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From Such Great Heights

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> We are the queer / We are the whore / Ammunition / In the class war
>
> – NOFX, "The Decline"

The great theme of our current cultural moment seems, unavoidably, to be the lurking spectre of "decline." The long, sad, fasco-populist screeching of "Make America Great Again" assumes exactly this scenario: Once, America was the mighty eagle bestriding the world; today, it sulks in line to use the public pay toilet with, say, Turkey or Brazil. Once-jaunty Britain is in line, too, squawking insistently that is it is really very different from Europeans and inexplicably demanding that it owns all the stalls. Brooding France has joined the back of the line, muttering about Western civilization, fanaticism, and *laïcité*. Back in America, the top 1 per cent own everything, nobody's vote

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matters, the government spies on you all the time, and higher education has become a pyramid scheme. Even the cops are getting killed.

Of all intellectual types, historians are perhaps most receptive to – and most responsible for shaping – narratives of national or cultural decline. The legendary example is, of course, Edward Gibbon (as Will Rogers once joked, Rome declined because it had a Senate; how can America survive with a Senate *and* a House?). For those who worry that right-wing nationalism may be collapsing the Euro-American dream of global liberalism, perhaps Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* – written in the chastened wake of World War I, decried in its own time, and retrospectively seen as a harbinger of the fascist worldview – is the historical work of the moment. In truth, both Gibbons and Spengler were latecomers in the decline business; stories about the past have fixated on declension since at least the time when ancient Greeks juxtaposed their own shabby era with an earlier "age of gold" (poor Greeks – they had to settle for a world inhabited by Aristotle and Pericles). Even in the relatively brief history of the United States, the country has "risen" and "fallen" many times since its origin, depending on when you start and end the story and on what theme you hold aloft.

"Decline" is a powerful concept for historians because it provides many of the narrative and analytical elements necessary for meaningfully interpreting the past. Any account of "decline" opens up a clear, linear chronology: we start in the sunny light of moment X and descend to the abyss of moment Y. Decline demands causal explanations, which remain most historians' favourite form of argument. As Sophocles and Shakespeare knew, "decline" is propelled by psychologically rich characters and makes for compelling drama (and, however postmodern our analyses have become – which may be a "decline" in its own right – most historians still want to tell an engaging story). Perhaps there is even a residue of St. Augustine's eschatological spirit in our secular tales of "decline": Who hasn't wondered whether "making America great again" heralds the end of time, the moment of reckoning, the ultimate decline?

Labour historians have not been immune to this framing. On the contrary, much of the best writing on working-class history has taken "decline" as its organizing principle and chief problem to be explained (the only obvious alternative seems to be the "rise" narrative, which also has its champions). Indeed, scholars have outlined a rather depressing *series* of working-class "declines": during the "enclosure" movement, when semi-independent rural folk were twisted into either factory servitude, prison, or the workhouse; during the rise of industrialism in the early 19th century, when proud citizen-artisans faced deskilling and dependency; following the Haymarket bombing, when anarchism was squelched and the Knights of Labor collapsed; following World War I, when strikes were crushed and radical movements destroyed; and again following World War II, when the anticommunist witch hunts truncated labour's social ambitions.

Seen from 2017 the history of labour's decline seems to have a longer arc and more devastating impact, one that ripples into and actively shapes the present. This account might begin around the 1880s, when US workers allied with the liberal middle class to create a "Progressive" era of reform. Following the apparent collapse of the entire capitalist system during the 1930s, workers finally won major political and legal concessions from Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal state; the subsequent postwar affluence, combined with the muscular presence of unions in the "tripartite" (business-labour-government) postwar economy, produced the flowering of labour's "golden age." And then, sometime in 1973 (or 1974 or 1979), a host of forces – led by globalization, automation, urban decay, and Ronald Reagan, the four horsemen of the labour apocalypse – conspired to destroy this working-class idyll. Since the 1970s, union membership has virtually collapsed, wages have stagnated or declined, organized labour's political power has atrophied, and many once-thriving working-class neighbourhoods have slowly succumbed to a dispiriting number of social maladies. Jefferson Cowie has even suggested (rightly, I think) that "the working class" as a viable civic concept "died the death of a thousand cuts" in the 1970s.[1]

Nowhere have the pallbearers for working-class power been busier burying the bodies than in the industrial core of the urban Midwest. Bounded roughly by Buffalo and Pittsburgh in the northeast, Cincinnati and Indianapolis in the south, St. Louis in the southwest, and the St. Paul-to-Chicago corridor in the northwest, this region anchored America's industrial civilization. Economically, of course, these cities were centres of heavy industry, producing the coal, steel, copper, meat, timber, and automobiles that turned America into the world's largest economy – producing half of *all the stuff* in the world by 1950. Socially, the cities of the urban Midwest were deeply shaped by the same distinct strains of human migration: before World War I, by the Irish, German, Polish, Swedish, Slovakian, Croatian, and Italian workers of the world who settled across the region; then, from about 1917 through the 1950s, by two more major waves of migration from the semirural South – one Black and one white – chasing better lives in the industrial cities up north. (A fourth migratory stream, from Mexico, was more targeted, but shaped cities like Chicago and Detroit). By the time of labour's cresting in the 1950s, the steelworkers of Pittsburgh, autoworkers of Detroit, packers of Chicago, brewers of Milwaukee, and skilled tradesmen across the region had become symbolic of the triumph of democratized (read: unionized) capitalism.

Inevitably, then, the urban Midwest must figure prominently in historians' understanding of working-class decline. In 1940, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland,

1. Jefferson Cowie, quoted in Richard Greenwald, "Rethinking 'the Last Days of the Working Class,'" *In These Times*, 20 December 2010, http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/6786/1979_the_return_to_normal; see also Victor Tan Chen, "All Hollowed Out: The Lonely Poverty of America's White Working Class," *The Atlantic*, 16 January 2016, http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/white-working-class-poverty/424341/.

St. Louis, and Pittsburgh were all among the ten largest cities in the country (with Milwaukee, Buffalo, Minneapolis, and Indianapolis close behind); 40 years later, only Chicago and Detroit remained among the top ten, while cities like Houston, Dallas, San Diego, San Antonio, and Phoenix had bounded up the population charts. This demographic shift, as many scholars have shown, represented a cultural and political shift as well. As capital chased lower labour costs, first in the union-thin Sunbelt and then around the world, the political and economic power of unions rooted in the Midwest atrophied. The ascension of a free-market, anti-tax, small-government ethos in politics was made possible by the collapse of a social-democratic labour movement and its working-class constituency in places like Detroit and Cleveland. Of course, the crucial point, which always bears repeating, is that it was not just a particular political agenda or social organization that suffered with this transformation, but *people*: namely, workers of the urban Midwest who lost jobs, or social services, or communities, or reputable creditors, or reliable transportation, or families, or marriages, as the fabric of the New Deal unravelled.

Accounts of this tragic trajectory have suddenly become a near obsession in American culture, for good and obvious reasons. The anger, divisiveness, and naked animosities of contemporary political culture, combined with the lingering pain of a disastrous recession and the humiliating sense (shared by Bernie Bros as much as Trump Thumpers) that wealthy elites rig the system, have sharpened attention on questions of class with an intensity (if not comprehension) absent for decades. From the right, libertarian political scientist Charles Murray argued in *Coming Apart* that if lower-class whites went to church more, got married, and stayed off welfare, their economic fortunes would improve.[2] The moralism and predictability of his antigovernment prescriptions limit Murray's analysis, but his account of deep rot in the familial and social institutions of the working class strikes a nerve. And his conclusions cannot be dismissed as simple libertarian ideology. From the left, sociologist Andrew J. Cherlin discovered similar social discord in his study, *Labor's Love Lost*.[3] According to Cherlin, the convergence of several forces – from automation to the rise of a service economy, from feminism to the rise of companionate marriage – utterly disordered the gender identity of working-class men. Confused and frustrated, these men failed to form families the way their parents or grandparents had. Cherlin sombrely notes the parallels between the transformation of the economy and the unmaking of working-class family life over the last twenty years: just as "casualization, disengagement, [and]

2. Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (New York: Crown, 2012).

3. Andrew J. Cherlin, *Labor's Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014).

rootlessness" describes the job experiences of most working-class men, so, too, does it describe their romantic relationships and ties to a stable family life.[4]

Surveying his own family's working-class journey from the hollers of Kentucky to rustbelt Ohio, memoirist J. D. Vance recounted these mournful transformations first-hand. "By almost any measure," Vance observes in his widely noted book *Hillbilly Elegy*, "American working-class families experience a level of instability unseen elsewhere in the world."[5] He can speak from experience. Vance's mother was loving but unstable, frequently succumbing to substance abuse, erratic emotional desperation, and bouts of unemployment. His father was largely absent from Vance's life, while various stepfathers and boyfriends cycled through. For his formative years, Vance lived with his grandmother, a foul-mouthed, tough-as-nails Kentucky matron who doused his grandfather with gasoline and lit him on fire after he came home drunk once too often (his grandfather survived, and though his grandparents divorced, they remained intertwined in each other's lives and helped raise Vance). Still, during his childhood, Vance benefitted from his extended network of kin, the support of his grandparents, and the economic security that flowed from his grandfather's longtime employment during Ohio's golden era of manufacturing. Returning to the towns of his childhood in 2016, Vance perceives forces beyond mere economic change; he feels a deeper form of disintegration. As he puts it, there was "something almost spiritual about the cynicism of the community at large."[6] What Vance means is that in the working-class towns he knows, fatalism, anger, and even fecklessness are no longer the characteristics of certain individuals but the overriding ideology: they define a working-class way of life. Perhaps there is a measure of retrospective nostalgia in this perspective, a romanticizing of earlier and less complicated times. Some labour historians might object that Vance's adjectives have often been used by the powerful to describe the working classes, usually as a means of inscribing marginalization upon them. But Vance does not intend to be pejorative; he is simply attempting to honestly record what he sees and thinks. And the collective evidence is simply too overwhelming: something has clearly happened to the American working class.

So how did we get here? Robert Bussel is among a recent group of historians who reconsider not just the economic troubles of the urban Midwest but the humanity of the workers. Critically, and unlike so many of the journalists and social scientists who have received attention for their working-class funeral songs, Bussel reminds readers that midcentury workers were not distended individuals but self-directed actors who built powerful, communal institutions. Perhaps you've heard about these institutions: they were called unions.

4. Cherlin, *Labor's Love Lost*, 174.

5. J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 228.

6. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*, 188.

According to Bussel, the protagonists of his newest book – Harold Gibbons, a white one-time socialist who enjoyed a pioneering stint as leader of the influential Local 688 of the St. Louis Teamsters, and Ernest Calloway, his bookish African American union collaborator in the Gateway City – were animated by a shared desire to create what Bussel terms "total person unionism."[7] Gibbons and Calloway recognized that many ethnic, religious, political, or personal identities could dilute workers' commitment to their union – and, in turn, weaken their social and political voice. Workers' lives, this duo recognized, were not confined to the shop or the factory. Therefore, if the union could not engage workers in their neighbourhoods and communities – if, in other words, it could not engage unionists as "total persons" – then, Gibbons and Calloway believed, the working class could not produce a civic voice loud enough to compel attention from otherwise insular and self-serving power brokers. As Bussel writes, Gibbons and Calloway "sought to create a community bargaining table where empowered worker-citizens negotiated with St. Louis' economic and political elites to ensure an equitable distribution of social resources."[8] Bussel wants us to consider a labour movement in which unions were much more than simply economic instruments for attaining material ends: they were engines of civic engagement and social belonging.

Surprisingly (for many readers today and for many labour observers in the mid-20th century), this form of socially enlightened unionism emerged not among Walter Reuther's autoworkers, Mike Quill's transport workers, or Harry Bridges' longshoremen, but among St. Louis Teamsters. Bussel is well aware of the cognitive dissonance that many will experience trying to fit the Teamsters, a union famous for its dictatorial culture, tribal machismo, and links to organized crime, into the peg for democratic activism. The explanation has almost everything to do with personality: in 1945, St. Louis Local 688 – an independent union of Gateway City teamsters – hired Gibbons as its chief executive. Like many children of the working class, Gibbons, born to a Pennsylvania coal miner in 1910, had come up the hard way; his childhood recollections were "tinged with neither romance nor nostalgia."[9] He escaped to Chicago and began affiliating with leading reformers. Intelligent and ambitious, Gibbons won a scholarship to study at the University of Wisconsin's School for Workers in 1932, where his political and strategic vision began to crystallize. Gibbons rejected communism as authoritarian, but he warmed to socialism, which provided him a "moral framework" for what a just economy and democratic society might look like. At the same time, Gibbons became skeptical at unions' overreliance on the benevolence of the state in protecting workers' rights; he preferred an independent labour movement, primed to

7. Robert Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism: Harold Gibbons, Ernest Calloway, and Working-Class Citizenship* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

8. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 5.

9. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 13.

aggressively wage strikes when necessary to compel honest bargaining with employers. Returning to Chicago in the mid-1930s, Gibbons began ascending the ranks of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

But by the end of World War II, Gibbons was in conflict with his superiors and looking to establish his own vision of unionism. He found his chance in St. Louis, when a large and influential independent teamsters' union hired him to run it. Shortly thereafter, to the shock and disgust of many of his one-time allies in the CIO, Gibbons merged Local 688 with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and developed a partnership with infamous IBT president Jimmy Hoffa. Clearly, as Bussel acknowledges, his partnership with the Teamsters placed Gibbons in a "far more complicated and ambiguous moral universe" than he had known in the CIO.[10] How could a former socialist ally himself with a union known to form sweetheart deals with favoured employers and utilize mobster-backed violence to deter opponents? And what explains Gibbons' seemingly close relationship with Hoffa? Bussel thinks that Gibbons and Hoffa were able to bond over key commonalities; both men shared impoverished childhoods, disliked and distrusted authority figures, and desired to succeed with a working-class chip on their shoulder. But more than anything, Bussel believes, Gibbons made the move because he was interested in harnessing working-class power to positively shape society, and the IBT gave Gibbons a tremendous opportunity to build precisely the kind of strong, active, politically aggressive union that Gibbons had long envisioned.

In creating this expansive unionism, Gibbons enlisted Ernest Calloway, a brilliant and skilled organizer he had first met in Chicago in 1937. Though coming from different sides of America's brutal racial divide, the two men shared similar backgrounds. Like Gibbons, Calloway was the son of a coal miner, born in West Virginia one year before Gibbons was born in Pennsylvania. Calloway apparently endured a dissolute, Depression-ravaged youth, bumming around the country, before ultimately being transformed by a remarkable mystical experience on a Mexican mountaintop. Always cerebral, Calloway began the life of the labour intellectual after winning a scholarship to Brookwood Labor College in 1934 and later gained an international perspective while studying at Ruskin College in Oxford, England. By the 1930s, he had gone to work for the "Red Caps" union in Chicago ("red caps" were porters who assisted train passengers with baggage). Already, in the 1930s, Calloway was thinking about how to cultivate a broadly defined working-class citizenship, exploring in the Red Caps' newspaper his ideas about the "relationship between work, family, and community."[11] In 1951, Gibbons hired Calloway to assist him in realizing his vision for a civically powerful union. Calloway proved useful not only as a conceptual and strategic thinker, but as a publicist, a researcher, and a key bridge to St. Louis' African American community. In 1955, while working for

10. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 61.

11. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 35.

Gibbons, Calloway was elected president of the city's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter, and he subsequently enjoyed success in expanding the organization's membership and opening up some previously segregated workplaces.

The key to Gibbons' and Calloway's experiment in St. Louis – and, in many ways, the key to Bussel's book – was an innovate initiative the union launched in 1951 known as the community steward program. More than any other endeavour, the community stewards embodied Local 688's aspirations for working-class citizenship and "total person unionism" – or, the idea that the union needed to bridge the chasm that divided the workplace from the "other sixteen hours" of workers' lives.[12] Clearly, Gibbons and Calloway were deeply committed to the notion that workers were citizens who existed in – and must work to shape – a broader political and community context. As a Local 688 memo from the early 1950s put it, "The union member is also a citizen and his interests as a citizen coincide with the interests of his fellow citizens."[13] Similarly, the coursebook for would-be community stewards began with the declaration "Workers are citizens first."[14] Citizenship, in this sense, was much more than a legal term for where you were born or whether you could vote; the word connoted a sense of empowerment, responsibility, and respectability. More than anything, it asserted that working-class people *belonged* in, and were committed to, the social health of their communities. The power of this idea was apparent at the time, but perhaps has even greater importance today, when so many working-class people so keenly feel an erosion of this type of citizenship (and many minority workers, of course, are challenged by the even more basic definition that includes relatively easy access to a ballot box).

The community steward program operated as an interesting hybrid between collective bargaining and ward politics. The union solicited Local 688 members living in each of St. Louis' 28 wards to serve as stewards for their wards, much as unions typically recruited trusted workers to serve as shop stewards in the workplace. Just as shop stewards processed complaints and requests from fellow workers and pressed managers for some redress or solution, so community stewards were trained to gather the concerns of neighbours and ward residents and advocate on their behalf to elected officials at community forums. Where shop stewards might dangle the threat of a strike if workplace grievances were ignored, so community stewards might mobilize voters behind one candidate or another if the local ward politician proved obdurate. Not surprisingly, nobody at city hall was particularly enthusiastic about the emergence of an independent political movement that operated outside the existing control mechanisms of ward politics, especially at a moment when the city's technocratic mayor, Raymond Tucker, was already

12. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 87.

13. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 85.

14. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 88.

worried about the allegedly outsize influence of the city's unions and struggling to centralize power in the name of "urban development." Still, the community stewards became, if not a force in city politics, at least a voice that needed to be respected. At the urging of community stewards, for instance, the city created a metropolitan sewer district and later adopted a major rat-control ordinance that offered protections to mostly African American St. Louians living in properties the city would have preferred to turn over to private developers rather than provide with city services. The stewards helped shape union policy on juvenile delinquency, pushed for expanding recreational facilities across the city, and spearheaded the union's own recreation centre, "Teamster Teentown."[15] They urged the creation of a free four-year city college and monitored schools across the city.

The stewards even helped create a coalition that, in 1957, rebuffed a powerful effort by development-oriented elites to rewrite the city charter. The proposed charter aimed to cut the number of city aldermen in half while increasing the number of aldermen elected on an at-large basis and granting the mayor more executive power. The idea was to dilute ward power and allow city hall to fast-track development projects and attract investments. However, the union, the NAACP, and related groups perceived the proposed charter as an exercise of class and racial hegemony, one that would exclude affected communities from the discussion and weaken the community stewards' ability to demand responsive governance. It is a testament to the vitality of the Teamsters' organizing efforts that they won what Bussel refers to as an "epic debate over which social groups would shape post–World War II St. Louis' policies regarding urban vitalization."[16]

Bussel's tone is optimistic throughout; indeed, he specifically hopes to modify the declension narrative. Bussel points to Local 688's steadfast commitment to continued organizing, striking, and politicking in the 1950s – an era, shaped as it was by both the aftermath of Taft-Hartley and the flourishing of the anticommunist witch hunts, that is more usually seen as a moment of retreat or retrenchment for labour – as a proof that unions could remain strong, even visionary, civic players in the postwar era. Likewise, he points to both Gibbons' and Calloway's commitment to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and their deep interest in developing equitable housing projects as signalling the long-term social dynamism of Local 688. Bussel does a remarkable job researching and reporting on these men and their union, and his language is likely meant to inspire readers with the promise of old ideas that might have fresh relevance for the challenges of today. I hope that is the case. Still, it is hard to escape the conclusion that "decline" remains the chief historical pattern of the St. Louis working class and the city more generally. Colin Gordon's *Mapping Decline*, for instance, provides a thoroughly devastating picture of a

15. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 91.

16. Bussel, *Fighting for Total Person Unionism*, 102.

city once predicted to be the greatest inland metropolis in North America, but that, by the 1980s, had lost fully half of its pre–World War II population peak and was locked in a cruel cycle of poverty and segregation.[17] Sadly, the bigger question is not how Local 688 accomplished so much, but why its vision and activism failed in the face of deeper structural changes.

Like St. Louis, Milwaukee enjoyed a swelling population and healthy union presence at midcentury. In fact, as Tula A. Connell points out in her new book, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, Milwaukee had the fifth-highest income of the 25 largest US cities in 1950.[18] This prosperity was deeply tied to the dense unionization of the manufacturing economy; fully 42 per cent of Milwaukee County's workers were employed by manufacturers in 1957.[19] Yet, these rosy midcentury numbers "masked . . . early stages of decline" in the health of the labour movement and of the city more generally.[20] By the 1960s, Milwaukee faced a series of problems familiar to those in St. Louis, Detroit, Cleveland, and similar cities: a stalling economy, a housing crisis fuelled by racist lending and development practices, declining population, and a civil war with suburbs that enjoyed city services but refused to pay taxes or incorporate with the metropolis. Beyond these internal tensions, we might point to macroeconomic trends to explain Milwaukee's travails: the internationalization of American manufacturing, management's pursuit of non-union labour, and so on.

But, according to Connell, Milwaukee's decline is primarily attributable to – and inseparable from – the decline of a particular vision of politics inculcated by New Deal–style liberalism. In Connell's view, Rooseveltian liberalism "saw government as the foundation for pursuing the collective good."[21] This philosophy produced a widely shared affluence and upwardly mobile working class heading into the 1940s. But, as the embers of the New Deal cooled following World War II, an alternate political vision rooted in individualism, free enterprise, and limited government (what Connell calls "conservatism," though it is actually a potent recipe for dramatic social instability, as Milwaukee itself demonstrates) asserted itself. Indeed, Connell goes further than simply arguing that the New Deal eroded naturally as the social context of the country shifted after World War II; as the title of her book suggests, the New Deal instead succumbed to a "counterrevolution" launched by ideologically self-conscious conservative activists who never accepted the legitimacy of modern liberalism. Readers are meant to conclude that the woeful present-day state of

17. Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

18. Tula A. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution: Challenging Liberalism in 1950s Milwaukee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 19.

19. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 144.

20. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 137.

21. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 14.

working-class Milwaukee is the consequence of this political reorientation, though one might argue that this conclusion underestimates the importance of international, structural changes in the economy itself.

Connell makes two interesting and provocative choices in framing her analysis: location and chronology. Milwaukee, after all, was legendary for its receptiveness to the socialism of Victor Berger, its support for Progressive iconoclast Robert LaFollette, and its implementation of many pioneering labour reforms. We don't necessarily expect to find the "suburban warriors" of Orange County or the antigovernment tax-cutters of Dallas mingling with unionized brewery workers. That the city's mayor, Frank Zeidler, openly sympathized with socialism while maintaining high levels of popularity throughout the 1950s only renders the vitality of Milwaukee's midcentury conservatism more jarring. Yet, as Connell concludes, Milwaukee "illustrates both the limits of postwar liberalism and the resurgence of conservatism."[22] Here is William Grede, a Milwaukee industrialist, writing in 1955 to his fellow businessmen: "Our job is to start a revolution [against the New Deal] . . . and hope that in the next fifty years we can swing it back."[23] Likewise, Connell sensitively documents the activism of William Pieplow, a broad-minded civic leader and local newspaper columnist who became resolutely opposed to any expansion of badly needed public housing. Pieplow's characterization of public housing as "nothing but Communism" and his concomitant invocation of "taxpayers' rights" to oppose new building projects neatly anticipated two of the major rhetorical themes of Reagan-era conservatism.[24] Connell forces readers to confront an important question: If New Deal liberalism was only partially and thinly accepted even in union-heavy, socialist-leaning Milwaukee, how deeply could it have planted roots *anywhere* in the United States? Connell thus suggests that because conservatism retained a deep allure and a strong hold on levers of political and cultural power even in the golden age of the New Deal, liberalism cannot be said to have failed in America; in fact, it has never received a full trial.

Another important point for Connell concerns the timing of this "counterrevolution." Many historians are now comfortable with Rick Perlstein's claim in *Before the Storm* that Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign marked the beginning of modern conservatism; many more scholars have shown that the spread of a suburbanized, anti-tax, and evangelical ethos had transformed conservatism into a mass movement by the 1970s.[25] But Connell, like Kim Phillips-Fein, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, and Colleen Doody, locates the

22. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 2.

23. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 1.

24. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 77.

25. Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001).

conservative resurgence much earlier, seeing it primarily as a response to the pro-labour and quasi-welfare-state politics of the 1930s.[26] Connell is skeptical of the "backlash" thesis, which proposed that suburban conservatism was primarily a reaction against the gains of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Instead, she argues convincingly that Milwaukee's suburbs – particularly the industrial stronghold of Wauwatosa – were deeply suspicious of the metropolis and its progressive mayor since the late 1940s and consistently blocked any effort to create a more metropolitan governance structure that could have expanded city services. To do so, the suburbanites claimed, would have raised taxes, curbed self-government, and imperiled free enterprise – a familiar litany of conservative concerns.

In exploring the deterioration of New Deal liberalism, Connell employs a fruitfully broad definition of "politics." While the formal, mayoral politics of Zeidler remains Connell's narrative anchor, she also considers a more capacious view that interrogates the ways in which political discourses come to shape the public's consciousness and, thus, policy possibilities. In particular, Connell points to an increasingly commercialized media environment to explain why voters' support for Zeidler did not mature into a firmly rooted progressive political culture. Though midcentury Milwaukee was well known for its socialist, immigrant, and labour newspapers, Connell argues that the "scope of labor media . . . masks the extent to which its visibility began to be contested by well-funded and nationally distributed conservative print and broadcast media."[27] Not surprisingly, conservative media found an especially receptive home in the suburbs. But even the mainstream Milwaukee newspapers presented a narrow range of debate on public issues, and the *Milwaukee Journal* – generally regarded as the most professional and nonpartisan of the city's two major papers – later admitted that it had weighted its coverage against Zeidler in the 1948 mayoral election (consistently referring to Zeidler as "socialist," for instance, while referring to his opponent as "nonpartisan").

Connell is especially intrigued by the contentious debate in Milwaukee over the role of public television. When the Federal Communications Commission announced that it was inviting permits for additional broadcasting channels in 1951, it encouraged the city of Milwaukee to apply for a public channel that could serve as a home for educational, informational, and noncommercial programming. Mayor Zeidler was a strong supporter of the idea, and the city's vocational and adult schools hoped to host the channel. However, the city's commercial stations opposed the move, arguing that they would volunteer

26. See Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945–1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Colleen Doody, *Detroit's Cold War: The Origins of Postwar Conservatism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

27. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 47.

airtime for educational programming – and, of course, they simply did not want the whiff of government competition or interference. Broadcasters were joined in their opposition to public TV by Milwaukee's oldest and largest anti-tax organization, the Affiliated Taxpayers' Committee. According to Connell, much more was at stake than simply whether or not Milwaukee got new TV channels: it was ultimately an "ideological battle," with public TV's opponents "rooted in a deeper, underlying antagonism to government expansion."[28] Ultimately, in 1957, the advocates of public television in Milwaukee secured a broadcasting license. Still, from Connell's perspective, the vigilance of anti-tax, free-enterprise, small-government advocates in stonewalling the channel for five years (and of groups like the National Manufacturers' Association in counterattacking with a deluge of "informational," pro-business media) speaks to the self-consciousness of conservative activists. They wanted more than to win a disagreement over policy; they were interested in winning a war of ideas. From Connell's perspective, conservatives' considerable long-run success in this ideological struggle with liberal inheritors of the New Deal (nowhere more apparent than contemporary Wisconsin, with its union-busting governor and recent electoral support for Donald Trump) ultimately weakened the political conditions within which a robust working class could thrive.

Perhaps it is time to pause and take a breath. History, after all, should point us toward options beyond gnashing teeth and rending garments: it should provide a sense of context, complexity, and possibilities. This tempered perspective is especially necessary for a consideration of Andrew E. Kersten and Clarence Lang's excellent new anthology on the legacy of labour and civil rights pioneer A. Philip Randolph. As the editors of *Reframing Randolph* point out, "the current moment is a strong rebuke to the politics Randolph espoused, and signals an erasure of the reforms to which he devoted his life for nearly fifty years."[29] Yet, they also suggest that "we are witnessing the possibility of a reenergized labor-centered popular politics, [and] we have much to gain from a focus on the critical role that working-class people of color have played in advancing the meanings of citizenship and democracy."[30] Put another way, the notion of working-class decline is real enough, but it must be confronted by engaging with the full possibilities and complicated legacies of the past. In particular, as Kersten and Lang suggest, it is folly to argue that a revival of the American working class would be synonymous with maintaining the status of white men, as so many post-Trump analyses presume. Rather, as the example of Randolph demonstrates, future successes will depend on working people

28. Connell, *Conservative Counterrevolution*, 64.

29. Andrew E. Kersten & Clarence Lang, "A Reintroduction to Asa Philip Randolph,"in Andrew E. Kersten & Clarence Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 19.

30. Kersten & Lang, "A Reintroduction," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph*, 19–20.

embracing the multiethnic and sexually diverse nature of their own social reality and not succumbing to the zero-sum philosophy of ethno-nationalism.

The contributors to *Reframing Randolph* reintroduce their subject with clarity and style. In particular, the book develops three themes that offer new insight into the history of civil and labour rights and, perhaps more importantly, point readers toward ways of thinking through the present challenges to working-class politics. First, the volume provides a rich context for interpreting the various intellectual and cultural strains that informed Randolph's worldview. It is well known that Randolph was a socialist, but the book's contributors usefully emphasize just how unexpected and, in a way, daring was Randolph's embrace of the Socialist Party (SP). Black socialists, as Eric Arnesen notes, were rare in the early 20th century. Randolph's own personal background – as the son of a preacher from the southern Black church – might also be thought to have squelched his more adventurous radical impulses. But no, says Cynthia Taylor in her chapter. Indeed, according to Taylor, Randolph "consistently drew from the empowering capacities of a Christian faith" – marked by the legacies of the social gospel – "which provided him and his followers the ability to challenge the overwhelming social restrictions of a Jim Crow system."[31]

The SP itself seemed indifferent to the plight of African Americans and the reign of terrorist racial violence that haunted Black life in the South and elsewhere. Even after Randolph's arrival in New York at the high point of the "New Negro" movement, there were other, more race-conscious movements that he might have joined. But Marcus Garvey's call for Black nationalism and pan-Africanism held no appeal for Randolph; rather, he was drawn to the firebrand Black socialist Hubert Harrison and promptly began publishing his own radical newspaper. According to Arnesen, Randolph was not a profoundly original thinker; his interpretation of socialism "rested on his conventional . . . view of how race and racism operated under capitalism" – which is to say, racism was seen as a delusional epiphenomenon that would disappear along with the exploitations of capitalism.[32] Randolph was a better organizer and agitator than he was a theorist. Yet, read together, Taylor's and Arnesen's essays remind us that ideas are not static and monochromatic; in individual creative minds, ideas might blend, blur, and swirl into new visions of social activism. If Randolph could find a way to incorporate white-dominated ideologies like Christianity and socialism into a recipe for multiracial democracy, might leaders of the white working class find vital and exciting ideas in Black Lives Matter?

31. Cynthia Taylor, "Keeping His Faith: A. Philip Randolph's Working-Class Religion," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph*, 79.

32. Eric Arnesen, "A. Philip Randolph: Emerging Socialist Radical," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph*, 62.

All students of social movements know that effective coalitions are essential to accomplishing reforms – yet maintaining them can be hard. Perhaps no moment in Randolph's career offered him riper chances for coalition building than the late 1930s. This was a moment, after all, that seemed finally to witness the season of working-class awakening. Having attained landmark legal rights in 1935, and having won a string of legendary strikes in heavy industry between 1935 and 1937, the labour movement – led by the insurgent, newly formed CIO – was at high tide. Meanwhile, the "popular front" strategy of the Communist Party promoted cooperation with all liberal groups seeking to reform capitalism or confront racism. As a well-known socialist and the face of the largest African American labour organization in the country, Randolph would have been an essential player in any coalition-building effort. Therefore, as Erik Gellman notes in his chapter, Randolph's leadership would be an important factor in shaping the National Negro Congress (NNC), formed in 1935 (with extensive Communist backing) to push a broad antiracist and pro-labour agenda. And indeed, Randolph did, for a few short years in the late 1930s, become the NNC's figurehead. But by 1940, Randolph had abandoned the NNC; as Gellman puts it, Randolph "tragically helped develop a new vanguard coalition of the black freedom movement that by the dawn of the next decade he was unwilling or even unfit to lead."[33]

The traditional explanation for Randolph's departure from the NNC concerns his long-running dispute with Communists, which became almost impossible to reconcile following the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939. But Gellman also notes that Randolph became increasingly uncomfortable with the outsized influence of the CIO within the NNC, as Randolph's own union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), remained awkwardly within the otherwise Jim Crowed unions of the American Federation of Labor. Moreover, Randolph was accustomed to a top-down leadership style, which was itself a problem. Gellman presents an ironic picture of Randolph: once a firebrand "New Negro" of the 1920s who had found success and influence as the undisputed chief of the BSCP, Randolph struggled to pivot in the face of a genuine grassroots insurgency of Black workers within the pluralistic industrial unions of the CIO.

But, finally, *Reframing Randolph* reminds readers of Randolph's ultimate talent for building movements and organizations. Of all his activism, Randolph is today perhaps best known (or should be best known) as the originator of the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Originally created in the early 1940s, MOWM sought to mobilize a massive demonstration of Black workers to demand that the federal government ensure equal job opportunities within the rapidly swelling war industries. The gambit worked, and the subsequently created Fair Employment Practices Commission became the opening wedge

33. Erik S. Gellman, "'The Spirit and Strategy of the United Front': Randolph and the National Negro Congress, 1936–1940," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph*, 132.

for civil rights on the job (two decades later, Randolph's idea would be energized with a new generation of Black activists, and Martin Luther King would attain immortality delivering his "I Have a Dream" speech at the MOWM rally in 1963). In his chapter, David Lucander effectively shows that Randolph's MOWM was not reducible to the Great Man alone; local leaders, especially women in cities like St. Louis and New York, used local MOWM chapters to pressure their local communities, producing modest but tangible results.[34]

To be sure, while all of the contributors are admirers of Randolph, this volume is no simple hagiography. In particular, Robert Hawkins, William Jones, and Melinda Chateauvert critically examine Randolph's attachment to traditional definitions of masculinity. According to Hawkins, Randolph promoted the BSCP by contrasting the respectable masculinity of porters with the degraded masculinity of Black singers and musicians. Rather than see working-class musicians as potential allies, Randolph invoked them as straw men in order to court middle-class support.[35] Jones points out that during the founding convention of Randolph's last great project – an antiracist labour organization called the Negro American Labor Council – Black women activists had to disrupt the proceedings to have their issues addressed and their leadership acknowledged.[36] Chateauvert is critical of Randolph's definition of "manhood rights," by which he presumed that raising the living standard of Black men would inevitably improve the lives of Black women. In fact, as Chateauvert points out, the opposite was consistently true.[37] Still, however blinkered he was by an attachment to respectable masculinity, Randolph admired and respected women activists, and he often appointed them to important organizational positions.

These chapters collectively raise the troubled legacy of gender in warping or stunting working-class politics. This point is especially necessary and sensitive today. More than a few recent volumes on the current "working-class decline" might be more accurately characterized as studies of "masculinity in crisis." Cherlin, for instance, explicitly argues that the collapse of working-class family life has been harder for men than for women because of the historically patriarchal nature of the breadwinner mentality. But the breadwinner economy is gone, and while it is imperative to create new outlets for meaningful work, few should mourn the loss of working-class patriarchy. Rather,

34. David Lucander, "Beyond A. Philip Randolph: Grassroots Protest and the March on Washington Movement," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph*, 195–222.

35. Robert Hawkins, "Brotherhood Men and Singing Slackers: A. Philip Randolph's Rhetoric of Music and Manhood," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph,* 101–128.

36. William P. Jones, "The 'Void at the Center of the Story': The Negro American Labor Council and the Long Civil Rights Movement," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph*, 223–244.

37. Melinda Chateauvert, "Organizing Gender: A. Philip Randolph and Women Activists," in Kersten & Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph*, 163–194.

any future labour movement must not only deflect ethno-nationalism and promote pluralism; it must also offer a new vision of manhood and womanhood that promotes dignity, worth, and self-respect without reproducing old hierarchies and inequalities.

Finally, we also need to consider whether the narratives of decline that so decisively shape our understanding of the contemporary working class threaten to erode our appreciation for the accomplishments of past leaders and movements. If so, we run the risk of replacing mature wisdom and hard-earned perspective with an ahistorical sense of weightlessness, drift, and despair. While these works cannot be read apart from the dispiriting context of the current moment, all point to significant and notable achievements of the recent past. When effectively organized and led, St. Louis' Teamsters were actually able to shape public policy. Milwaukee's workers were able to elect a popular pro-labour mayor. And, most remarkably, the most marginalized workers in American history – African American men and women – were able to build alliances between churches, unions, and civic organizations to transform law and culture. Struggle, if energized and focused, can lead upward.