that labour was either weak, or passive, or unimportant; or that somehow (because of failures of leadership, ruling class conspiracy, or plain old "false consciousness"), it was unable to realize its historical potential.

That such views should persist into the 1980s attests not only to the cultural

hegemony of 19th-century European social theory, but to recent imperial cultural and political manipulation by the liberal and Marxist superpowers. In the period since World War II, the United States projected "modernization" theory onto Latin America, the Soviet Union an ossified Marxism. Both sought to finance the Latin American labour movement, and study of it, in ways consistent with their politically-opposed, but conceptually-similar (in the dichotomous sense that interests us here) analytical frameworks.

For at least two reasons, however, the persistence of such views well into the 1980s is surprising. For one thing, from the 1950s through the 1970s, organized labour played a major role in the crisis that reversed the democratic, social welfare, and domestic industrialization policies pursued by the major nations of the region before and during World War II. For another, in virtually all respects except those concerning labour, the standard conceptual framework for viewing Latin American history underwent fundamental transformation in the postwar period. Classical Eurocentric liberal and Marxist approaches were rejected in favour of an autochthonous, regionally-inspired approach called "dependency analysis." Initially associated with the Latin American economists of the United Nations regional development agency (whose work focused, ironically for us, on the developmental implications of the region's primary export economies), "dependency analysis" spawned masterworks in literature, history, and sociology that by the 1970s had transformed understanding of Latin American historical development.[1] All this work rejected the normative and conceptual underpinnings of European paradigms for analysis of the region, particularly the idea that Latin American capitalism had developed and would develop along lines similar to its historical course in the core.

None of this work, however, attempted fundamental reconceptualization and revision of the region's labour history. The reasons for this curious omission merit much closer analysis than I am able to provide here. Suffice it to say that, while the social and political targets of Latin American revisionism included the machinations of imperial, industrial capitalist powers and the developmental and democratic failings of domestic elites (landowners, the middle class, the bourgeoisie), labour as a class was assumed to be either impotent or benign. The former were powerful "enemies" of the nation's just development, the latter its ineffectual "friends." Consequently, the analysis of labour, and of the theories and concepts that explained it, received little attention. Even the first systematic attempt to reinterpret the region's labour history in terms of the "dependency" paradigm, Hobart Spalding's *Organized Labor in Latin America*,[2] focused primarily on the strength and cohesiveness of elites, and on the role of international capital and labour organizations, to explain the trajectory and limited influence of labour.

[1]Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Buenos Aires 1967); Celso Furtado, *The Economic Development of Latin America* (Cambridge 1970); Osvaldo Sunkel con Pedro Paz, *El subdesarrollo y la teoría del desarrollo* (México 1971); Fernando Enrique Cardoso y Enzo Falleto, *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina* (México 1969); Tulio Halperín Dongui, *Historia contemporánea de América Latina* (Madrid 1970).

[2](New York 1977).

Only in the 1980s, as the downturn in the long wave of postwar capitalist expansion generated ever-greater economic, social, and institutional crisis in the capitalist world economy (and in the socialist bloc involved with it), have labour studies in Latin America and elsewhere witnessed a renaissance. This new work is notable for its volume (as early as 1979 Thomas Skidmore could speak of a boomlet;[3] today we could eliminate the diminutive), for its revision of conventional paradigms of the kind described in this essay,[4] for its growing recognition of the centrality of labour in the modern history of the region (a tendency revealed in titles like that of the massive 17-volume collection published in Mexico, *La clase obrera en la historia de México* [emphasis mine],[5] and for a growing infatuation with the "new" social and cultural history in vogue in North Atlantic labour studies.

II

The "New" Labour History and its Meaning for Latin American Studies.

IF THE INSIDIOUS DOMINION of orthodox Eurocentric paradigms over the study of Latin American labour history seems to be breaking down, First World influence upon how Latin American labour history should be written seems to have reasserted itself in new form. I refer to the influence of the "new" social and labour history, particularly that exercised through the work of the English historian E.P. Thompson and, to a lesser extent, the work of North American historians like Herbert Gutman. I attended a labour history conference in Rio de Janeiro in July 1987 and was, frankly, quite taken aback to hear Brazilian historians citing and quoting Thompson the way orthodox Marxists used to cite Marx and Lenin to buttress the authority of their arguments.

The new social history has enriched the content and expanded the boundaries of traditional labour history. It has broadened the definition of relevant sources. It has demonstrated the complexity of the processes once easily and simplistically encapsulated in the shorthand Marxist notions of "class consciousness" and "proletarianization." Its attention to everyday life and working-class culture serves as an effective complement to the schematism of much structural analysis. For all these reasons, it has developed new conceptual and methodological approaches vital to the study of labour history everywhere.

But like all the new ideas generated by advanced capitalist societies, the concepts and methods of the "new" labour history must be evaluated critically as they are applied to the task of writing labour history in underdeveloped societies. The new labour history responded to the concerns, problems, and opportunities

[3]Thomas Skidmore, "Workers and Soldiers: Urban Labor Movements and Elite Responses in Twentieth-Century Latin America," in Virginia Bernhard, ed., *Elites, Masses and Modernization in Latin America, 1850-1930* (Austin 1979).

[4]Charles Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America. Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela and Colombia* (Stanford 1986).

[5]Published by Siglo XXI, Mexico.

confronting progressive historians in a very peculiar time and place. It emerged in the 1950s, and has reached its fullest expression since then, in the two English-speaking societies that have occupied the position of the 20th century's pre-eminent capitalist and (formally or informally) imperialist powers. These are the two societies whose labour movements have revealed the greatest propensity to accommodate themselves to the cultural and political hegemony of capital. They are the two societies where liberal democratic political forms have reached perhaps their fullest and most consistent expression. And they are the two societies where, for all these reasons, the intellectual Left reacted most defensively or creatively to the critique of Stalinism (and by extension Leninism) which became general by the 1950s.

I stress all this because it helps to explain why in Thompson's great book there is, in Perry Anderson's words, "a disconcerting lack of objective coordinates as the narrative of class formation unfolds,"[6] why studies by many Thompson admirers have been criticized for ignoring issues of political power,[7] and why Herbert Gutman's defenders have gone to great pains to demonstrate that this charge does not apply to him.[8] Whatever position one takes in these debates, and however one evaluates the new social history, it should be obvious that the particular problematic to which this history responded is only partially present in the Latin American context. There, a dependent capitalism has not worked very well, important sectors of the labour movement remain outside the hegemony of capital, liberal political forms remain problematical, and the attraction, if not the appeal, of the Soviet experience (at least for some, especially in terms of its record of economic and social development) remains in force. Moreover, the intellectual Left, including academic historians, enjoys close ties to either the political establishment or the labour movement itself. And it is in this last consideration that the biggest drawback to uncritical appropriation of the new social history may lie. For the form and style of Thompson's work — its assumption of a thorough knowledge of English history, its length and incredible detail, its ingenious cultural analysis, and its exclusive focus on the early period of labour-movement formation — reveal how fully it is addressed to a specialized academic audience, and how far it is from speaking to contemporary labour activists. In this sense, the form and style of the book also seem to reflect contemporary political and social realities (the professionalization of the academy, the disjunction between intellectuals and politics) of the country in which it was produced.

Similar critical scrutiny should be applied to the methods of the new labour and social history, which manifestly are more appropriate to the capital resources and developed historiographies of advanced industrial societies than to those of the underdeveloped world. The latest phase in the development of a professional

[6]Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London 1980), 33.

[7]Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (Winter 1976).

[8]See, in this context, Ira Berlin's introduction to Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture* (New York 1987).

discipline now more than a century old, the new social history not only builds on an extraordinary edifice of political, economic, and "old" social and cultural history, it depends as well on an accumulated institutional structure that ranges from the material (phenomenal physical faculties and financial support) to the cultural (traditions of working-class literacy, dispositions toward the preservation of private papers and public documents). For all these reasons, those who advocate wholesale adoption of the new social history in underdeveloped fields might well reflect on the appropriateness and feasibility of this endeavour. Thompsonians, in particular, might well ponder how to implement his concept of class[9] when so little is known about the class antagonists of working class — little, that is, about the elite-centred economic, social, political, cultural, diplomatic, and institutional history of the underdeveloped society they study.

Finally, the appeal of the new social history to Latin American labour historians involves questions beyond those which concern its independent intellectual merits and its appropriateness to work in underdeveloped societies and historical fields. It involves, too, the way prestige, positions, and research support are distributed in a global profession dominated by the current interests and concerns of the legions of First World scholars who dominate it. The asymmetry of power that results within the historical profession may be as extreme (and destructive) as that between the developed and underdeveloped economies and polities which account for it.

III

The Comparative Advantage of Latin American Labour History

IN THE DEVELOPED WORLD, as noted above, the most frequent criticism of the new labour and social history is that it tends not to address issues of power — a charge, we have also seen, that often is denied hotly by its practitioners. A further criticism, focused on the issues of appropriateness and application of the new social history to underdeveloped societies and historical fields, has been outlined above. In a sense, both of these criticisms, valuable as they may be, are essentially defensive. It can be argued plausibly, however, in a more positive vein, that the basic problem with the new social history is both more general, and more universally important to the practice of the discipline of history, than either of these two criticisms imply. This problem, like many of the most salient issues in the industrialized world today, is largely a consequence of development itself.

Stated baldly, the sheer volume of historical production in the developed world, and the degree of specialization it fosters among historians, threaten to undermine the great and characteristic strength of history as a discipline and to violate its internal logic. That strength is the commitment to study the dialectical

[9]E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?" *Social History*, 3 (1978).

interconnectedness of social change through time, a commitment much less widely shared by the social sciences, as their names clearly signal. True to this commitment, historians are trained as specialists in a place and time, and not (as are social scientists) in social theory that is assumed and tested as universal. The same commitment helps explain the historian's propensity toward narrative forms of exposition, as against the more obviously analytical discourse of the social sciences: if, for the historian, everything ultimately affects and is affected by everything else, social change must be captured a step at a time, backing and filling as one goes. And finally, for the same reason (and again, unlike social scientists), historians address their work to the literate layperson, secure in the democratic faith that such people contribute to the making of history just as history in turn makes them.

Historians in developed fields and societies, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task of mastering the secondary literature on large chunks of time and space, and propelled into increasingly-confined areas of geographical, chronological, and thematic specialization by other canons of the discipline (such as the requisite research in primary sources as the *sine qua non* of professional validation), appear to have become increasingly "ghettoized."[10] They seem unable or unwilling to address big questions, especially those concerning important national and international dimensions of the restricted places and times they study.

This general problem is dramatically illustrated in the field of United States labour studies in the recently published and long-awaited book by David Montgomery, a gifted labour historian noted for brilliant studies of workers' struggles for control of the work process in the late 19th- and early 20th-century United States.[11] In *The Fall of the House of Labor*, he attempts, with limited success, to explain the decline of radicalism, the eclipse of socialism, and the collapse of labour organization generally in the United States by the 1920s.[12] Montgomery argues persuasively that one part of the explanation can be traced to the problems posed to labour organizations by massive immigration, and another part to the legacy of slavery and racism. (These are time-honoured themes in social history, a literature still within the purview of a specialist in labour history like Montgomery.) A third part of Montgomery's explanation has to do with labour-process changes associated with scientific management and the "American Plan." These are themes which Montgomery is fully at home with and develops well. But still another part of the explanation (perhaps even the most important part), surely, lies in large-scale structural, economic and political change: in the peculiar effects on labour politics of a unique, clientelistic, two-party political system; in the economic, social, psychological, and cultural implications for labour of the advent of US imperialism (a word mentioned only once in the book, in its Preface). These themes are either

[10]The term is Nell Painter's, used in discussion at the Comparative Labor Forum, Duke University, 5 November 1987.

[11]David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (Cambridge 1979).

[12](Cambridge 1987).

totally absent from, or developed and integrated poorly in, Montgomery's analysis. One comes away from this book enriched by aspects of the analysis which are close to Montgomery's specialized knowledge, yet unable to answer, or articulate Montgomery's answer to, the central *national* questions it poses.

It is instructive to contrast Montgomery's book with two recent efforts by United States social scientists to answer these same central national questions: David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich's *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in United States*; Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States.*[13] Both books incorporate the specialized social and labour themes developed by Montgomery into an interpretive framework that emphasizes the national economic and political constructs noted above (revealingly, however, without much emphasis on the imperialist dimension). Their work may not strike historians as very good history, but to my mind at least, they construct more persuasive, and certainly more comprehensive, answers to Montgomery's central questions. And in doing so, they demonstrate (ironically, given their disciplinary training) a willingness to do what historians are trained to do best: interpret the interconnectedness of change in total societies through time.

I believe that unless First World historians move rapidly to recapture their disciplinary credentials and rediscover their commitment to relate all the parts to the whole, the breach will increasingly be filled by historically-minded social scientists, and Charles Tilly's tongue-in-cheek joke characterizing historians as empirical "moles" and social scientists as high-flying comparative historical "hawks"[14] will inevitably come closer to reality. This dreary division of labour is already manifest in the Katznelson volume cited above. Its two senior social-scientist editors make the analytical comparisons while junior historians provide the empirical historical case-studies. Such an outcome may satisfy social scientists, but, for reasons I have developed elsewhere, it usually does not make for good history.[15]

That history of the kind I have in mind is still possible in the developed world is revealed in the most recent book by that jack-of-all trades labour historian, the septuagenarian Eric Hobsbawm. *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*[16] provides the most comprehensive and persuasive synthesis we have of the fate of the various Western labour movements and of their impact on national and world history during the age of imperialism. Hobsbawm is equally at home discussing economic change,

[13]The Gordon volume was published by Cambridge University Press in 1982 and the Katznelson volume by Princeton University Press in 1986.

[14]"Closing Remarks," Conference on "Comparative Approaches to Social History," Northwestern University, 17-19 April 1986.

[15]"In Defense of History: A Disciplinary Critique of Orlando Fals Borda's *Historia doble de la costa*," forthcoming, *Latin American Research Review*.

[16](New York 1987).

social mobilization, popular politics, international diplomacy, and intellectual and cultural trends. He weaves together social theory, an unrivalled command of empirical knowledge, and a mastery of the historiography of an almost-global place and a long, pivotal period of time. Reading this extraordinary book makes one wonder what the specialized and fragmented historiographies of the developed world will become once the likes of Eric Hobsbawm leave the profession. Who then will write history true to its internal disciplinary logic?

All this, it should be clear, is not an argument against specialized historical research. It is an argument about placing such research in context, an argument about a comparative disciplinary advantage that is rarely acknowledged and that favours historians working in the underdeveloped world over their colleagues working in the developed world. Because historians working in underdeveloped fields must read, per force, not only the relatively modest production of historical work in their specialty, but humanistic and social science contributions to their field as well, they are able to maintain a much clearer idea of the interconnected whole that is their subject. And to the extent they do so, they are truer to the strengths of their discipline, "better" historians. This is why the best labour history in the Latin American field, even that most self-consciously attuned to the virtues of the "new" social history, such as Peter Winn's book on Chile or Daniel James' on Argentina,[17] could never be accused of neglecting questions of power or of ignoring the more general subjects of national economic and political change.

For the same reasons, historians of underdeveloped societies are also better placed than their colleagues in developed fields to contemplate comparative studies. This is of vital disciplinary import because comparison is the research strategy best able to rescue the historian from the pitfalls of a logic that emphasizes the interconnectedness of social change. For the historian faced with the acute disciplinary problem of disentangling the "seamless web," of deciding which elements of historical causation among the many in the whole are decisive, comparison provides a way to separate and weigh historical variables without abandoning (as do social scientists) a commitment to the whole. Historians in developed fields find it difficult to master even the historical literature on their specialties, much less the relevant literature on a whole society. Small wonder that they often are among the most parochial of historians, and that for all their calls for comparative work, few are the efforts that actually come to fruition. Here too, as the Katznelson volume illustrates, historians in the developed world seem to be abandoning the field of comparative history to social scientists.

It is true that the structure of dependency also inhibits such comparative work in the underdeveloped world; in terms of access to financial support and to secondary material such work is ironically most easily accomplished from a base in the metropolitan countries. Yet it must be remembered that holistic historical analysis, built on the comparative method, was the hallmark of "dependency

[17] *Weavers of Revolution* (New York 1988); *Persistence and Integration* (Cambridge 1988).

analysis," the body of thought that constitutes Latin America's most important contribution to world social thought to date. As that work shows, comparison is a highly efficient, resource-saving mode of historical analysis. For all these reasons, students of Latin American labour history, like historians in underdeveloped fields in general, would do well to press their comparative advantage in comparative studies.

Building on the successful challenge posed by "dependency analysis" to the distorting effects of Eurocentric thought, recognizing the insidious nature of the cultural dependency fostered by uncritical application of traditional liberal and Marxist paradigms and of the methods of contemporary social history, and challenging the credentials of historians in the developed world unable to recognize the subversive disciplinary tendencies of their own allegedly sophisticated methods and unequal development, Latin American labour historians will have a clearer idea of the tasks ahead, and of the contributions they can make to historical studies generally.