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The American Way of Seeing Class

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David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The workplace, the state, and American labor activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987).

THIS BOOK has had the misfortune to appear at the very time when the concept of class is under sustained attack, historians of American labour are chastized for their atavistic focus on a social stratum many deny ever existed in any meaningful sense, and trade unionism in the United States of the Reagan-Bush years has sustained a decade of defeat. Montgomery's text, orchestrated around his insistence on the place and importance of class, has understandably played to mixed reviews within an academic milieu anything but impervious to the fashions and pressures of the moment. If some acknowledge the book's impressive reach across the breadth of working-class experience in the years of industrial-capitalist consolidation and concentration, others turn each page with the cynicism and skepticism cultivated in the sure-footed apostatic retreats of the 1980s.[1]

This timing is both fortuitous and unfortunate. On the one hand, it is useful that Montgomery's sensible and sensitive insistence on the critical place of class in the making of modern America appears at precisely the moment when many want to deny workers and class conflicts any presence in the life of the Republic, past or present. On the other, the complacent and arrogant revival of an interpretive politics of consensus and pluralism often sinks discussion of this book into a fruitless rejection of class as the illusory construct of a weak and intellectually

[1]For statements that denigrate the concept of class and, indeed, deny its place in American history, see Alan Brinkley, "The World of the Workers," *New Republic*, (8 February 1988), 35-8; Michael Kazin, "A People Not a Class: Rethinking the Political Language of the Modern US Labor Movement," in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, eds., *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (London 1988), 257-86. The latter essay is a methodological and political mess, collapsing the entire history of the American working class into the language of its conservative leadership, idealizing and essentializing a notion of class consciousness and, finding it wanting in the history of labour, concluding that class therefore does not exist, except in the imaginations and constructions of leftist historians. For a critique of Kazin, see my forthcoming book, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1990).

Bryan D. Palmer, "The American Way of Seeing Class," *Labour/Le Travail*, 24 (Fall 1989), 245-252.

bankrupt American Left, or alternatively, encourages assessment to collapse itself inward in an expression of scholastic parochialism.[2] This is unfortunate because so much is missed in such readings of Montgomery's account of the historical establishment of the US workers' movement.

Michael Kazin, whose recent pronouncements seem intent on establishing him as the Arthur Koestler of New Left labour historians, has proclaimed in a recent critique of *The Fall of the House of Labor* that he writes "primarily to criticize Montgomery, not to applaud him."[3] I will reverse this emphasis, and actually attempt to address what it is that Montgomery explores, something Kazin and many other reviewers rather easily bypass.

What is striking about this book is its synthetic sweep across the expanse of a working-class experience that encompasses but extends beyond regionalism and the fragmentations of race, gender, ethnicity, skill, and political factionalism. Montgomery's concern is not with this or that trade union, political tendency, or episodic confrontation. Instead, he draws upon the scholarship of the last two decades which has zeroed in on just these limited identities, and integrates it with older examinations of labour and the political economy of trade unions, as well as with his own eclectic probes into original sources that illuminate the obscure or recast the obvious. He uses the resulting extensive compilation of data to fashion an account of the formation of class. The reader is drawn into the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor, just as he or she is introduced to Debs and DeLeon and pointed to the momentous clashes at Homestead, Pullman, and Ludlow. But this history of institution, leadership, and event is never dichotomized from the everyday experiences of neighbourhood, workplace, and leisure. Montgomery's text is a persistent and resourceful illustration of the interconnected layers of working-class life which often either are ignored or separated (with considerable analytic violence) in traditional histories. If the workplace and its conflicts understandably loom large in the pages of his book, Montgomery usually takes pains to relate these realms to politicized and materialized histories of kinship, sexuality, and youth. This has not stopped the advocates of one-dimensional scholastic

[2]The American journal *Labor History* "honoured" Montgomery's book with a 45-page symposium composed of comment by six critics and a response by Montgomery. Two of the five commentators, Michael Kazin and Robert Zieger, question either the existence of class itself or the importance of class conflict, focusing on how American workers integrated comfortably into the spoils of a supposedly benevolent capitalism. Three more, Nell Painter, Sanford Jacoby and the team of Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, structure the entirety of their comment on their own specialized concerns: race (admittedly a vitally important realm), managerial innovation, and health. What is amazing in this symposium is the mundane nature of the commentary, and its surprising narrowing of the issues that arise out of a text like *The Fall of the House of Labor*. Moreover, given that Montgomery is intensely internationalist in his interpretations, commitments, and practical activity, it is somewhat surprising that the personnel of the symposium were overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of Americans, with little attempt to draw out the critical commentary of figures in France, Italy, Germany, or — gasp — Canada, countries where Montgomery's work is influential and the topic of considerable discussion. See "A Symposium on *The Fall of the House of Labor*," *Labor History*, 30 (1989), 93-137.

[3]Kazin, "The Limits of the Workplace," *Labor History*, "Symposium," 111.

sectionalism — particularly some historians of race and specific feminists — from routinely deploring Montgomery's failure to place their particular subject at the very centre of his history.[4] But the blunt reality is that no earlier treatment of working-class life in America has been as attentive to the fragmentations of class experience in the United States at the same time as it addresses the stresses and strains affecting all workers. Race and gender are present in abundance here, both in the empirical lines of inquiry and on the interpretive pages of analysis.

The overarching concern of Montgomery's treatment of labour is the way in which political economy, conceived as the structured pressures of state power, economic transformation, and workplace reorganization, homogenized late nineteenth-century workers. In this process, the great divides among the experiences of black and white, female and male, immigrant and native, labourer and craftsman appeared to be breaking down in the face of Taylorist principles of leveling, and the restructured productive environments of mass production. By 1916, in the words of the head of the US Commission on Industrial Relations, Frank Walsh, many entertained the notion that "workers of all lines of thought" should combine to create "a democracy, industrious and political, based on enduring justice." (464)

This was the dream; it was not to be. Workers remained, in spite of the pressures of homogenization, far from unified. At the very point that the internal divisions of working-class life seemed capable of being superceded and collectivism sustained, new agendas were being laid out by capital and new dangers for working-class cohesion forged in the corridors of state power, where the frenzied patriotism of the World War I years and the rabid anti-Bolshevism of the post-war reconstruction consolidated an ominously hostile programme with which labour lived throughout the 1920s. Open-shop drives, vigilante terrorism, and a plethora of laws drawing on nativist and "law and order" premises silenced the calls for "workers control" and "production for use" that echoed in many quarters a few years before. The house of labour, which had such various inhabitants in the late-nineteenth century, and which threatened to bring these often-contending room-mates together in powerful and concerted action by the 1910s, had fallen.

Montgomery's self-proclaimed "narrative" (3) is not followed easily, largely because it depicts anything but a simple progression of events. He orchestrates his "story" through specific reconstructions of particular themes, in which the complex experience of labour is conveyed by discussions of craftsmen and control, the ubiquitous yet shadowy presence of common labourers, and the birth of the specialized, piece-working operative. For the most part, the discrete chapters that detail these histories of particular labouring strata build on the late nineteenth-century years. The treatments of common labour and semi-skilled operatives are pathbreaking and innovative; the assessment of craftsmen is far less one-sided and laudatory than in Montgomery's previous writing, and places the chauvinism, racism, and sectionalism of the skilled alongside their combativity, solidarity, and

[4]See Nell Irvin Painter, "One or Two More Things About *The Fall of the House of Labor*," *Labor History*, "Symposium," 117-21.

organizational accomplishments. In the first three chapters of this book, encompassing some 170 pages, these sketches of craftsmen, labourers, and operatives give us as forceful a depiction of a segmented working class as we are likely to see for some time. Each page contains insight and illumination; each chapter provides proposals and interpretations that run against the grain of received wisdoms and newly-established orthodoxies. Those, for instance, who adhere to the increasingly fashionable fixation on the "social construction" of skill would receive a sobering education in the pitfalls of such a one-sided and often idealistic assessment if they read Montgomery seriously.[5]

As Montgomery moves into the second, twentieth-century half of his study, the chapters shift focus from discrete social layers of the working class to what he designates the "social engineering [that] had to be applied to the whole matrix of work, family, peer group, and neighborhood bonds that was the breeding ground of class consciousness." (170)[6] The Taylorist assault on the machine shop provides a case study of the ways in which the leading "scientific" edge of the efficiency movement whittled away the prerogatives of the skilled. A proliferation of "white shirts and superior intelligence" in the mass-production and other sectors redefined the very being of foremanship and, necessarily, of factory labour: crises of labour turnover and epidemics of strikes were "solved" on the backs of workforces "accommodated" by welfare schemes, personnel departments, and the influx of sociologists and psychologists paid for by an industrial capital that was both more sophisticated and powerful than its nineteenth-century predecessor.

Paralleling the ever-sharpening changes of life on the job was an orchestrated assault on trade unionism, with the open-shop drive of metal-trades employer David M. Parry winning the hearts and minds of the American business community. The ideological message of responsible and peaceful class co-existence, espoused by that favoured object of historians' scrutiny, the National Civic Federation, was outdistanced by the uncompromising Parryite message of the need to oppose "union tyranny." Backed by a nationally-organized network of citizen's bodies composed of local merchants, academics, fraternity boys, supervisory personnel, scabs, and workers hostile to organized labour, the Parryites drove unionism in the metal trades into the ground before World War I. One ironic consequence was that

[5]One of Montgomery's virtues is that he has actually read Marx closely enough to grasp that much of the one-sided current emphasis on "social construction" was actually anticipated by Marx who, however, always acknowledged the other side of material determination. See Montgomery, *Fall*, 44-6; Gerard Bekerman, *Marx and Engels: A Conceptual Concordance* (Oxford: 1983), 87-8. For statements on the social construction of skill that are quite one-sided, if useful in pointing to one part of what skill is and how it developed, see Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes Towards a Feminist Economics," *Feminist Review*, 6 (1980), 79-83; Jane Gaskell, "Conceptions of Skill and Work: Some Historical and Political Issues," in Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism, and Nationalism* (London 1986), 361-80.

[6]This quote alone is sufficiently unambiguous to call into question those critics like Kazin who declare baldly, without much careful attention to the actual positions Montgomery develops, that the flaw in *The Fall of the House of Labor* is its author's too easily assumed premise that "the workplace was the cockpit of social consciousness." See Kazin, "Limits of the Workplace," 111.

with unionism beaten back, and then mercilessly down, the Socialist Party gained labour adherents and the direct-action doctrine of the Industrial Workers of the World secured a significant foothold in machinists' and metal trades' circles. By World War I, this blend of repression and the rise of a "militant minority" within the American Federation of Labor set the stage for a momentous confrontation.

The final three chapters of *The Fall of the House of Labor* explore the unfolding of this battle and the consequences of the subsequent working-class defeat. A massive strike wave that commenced in 1916 revealed labour's strengths to such an extent that the carrot of state enticement, rather than the stick of Parryite opposition, was ultimately necessary to calm the class revolt of these years. "Labor Progressivism" was born as huge battles on the railways secured the eight-hour day, President Wilson conceded victory to the brotherhoods, and conservative members of the running trades aligned with Gompers, the United Mine Workers of America, Mother Jones, and as many as 250,000 Socialists in a massive slide into the ranks of the Democratic Party. By 1919-20, with the American working class in overt revolt, Wilsonian concession had hardened into class resolve not to see Washington's arms unduly twisted by trade unionism. "Labor Progressivism" predictably wilted in the face of state intransigence and programmatic indecision, an appropriate response from a reformist precursor of America's still-born, social democratic left. The Wilsonian wartime interlude gave way to the Harding years, when the rhetoric of the state moved decisively away from placating labour and instead committed itself to "maintained law and order and the protection of [such] lawful effort as will give assurance to everyone concerned." (408)

Capital's assurances were voiced the loudest and with the most authority. The strikes of 1922, when more than 1.6 million men and women engaged in work stoppages, were defensive defeats that ushered in a period of declining union membership and retreating working-class aspiration. Waged under the ominous cloud of rising unemployment, these class confrontations were the last gasp of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century workers' movement. Fought against the odds, they were a testimony to class resiliency and combativity; fought bitterly and brutally with small chance of anything remotely conceivable as victory barely in sight, they consolidated a cautious, bureaucratized leadership that guided what was left of trade unionism in the 1920s toward increasingly conservative directions. Montgomery sees the legacy of 1922 in stark terms: "Beleaguered unions clinging to minority sectors of their industries, surrounded by a hostile open-shop environment and governed by ruthless suppression of dissent within their own ranks." (410) Labour's house had not so much fallen; it had succumbed to the protracted socio-economic equivalent of a nuclear attack.

What is at stake in Montgomery's construction of the experience of American labour in these formative years is not really a thesis. Like his earlier monograph, *Beyond Equality*,[7] this book will not be known for its convincing arguments. In

[7]David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York 1967), reprinted with a bibliographic afterword (Urbana 1981).

both texts, it is the parts that are much greater than the whole and, in the case of *The Fall of the House of Labor*, it even is possible to ask just what the whole is. Montgomery's final chapters wander, no forceful presentation of an overarching end is made, and the reader looking for some decisive conclusion upon which to hang neatly events and episodes will be frustrated. As Howell Harris has pointed out at some length, Montgomery's organization of his material is often problematic, essential matters of definition (such as what *was* the house of labour) are assumed rather than laid out clearly, and the analytic reach of the study is sometimes overextended in prose that sweeps beyond ambiguity and contradiction into surprisingly confident assertion and exaggeration.[8] Inasmuch as this book will be read by many accustomed to caution graduate students to tone down their overstated theses, narrow their concerns, and spell out precisely what they mean by particular terms, *The Fall of the House of Labor* is bound to appear to some as inadequate, overstated, and confusingly unfocused.

But this is to miss the point. Montgomery orchestrates his understanding of class in America during 1865-1925 with subtle appreciation of a wide range of critical forces, and a sure grasp of the complexities and scope of labour activity. As a result he establishes the possibilities and constraints within which workers lived. That duality of horizons looked for and reached at and determinations limiting agency does not lend itself to a thesis-like statement of this is the way it was. But it gives us an unprecedented appreciation of a history long-suppressed in the academic confinements that emerge from demands for the kinds of systematic reductionism that sit well with examining committees and University-press assessment procedures. This is not to say that Montgomery, because he possesses a specific, broad conception of working-class activism, is allowed to be sloppy and unsystematic. It is to claim that the very nature of his project is not going to sit well with many academics who do not share, in Montgomery's words, "a common understanding of how history should be written and what it is about."[9] That this basic point is so often skirted in readings of historical texts that *assume* some universalistic commitment to a historical discourse that unfolds in the proper manner is central to the rigid and stifling conformities that contribute to the ossification of the entire discipline. This is a process which, in the Canadian and American cases, has gone a long way toward routinizing historical scholarship on the left, insuring that the promise of working-class, women's, and other histories is at best realized incompletely and unimaginatively. One need only stack up a pile of specialized, narrowly-conceived monographs in these areas authored by Montgomery's younger colleagues, and place them alongside *The Fall of the House of Labor* which so creatively draws upon them, to realize how different Montgomery's historical reconstructions are from the safe, award-winning, grant-securing studies that proliferate around us.

There are, of course, areas where Montgomery's book falls short not only of

[8]See Howell Harris, "The Master Craftsman," *Labor History*, 93-106.

[9]David Montgomery, "Class, Capitalism, and Contentment," *Labor History*, 125.

its own promise, but of what it realistically might have been possible to achieve. In spite of the book's explict concern with the state, for instance, this complex component of class relations and political economy is both theoretically underdeveloped and handled with an all-too-cavalier empirical eclecticism. It is possible to argue that in the years with which Montgomery is concerned, the American state was actually made, and that the place of class in this formation was not negligible. Since this is terrain virtually uncharted by labour histories of this period, a text such as Montgomery's might have been expected to draw out the reciprocal histories of class and state formation, locating the economic, political, and socio-cultural intersections of coercive and consensual forces. Nothing like this arises from the book: repression (certainly *not* to be understated) of labour is a virtual surrogate for the presence of the state, with a brief nod toward the benevolent face of hegemony in Montgomery's comments on labour progressivism. Historically, there is actually little attention paid to the nineteenth-century state, which is unfortunately obscured in Montgomery's focused discussions of particular layers of the working class, and of their immersions in discrete labour processes and work environments. World War I marches the state into this history, an entry that is both too late and too obvious.

If the state is an example of an area that needs more explicit recognition and development, there are also interpretive realms where differences with Montgomery's treatment can certainly be raised. He is too prompt to proclaim the existence of class consciousness and, alternatively, rather slow to question the strategic direction of his favoured stratum of activists, the militant minority of secondary leaders below the labour statesmen (from Gompers to Hillman). Where the new popular frontists write class out of the history of American opposition, and fawn over the broad progressive ranks of various 'new' social movements, Montgomery, the old popular frontist, places class squarely at the centre of resistance. If the former see struggle without class and even more emphatically without class consciousness, the latter locates class consciousness rather indiscriminatingly at the base of a host of rather dubious projects. This is not unrelated to Montgomery's underdeveloped treatment of the state, especially in the case of his insufficiently-critical treatment of labour politics and the Democratic Party during 1916-22.[10] Aside from the chimera of electoral victories that saw labour-endorsed candidates such as Al Smith and J.J. Blaine swept into office, what basis is there for claiming that the 1922 elections "paid off handsomely" for the working class, which had "never before ... asserted itself so decisively at the polls?" (435) And to associate all of this with class consciousness is surely to beg the question: can class consciousness mobilize and rationalize capitalism's 'left' face?

These and many other quibbles could be raised. They relate to what Montgomery does, how he does it, and, more fundamentally, to conceptions of history and politics. That arguments of this sort can be drawn out of an engagement with *The*

[10]For another way of looking at such matters see Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London 1986).

Fall of the House of Labor is an indication of the uniqueness of this book and its author. Virtually alone among labour historians in the United States, Montgomery tackles the history of the working class in ways that inevitably put large questions in front of the reader. Despite all the carping reviews, many of which treat this text as something of an obituary for the American way of seeing class, there is not likely to be a study like this for some time.