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The Demise of Exceptionalism? Comparative Labour History in Light of Anglo-American Comparison

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The Demise of Exceptionalism? Comparative Labour History in Light of Anglo-American Comparison

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Neville Kirk, *Labour and Society in Britain and the U.S.A.*, 2 vols. *Capitalism, Custom and Protest, 1780-1850* and *Challenge and Accommodation, 1850-1939* (Aldershot: Scolar Press) 1994.

DESPITE THEORETICAL INADEQUACIES and an occasional tendency to disregard the wood for the trees, this two-volume comparative study of the British and American labour movements across a two-hundred year period is an historic achievement of which the author has every reason to feel proud. In recent years increasing dissatisfaction with purely domestic labour history, coupled with the growing sophistication of discrete cross cultural studies by scholars as varied as Friedrich Lenger (artisans on the continent and the U.S.)[1], Jeffrey Haydu (skilled metal workers in Britain and America)[2], and Bruno Ramirez (French-Canadian and Italian migrants in Québec)[3] have accelerated calls on both sides of the Atlantic for more comparative work, despite its acknowledged difficulties. In England, this new trend was confirmed in discussions held at the spring 1990 conference of the Society for the Study of Labour History at Birkbeck College, London.[4] In the USA,

[1]Friedrich Lenger, "Beyond Exceptionalism: Notes on the Artisanal Phase of the Labour Movement in France, England, Germany and the United States," *International Review of Social History*, 46 (1991), 1-23.
[2]Jeffrey Haydu, *Between Craft and Class: Skilled Workers and Factory Politics in the United States and Britain, 1890-1922* (Berkeley 1988).
[3]Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadians and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economies, 1860-1914* (Toronto 1991).
[4]*Labour History Review*, 55 (Winter 1990), 6-9.

John H.M. Laslett, "The Demise of Exceptionalism? Comparative Labour History in Light of Anglo-American Comparison," *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Fall 1995), 309-16.

it was shown in various papers on trans-Atlantic topics that were delivered to the November 1994 North American Labour History Conference held in Detroit.[5] Other examples could be cited.[6] But instead of just paying lipservice to a comparative overview, as many of us have done for some years now, Kirk has taken the bull (and some bull it is) by the horns and actually done it.

As Breuilly pointed out in his report on the 1990 London meeting, long-range societal comparisons of the kind Kirk attempts in the volumes under review carry both benefits and risks.[7] Among the benefits are the fact that the comparative historian is able to disregard national boundaries when treating social or industrial movements that are more properly kept together. Thus, in Volume 1, Kirk devotes a considerable amount of time to comparing and contrasting the rise of artisanal and custom-based protest movements in the US prior to 1848, which were very similar —although in subtle ways different — from those which arose in the United Kingdom in the same period. In Volume 2 he does a similar thing with the rise of 20th-century industrial unionism, comparing the emergence of mass unionism in coal, steel, and other industries in the AFL-CIO, on the one hand, with similar developments in the British Trades Union Congress on the other. (Had I written Kirk's second volume I would have spent more time contrasting the failure of 1890s new unionism — save for the United Mine Workers of America — in the US compared to its success in the UK. In the long run, this had a lot to do with the greater success of the British Labour Party).

The risks of writing comparative labour history, as Breuilly points out, are four fold. First, there is the danger of writing an essentialist form of history: one which assumes the presence of an ideal-type labour movement in some country or other (for Marxists, one that moves from a lower to a higher form of consciousness across time) which never existed in reality but against which the "success" or "failure" of other labour movements is judged. Second, there is the related problem of exceptionalism, one which has proved to be the special — but not the exclusive — preoccupation of writers about American labour since the time of Sombart, Perlman, and even Alexis de Tocqueville. Kirk, too, deals extensively with this matter. Third, there is what might be called the "comparing apples with oranges" syndrome, in turn linked to the problem of periodization, which is particularly acute in the kind of longitudinal study Kirk has attempted. This problem arises from changes, sudden or long-term, which occur in the industrial or national contexts in which labour movements grow. Thus comparing pre-1870 artisanal movements in France and Germany may be fine because of the statist but petty producerist nature

[5]See Program, twentieth meeting of the North American Labor History Conference, Detroit, November 1994.

[6]For example, see papers delivered to February 1995 Commonwealth Fund Conference on American exceptionalism, University College, London, February 1995.

[7]John Breuilly, "Comparative Labour History," *Labour History Review*, 55 (Winter 1990), 6-9.

of the two societies. But comparing the French with the German labour movement after 1870 becomes problematic, partly because Germany industrialized more rapidly than France, and partly because the federal German state was so different from that in France that it becomes doubtful whether one is really comparing the comparable. The ground upon which the original comparison is based has shifted.

Fourth and last, there is the danger of assuming that the language of class carries the same cultural set of meanings across national boundaries. Thus in the 19th century the concept of republicanism carried a very different set of meanings in France, Britain, and the US. How does Kirk's analysis hold up in the light of these and other pitfalls? To begin with, whatever the empirical or methodological weaknesses of his two volume history, he is to be congratulated upon the depth of his scholarship and on the truly wonderful job of synthesis he has carried out. Except for an occasional tendency to lump too many sets of explanatory variables together in one sentence, Neville Kirk writes very well. He leads his reader carefully through numerous complex explanatory thickets, and pauses frequently for insightful reflection. Labour's political and cultural context is always carefully established. Besides reading omnivorously, Kirk weaves a wide range of labour topics together, including gender, a matter which has until recently been overlooked in most comparative studies. All of this is impressive. Kirk also avoids the error (committed by several comparative authors in the recently published Volume 8 of the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*), [8] of describing two discrete national labour histories and then simply setting them side by side. At most points in his analysis, Kirk does not simply describe: he compares, he explains, he provides us with his own opinions, and he cites those of other scholars in a coherent and plausible way.

From a strictly narrative point of view, Kirk also succeeds triumphantly in the task which he sets himself at the outset. This is "to investigate the key formative influences upon, the main characteristics of, and important debates surrounding the development of organized labour and workers' movements in the two countries." (Vol. I, 1) In his first volume he traces the process of capitalist transformation whereby customary practices and methods of work and payment in both agriculture and the artisanal crafts were transformed, on both sides of the Atlantic, by the coming of the market and the arrival of machine production. He deals here with the period from 1780 to 1850. While noting the differentiating impact of slavery, Kirk draws quite strict (in my view too strict) parallels between the experience of women in textiles in Lancashire and New England, and between Chartism and the independent workingmen's parties which flourished briefly on America's east coast between 1829 and 1836. Arguing more similarity than difference, he also draws an analogy between the accommodationist views that characterized the labour movement of both Britain and America during the mid-Victorian era.

[8] See, for example, the essays by D.E. Schremmer and G.V. Rimlinger in *C.E.H.E.*, V. 8 (Cambridge 1989), 315-404, 549-606.

In Volume Two Kirk carries the story up to 1939. Drawing on the work of David Montgomery, Eddie Hunt, David Brody, James Hinton, Richard Oestreicher, and literally hundreds of other scholars, the author contrasts the rise of trade unionism in heavy industry in the two countries (comparing, for example, differences and similarities in the unionization of coal and cotton), the founding and subsequent development of the Trades Union Congress and the American Federation of Labor, and the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. After arguing — in a manner consistent with his emphasis on the ubiquity of the class experience — that pre World War I differences between the fortunes of the Socialist Party of America and the British Labour Party have been exaggerated, Kirk nevertheless concludes that the British Liberal Party, unlike the American Democrats, was insufficiently flexible to contain the massive influx of male voters that resulted from the English Reform Act of 1918. Hence the triumph of the Labour Party in Britain in the 1920s compared to the collapse of the left in the US during the same period. I agree with this political analysis. There is also much in both volumes about leisure, sports, and consumption patterns. Unlike the "side by side" collection of essays published in 1986 by Katznelson and Zolberg entitled *Working Class Formation*,[9] or the suggestive but inconclusive exchange over American exceptionalism presented by Sean Wilentz and others in a 1984 issue of *ILWCH*,[10] Neville Kirk has written a genuine work of comparative labour history.

In doing all of this, the author manages admirably to avoid tripping over the first two methodological obstacles noted by Breuilly. These were essentialism and exceptionalism. In his introduction, while noting the need to add gender as a category to *The Making of the English Working Class*, Kirk declares himself an unashamed Thompsonian. This involves adopting a materialist stance while at the same time embracing a fluid definition of class. It also means rejecting both an ideal-type analysis, and the post-structuralist criticisms of the Thompson school made by linguistic critics like Gareth Stedman Jones.[11] For example, while noting the greater intensity of the class experience in the UK compared to the US, Kirk also provides incontrovertible evidence of the proletarianizing consequences of capitalist development in the United States. These included mass strikes, opposition to the unfettered growth of free market relations in the pre Civil War period, and the more (rather than less) frequent incidence of death and violence in American labour disputes after it. Yet at the same time he rightly argues against "both an absolute or 'true' expression of class, and a necessary progression from one stage of class consciousness to another." (Vol. I, 9) To put the point politically,

[9]Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton 1986).

[10]See Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Working Class," and other essays in *International Labor and Working Class History*, 26 (Fall 1984).

[11]Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge 1983).

because the Labour Party ultimately triumphed in Britain but failed in the United States, it does not follow — as many exceptionalists have argued — that the UK working class was somehow "more advanced" than labour in the United States.

This is well said. Had Kirk cast his net wider to take in continental as well as Anglo-American labour movements, his views on this matter would have been even more strongly confirmed. In the early 20th century sometimes French workers appeared more militant than German, Polish, or Russian workers; sometimes the reverse was true. On this matter Kirk rightly confirms what Friedrich Lenger among others has pointed out. This is that "debates over the peculiarities of the English, over a German *Sonderweg*, or over American exceptionalism have often failed to enhance our understanding of the historical process."[12] But this is not the end of the story. Having delivered a powerful and empirically well founded broadside against the exceptionalist thesis in its classical form, Kirk's analytic creativeness seems suddenly to dry up. Instead of formulating an alternate hypothesis, he contents himself with rehearsing the applicability of the class dimension of British working-class history to the American labour experience. This is true but insufficient.

The difficulty lies partly, as other critics of the Thompson school have pointed out, in the problem of becoming. Even if we accept that no working class is ever fully "made" (or "unmade)," once we accept the "making" hypothesis, as Kirk does, we are bound by its logic to ask a series of further questions. We must go beyond rehearsing the transatlantic applicability of a class analysis to ask: "What kind of a working class did America have in 1939 compared to the one it had in 1780? How did it become the kind of working class it was, and how different was it from the British?" The situation is complicated by the presence in America of a number of other factors that were either altogether absent in the United Kingdom, or were far less important than they were in the US. These include race and ethnicity, the frontier experience, and more rapid rates of upward mobility. At various points in his analysis, as in his discussion of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Kirk does take some of these factors into account. But he treats them as significant asides; he does not try to integrate them into any alternative theoretical formulation.

It helps here, in my view, to go back to the fourth pitfall noted by Breuilly in his discussion of comparative labour history. This was the problem of assuming that the language of class carries the same set of meanings across national boundaries. It is not enough to say, as Kirk does, that the class experience was more intense in Britain than it was in America. This is a true statement and he proves it well in his discussion of Chartism, which lacked a true analogue in America; in his comparative analysis of 1890s new unionism; and in the pages he devotes to the rise of the British Labour Party. The real issue is *why* the class experience was more intense. At various points in his analysis of the 19th century Kirk makes reference to republicanism, producerism, and anti-monopolism as social movements which

[12]Lenger, "Beyond Exceptionalism," 22.

played a role in both countries up to approximately 1848, but which continued to dominate labour discourse in America — unlike Britain — almost until the end of the century. But he does not recognize the full significance of this difference. In my view, its significance lies in the fact that the language of protest contained in each of these concepts had a multi-class content that continued to make sense in the looser protest movements of the United States, but in the more united and proletarianized world of the British working class, it did not. By about 1890, the language of producerism and anti-monopolism was too broad a vessel to embody the discontents of the urban working class in the UK. A more Marxist use of the word class was needed, instead.

A brief look at the role of the Knights of Labor in England, as well as at Henry George's tours of Scotland and Ireland in the early 1880s, will help to clarify the point. For a brief time in 1887-1888 the Knights of Labor established a significant presence for itself among Scottish miners, Liverpool dockers, and Lancashire glassworkers, as well as among other groups of workers in the UK. Henry George's single tax philosophy was equally attractive. But the influence of both groups rapidly faded because the language of producerism in which they both spoke was seen as out of date. As *Justice*, the official organ of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation, put it in reviewing *Progress and Poverty*: "no one who thinks for a moment can believe that the landlord is the chief enemy of the laborer in our modern society." Hence it is strange that Henry George did not see that the worker was not merely destitute of land. He was also destitute of "tools, machinery, and raw materials wherewith to produce useful articles."[13]

A similar point can be made with respect to the question of race and ethnicity, both as regards the proper language which should be used to describe the differences between the American and the British working class, and as regards important developmental differences between them. By taking note of the distorting impact which the presence of large numbers of Irish workers had upon working-class politics in places like Glasgow and Lancashire, Kirk shows that he is aware of the greater significance of race and ethnicity in America. Indeed, at one point, he notes approvingly Richard Oestreicher's argument that "both class-based and ethnocultural concerns interacted in powerful ways upon the lives of American workers." (Vol. 2, 173) But as with producerism, he fails to see the full implications of this observation. This is partly because, despite quite a full discussion of the Civil War and later on of agrarian movements in the old west, Kirk's analysis in his second volume is confined largely to America's eastern and midwestern industrial cities. This enables him to take account of the role of British immigrants to America, as well to some extent of Germans and other northern Europeans.

[13]Elwood P. Lawrence, "Uneasy Alliance: The Reception of Henry George by British Socialists in the Eighties," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 11 (October 1951), 66.

At the same time, however, Kirk's focus on an Anglo-American comparison means that he fails to do full justice to the divisive role of race in southern textiles, mining, or longshore, and that he gives short shrift to the work of bodies like the Knights of Labor and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the old Confederacy. Inevitably, the author's focus is almost exclusively Eurocentric. This does not, of course, do damage to his analysis of the British side, but it does a serious disservice to the American. Nary a word is said, for example, about Mexicans or Asian-American workers. Of course, the number of these workers in the American labour force was, until quite recently, small compared to that of Anglo-Americans. But racist ideas, including the threat of the yellow peril, shaped US working class opinion across the board to a far greater extent than the numbers of Mexicans and Asians in the economy would suggest. Witness the example of the American Federation of Labor's anti-Chinese campaign in the 1880s for its later ambivalent attitude towards new European immigrants. Besides, the southern and western territories in which Mexicans and Asians — still more Blacks in the south — were employed covered more than two-thirds of the north American land mass. Surely no fully comparative history of the American working class, with whatever other working class it is compared, can afford to ignore these areas. Despite numerous references to the regional idea of "combined and uneven development" moreover, Kirk fails to acknowledge that whilst the British working class underwent the process of industrialization and proletarianization more or less once, in America this process was repeated several times, in different regions of the country and under different modes of production. This, in turn, produced an ethnically and regionally differentiated working class that was subject to combined and uneven forward (and backward) leaps in consciousness in ways which the British working class was not. This weakness in Kirk's analytic framework points up the significance of Breuilly's third argument regarding the difficulty of writing comparative labour history: the danger of comparing apples with oranges.

This brings us to the nub of the argument. Some of the analytic weaknesses in Neville Kirk's *Labour and Society in Britain and the U.S.A.* are of his own making. His book, which succeeds marvellously as narrative and as a summary of the present state of Anglo-American historiography, copes well with the problem of essentialism. But it is mealy-mouthed on exceptionalism; it lacks analytic rigor in dealing with the language of class; and it falls down badly when it comes to regional development, and to the complicated relationship between race, ethnicity, and class that characterized the history of the American working class to a far greater extent than it did the British. To a great extent, these weaknesses are a function not of any lack of erudition or flaws in judgement on the part of the author but of the single-country-to-single-country comparative framework he has chosen to adopt. Similar weaknesses show up in other, equally flawed, one-country-to-one country

comparisons.[14] One answer to the problem might be to widen the focus from an Anglo-American to a north Atlantic perspective, adding Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia, and Canada to the equation. Given the large number of immigrants who entered the US from these lands, such a broadening would enable us to take into account the contribution of German and Scandinavian artisans to the industrialization of the midwest, the impact of Canadian workers in New England, and the role of the Irish in a wide variety of contexts.

But where, in such a north Atlantic framework, would Slavic and Italian unskilled factory workers from the Mediterranean area fit in? What more could a north Atlantic perspective tell us about Mexicans, Asians, and Blacks, about regional issues, or about the complex relationship between mercantile, slave, and capitalist modes of production — all of which played a crucial role in American working class development, but none of which played such a role in other north Atlantic states? The answer is, very little.

A truly successful comparative history of the British working class, in my opinion, would have to shift its focus significantly beyond the one which Kirk has chosen. It would have to include not only Ireland and the whole of north America but also parts of Australia and South Africa, bits of eastern Europe, and various ex-British colonies in Africa and the Caribbean. How else to explain the role of east European Jews in the trade union movement of London and Leeds, the peculiar characteristics of the British labour aristocracy, or the migrant habits of Scottish and Welsh coalminers?

Similarly, in order to avoid the problem of comparing apples with oranges, a far bolder approach must be taken to the comparative history of the American working class. Because it contains elements from Mexico, the Pacific, and the Caribbean as well as the countries of the north Atlantic, a simple Atlantic framework will not do. Nor will it any longer suffice to build an analysis around the essentially European idea of exceptionalism — either pro or con — even if that concept were not fatally flawed. Instead, as far as North America (including Canada) is concerned, whilst concentrating primarily on the internal dynamics of union building and working-class life in the country of prime focus, we must find a way of integrating all of the various cultural strands that influence a working class from abroad, as well as taking account of work habits, stages of capitalist development, and the role of family labour at home. In my own work I am trying to develop a theoretical model entitled 'Overlapping Diasporas,' that seeks to do just that. To go into that model here, however, would be to go beyond my brief.

[14]See C. Eisenberg, "The Comparative View in Labour History: Old and New Interpretations of the English and German Labour Movements Before 1914," *International Review of Social History*, 34 (1989), 403-32.