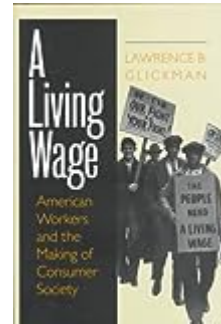


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Lawrence B. Glickman. *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. xvi + 220 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3357-3.



Reviewed by Margo Anderson (Department of History, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee)

Published on H-Labor (March, 1998)

Lawrence Glickman has written a fascinating book which straddles the borders of several subdisciplines of American history, particularly labor history, intellectual and cultural history, and economic history. *A Living Wage* treats the history of an idea: the development of the working-class claim to a wage adequate to support an appropriate “American” standard of living. Glickman dates the emergence of the claim to the 1870s and sees it as a major ideological reorientation of working-class social and political thought, a “consumerist” turn which rejected the older critique of the wage system as a form of “slavery” and in turn posed a fundamentally new critique of capitalism and market-based wages.

In the first half of the book, Glickman argues that after the Civil War, as employers claimed that the price of labor was set by supply and demand, working-class leaders abandoned their critique of the wage system as a form of slavery. Advocates of the new living wage critique of capitalism, from Ira Steward to George Gunton to John Mitchell to Samuel Gompers to Father John Ryan, countered with an alternative claim that the “market” set “starvation” or “subsistence” wages, but that workers deserved “fair,” “ample,” “just,” and “decent” wages. And when employers complained that such a living wage standard was imprecise, working-class advocates agreed and responded with an elastic definition that required

a wage sufficient for food, clothing, shelter, “sundries,” and for “citizenship,” “education,” “comfort,” and “health.” John Mitchell, for example, defined such a wage in 1898 as sufficient for a worker “to purchase a comfortable house of at least six rooms,” which contained a bathroom, good sanitary plumbing, parlor, dining room, kitchen, sleeping rooms, carpets, pictures, books, and furniture (pp. 82-3). Working-class advocates expected the standard to rise over time. Glickman thus sees Samuel Gompers’ famous claim for “more, more” “as part of a long working-class tradition of political economy” (p. 77).

The second half of the book traces the adoption and redefinition of the living wage standard by middle-class reformers during the Progressive Era, the relation between the working-class living wage and the development of public policy on minimum wages, and the influence of the working-class living wage on “consumerist” ideas within New Deal political economy. Glickman points out that the ambiguities inherent in the “living” wage standard were further confused after the turn of the century as minimum wage laws were introduced. Gompers, for example, had written an article in 1898 entitled “A Minimum Living Wage.” As it became clear that minimum wage laws would not guarantee a “living wage,” some union leaders opposed them, on the grounds that the “minimum” standard should be the “living wage.”

Throughout the volume, Glickman also critiques the living wage ideology for its elements of patriarchal and racialized discourse. He notes that all the debates about wage setting had embedded references to the racialized (foreign or non white) or gendered (female) “other” that threatened “American” standards if the “living wage” did not prevail. Gompers, for example, was also willing to advocate his “American” standard by contrasting it to “Asiatic Coolieism” in rhetoric such as that embedded in a turn of the century article, “Meat vs Rice.... Which Shall

Survive?” (pp. 86-7).

Finally, Glickman gently chides his fellow historians for not getting this important discourse straight, for conflating terms, not distinguishing the family wage (advocated by middle class reformers) with the working-class living wage, and for not distinguishing working-class consumerism from middle-class consumerism. Language matters here, Glickman suggests. A careful reading of the book goes a long way in helping us get it straight.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-labor>

Citation: Margo Anderson. Review of Glickman, Lawrence B., *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*. H-Labor, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1846>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.