

On Labour Repression

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

On Labour Repression

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Rosemary Feurer and Chad Pearson, eds., *Against Labor: How U.S. Employers Organized to Defeat Union Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017)

Andrew Kolin, *Political Economy of Labor Repression in the United States* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017)

IN A RECENT NETFLIX SPECIAL, the comic Dave Chappelle attempts to push his audience to what in his view is a more radical analysis of the subordination of women, workers, and people of colour. The metaphor he uses for contemporary society is that of the relationship between a pimp and his star prostitute. Prostitutes, Chappelle asserts, can take only so much exploitation: after a certain number of tricks, they refuse to turn any more. At this very moment, the pimp devises a plan. He promises to accept his employee's resignation provided she turns just one more trick. She agrees, but unbeknownst to her, the pimp sends in his muscle to murder the john and make it look like she did it. The prostitute is understandably beside herself in panic, whereupon the pimp swoops in on his white horse to save the day. He says he will bring someone in to take care of the body for a price, and in her gratitude and terror, the prostitute agrees to stay on just a little while longer to pay off her debt.

Now, in this story, there are three actors: the pimp in the leading role, the prostitute in the supporting role, and the hired thugs in a brief but brutal cameo. The main action is between the boss and the sex worker, and it is the former who holds all the cards. Those with the means of violence at their disposal – presumably the state or private security – do the boss's bidding. Chappelle means to tell us that if this is what is really going on, then we must do more than hold placards and charge powerful men with sexual harassment, for the system remains fundamentally unchanged, and it is that system that must be overturned if we want to be free.

Chappelle was denounced for his so-called “pimp story,” and while I, too, am critical of his account for many reasons, I think we must take his analysis seriously. Labour scholars know Chappelle’s analysis by another name: orthodox Marxism. Orthodox Marxism takes class relations as the motor of history. It frames the state as merely “the executive committee of the bourgeoisie,” and it interprets Marx to say that workers, by virtue of their deepening exploitation under capitalism, will see through their pimp-employer’s attempt to mystify himself as their protector and will at last overthrow him.

Generations of labour scholars have emerged since the Second International, when such ideas were the state of the art, to problematize this interpretation of Marx and of capitalism, yet we are forced to reckon with it time and again at historical conjunctures when capital is in the ascendant. Doing so is important, as it helps to sharpen our analysis and revisit what we think we know about our movement.

In this sense, I very much endorse the impulse of Andrew Kolin, Rosemary Feurer, and Chad Pearson to focus our attention on the boss. Kolin’s book, *Political Economy of Labor Repression in the United States*, argues that anti-labour violence occurs when capital is either in crisis or in transition to a new mode of accumulation. At these moments, employers use violence to exclude labour from decision-making in the state and economy. Feurer and Pearson’s edited volume, *Against Labor*, brings together scholars who take different cuts on the same question: “How have United States employers organized in order to maintain managerial control and stave off unionization?”¹

The shared emphasis on employers redirects our analytical gaze upward, instead of scrutinizing the ways in which organized labour has at turns screwed up or emerged victorious against all odds. Such work reminds us of what happens when employers are left unchecked by the state or civil society. Violence, and repression more generally, has pride of place in the employer’s toolkit, and it is good practice to recall that we are engaged in a long-standing struggle against a common foe, who, given their druthers, would crush us with their might.

I also like the different ways in which both books address the future of the American labour movement. In arguing that repression is fundamentally about shutting workers out of institutional decision-making, Kolin reminds us that the labour movement must be about democracy in the workplace and in the wider economy. Likewise, I enjoyed Peter Rachleff’s rousing conclusion to the Feurer and Pearson volume.² In it, Rachleff urges the movement to anchor itself in “a rights discourse” that resonates with a wide audience

1. Rosemary Feurer & Chad Pearson, “Introduction: Against Labor,” in Rosemary Feurer & Chad Pearson, eds., *Against Labor: How U.S. Employers Organized to Defeat Union Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 1.

2. Peter Rachleff, “Capital and Labor in the 21st Century: The End of History,” in Feurer & Pearson, *Against Labor*, 236–248.

of working- and middle-class women and men who are struggling not only to understand the causes of the Great Recession, but also to root out deeper inequalities along racial, gender, national, and class lines – “inequities which have shaped the American experience since its origins.”³

In addition to the shared dimensions of these works, I appreciate the attention to organizational learning and race in Feurer and Pearson. Like workers, employers learn to refine their strategies based on successive struggles⁴ This is especially salient in Feurer’s chapter on how the antiunion Albert A. Ahner Detective Agency made the transition from the “blackjack” thuggery and espionage of the early twentieth century to a more sophisticated labour relations “briefcase”-style union busting as early as the New Deal.⁵ Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger’s chapter is an illuminating piece on the ways in which employers used systematic techniques to divide workers by race before the advent of scientific management or “Taylorism”; in fact, the authors demonstrate that Frederick Taylor himself was heavily influenced by racial management.⁶

As with many things in life, however, the strength of both books is simultaneously a shortcoming. In emphasizing the importance of antilabour repression, they unnecessarily give short shrift to the relative autonomy of the state and political parties. The latter resemble the hired hands of the pimp in Chappelle’s analysis, though this is truer of Kolin’s book than of Feurer and Pearson’s volume, which pays some attention to the institutional constraints of antilabour activism (see Robert H. Woodrum’s chapter on the protection of Black workers under federal labour boards during World War I and their vulnerability to the Klan after the war).⁷

Nevertheless, both books are punctuated by claims that verge on and sometimes merge with orthodox Marxism. Take, for example, Kolin’s explanation for the exclusion of workers from institutional decision-making: “excluding labor from a primary role as a decision-maker in the state results from elite ownership of state power, which in turn, justifies policies and actions, which re-create the oppression of labor.”⁸ Similarly, Feurer and Pearson write of employers that “their collective work strategically activated the state on their behalf” and at one point go so far as to suggest that employer campaigns

3. Rachleff, “Capital and Labor,” 245.

4. Feurer & Pearson, “Introduction,” 9, 13.

5. Rosemary Feurer, “The Strange Career of A. A. Ahner: Reconsidering Blackjacks and Briefcases,” in Feurer & Pearson, *Against Labor*, 159–183.

6. Elizabeth Esch & David Roediger, “Scientific Management, Racist Science, and Race Management,” in Feurer & Pearson, *Against Labor*, 27–50.

7. Robert H. Woodrum, “Race, Unionism, and the Open-Shop Movement along the Waterfront in Mobile, Alabama,” in Feurer & Pearson, *Against Labor*, 104–128.

8. Andrew Kolin, *Political Economy of Labor Repression in the United States* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017), xii.

“helped to bring the modern state into being.” Accordingly, in response to the strike waves of the 1870s and 1880s, Feurer and Pearson assert that employers “launched more repressive mechanisms to restrain free labour and to insert the state’s policing powers to undermine workers’ struggle.”⁹

This insistence on the overwhelming power of the bourgeoisie leads inexorably to historiographical blind spots, chief among these being the tendency to underestimate the agency of workers and political elites. Thus, Kolin observes, “it is most significant that Roosevelt failed to include a prominent role for trade unions in the New Deal.”¹⁰ This claim is inaccurate at best: Franklin Roosevelt appointed labour leaders to key advisory posts and accepted the advice of pro-labour elites like Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Labor Secretary Frances Perkins. The presumed omnipotence of capital also leads Kolin to assume working-class disorganization where there was none. He writes, for instance, “What little radicalism there was in the nineteenth century was both homegrown and imported from the wave of German immigrants with the rise of the International Workers of the World (IWW).”¹¹ First of all, it is *Industrial Workers of the World*. Second, the struggle for the eight-hour day in 1867, the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, and the Great Upheaval of 1886 were nationwide uprisings, the likes of which Americans had never seen. And this is to say nothing of what W. E. B. Du Bois called the “general strike” of Black slaves and freedmen during a little-known conflict called the American Civil War.

Feurer and Pearson, for their part, argue that the scholarly focus on the New Deal conjuncture obscures the long arc of employer activism. I sympathize with this point – and have argued in my own work that the origins of right-to-work legislation date back to the 19th century¹² – but I worry that cutting the New Deal out is an all too convenient way to elide an important case in which the state and parties were clearly influential in mediating between labour and capital. The Democratic Party did what capital could not do, and indeed refused to do: namely, co-opt the rebellion of the working class with the Wagner Act and social legislation. With labour’s loyalty thus secured, the New Dealers channelled labour militancy into institutional politics. Had the state done *capital’s* bidding in the winter of 1933, there might well have been a third American revolution.

Two alternative frameworks would have helped to avoid this shared analytical shortcoming. At a minimum, the authors might have insisted that the political is shaped by the *balance* of class forces instead of just one class. That would have gone some way toward explaining those moments (often economic

9. Feurer & Pearson, “Introduction,” 2, 6, 8.

10. Kolin, *Political Economy*, 162.

11. Kolin, *Political Economy*, xvii.

12. Cedric de Leon, *The Origins of Right to Work: Antilabor Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Chicago* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

crises) in which the power of capital waned. Another alternative would be to suggest, in addition, that politicians have their own objectives and techniques of power, which in turn (a) shape the economic system via taxation and regulation, (b) divide workers by race, gender, and nationality, and (c) whipsaw employers by sector (e.g., Wall Street vs. Silicon Valley) as they struggle for power.

Of course, I can hardly blame Kolin or Feurer and Pearson for emphasizing the power of employers, especially in a moment of widespread inequality. Moreover, it is a worthy side of the debate with a long and illustrious history. Ideological conflict over the relative autonomy of the state and capital has been raging since Marx's own time, when, for instance, he attempted to theorize that very tension in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. The debate continued with Lenin and Gramsci, who insisted on the importance of party leadership, on the one hand, and Karl Kautsky and the Second Internationalists, who emphasized the decisiveness of deteriorating material conditions, on the other. The conversation continues with this latest installment on antilabour repression and a competing body of work (mine included) on political parties and labour.

Let us not, however, make the mistake of previous generations by descending into sectarian struggle. Perhaps the time is ripe for a new synthesis not unlike the once "new" labour history that brings the lessons of the past to bear on our present crisis. We live in a time of ethnic nationalist ascendancy the world over, from Europe and the United States to India and Turkey. We must be mindful that nativism and white supremacy, while operating under historically specific economic conditions, are at the same time the projects of political parties, whose hateful take on the world competes with our own vision of economic democracy. The answer to ethnic nationalism may not be a party of our own, and may instead take the form of mass mobilization and political independence, but whatever our response, it must take seriously the awesome power of political elites and the prospect of a new labour upsurge.

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