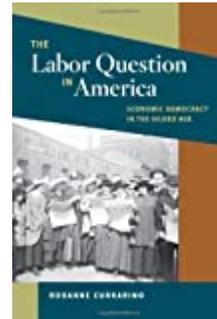


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Rosanne Currarino. *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010. 240 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03570-8; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07786-9.



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More!

In the recent debate over who should be bearing the burden of national deficit reduction, Fox News analysts Sean Hannity and Neal Cavuto have herniated themselves insisting that it must not be the wealthy—after all, they are “job creators.” Rather, the burden of austerity should be borne by a working class that is already stretched thin. To sustain this claim, Hannity and Cavuto cite Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation, who argues that the poor in this country are not actually poor. He bases this claim on the number of household amenities that those officially living below the poverty line currently enjoy. Brilliantly skewered by Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* (August 18, 2011), this report shows that, among other things, 99 percent of poor households have a refrigerator, 81 percent have a microwave, and 62 percent have a clothes washer. 38.2 percent have personal computers and 19.3 percent have a video game system. 32.2 percent have more than one television and 17.9 percent have a big-screen television.[1] According to Fox logic, with all these amenities, what need have we of a taxpayer-supported welfare state? After all, there is

more that these folks can sacrifice for the sake of deficit reduction. Does anyone really need a large-screen TV, an X-Box, or a home computer? Arguably, no. But that misses one of the key points that Rosanne Currarino makes in her new book, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age*. Currarino makes a compelling case that economic democracy requires the full participation of the American working class in the economic life of the nation as both workers *and* consumers.

Samuel Gompers, chief of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was once asked what labor wanted. He famously responded, “More.” Rather than leave that audacious demand hanging there like a challenge to those who would ask the working class to accept less, Currarino usefully fleshes out the full implications of what Gompers meant, when he demanded *more* for the American working class. She begins by posing a question—the labor question of the late nineteenth century: could democracy survive in industrial America? What follows is a broad sketch of two main answers given in response. The first

of these answers is rooted in a proprietary-producerist model of citizenship, that is, an understanding of citizenship that equated political standing with property-holding or the possession of hard-won skills and which also equated individual virtue with productive labor (p. 3). Rooted in the antebellum experience of American workers, this conception of citizenship granted political standing to those (by and large, white men) who were able to earn a living by selling the products of their labor. However, the dynamics of the second industrial revolution drove the majority of the American working class into permanent wage labor, threatening the autonomy and political standing of these producer-citizens. As this new class of proletarians grew increasingly dependent upon others for their economic survival, economists, reformers, and labor leaders like Gompers would articulate new answers to the labor question. Another important theme introduced in the first chapter is how the demise of producerism, which privileged the interests of native-born white men, opened the space for women and immigrants to articulate their answers to the labor question.

From the outset, Currarino warns her readers against defining the fall of proprietary producerism as the end of a golden age of civic engagement rooted in workers' control. The bulk of her book is a brief, but thorough, investigation of how this new world of consumer-centered labor politics opened the door to new understanding of democracy and civic engagement. The opening chapter, set against the background of the Panic of 1873 and violent labor upheavals of 1877, provides a nice summary of the various explanations for the economic crisis. This summary includes a useful synopsis of the debate between those who attributed the crisis to overproduction and those who pinned the blame on underconsumption—the latter laying the foundation for the future development of Keynesian economics.

Chapter 2 provides an innovative interpretation of the anti-Chinese racism of the 1870s and 1880s. During these decades native-born white men came to define themselves less as members of the producing class and more as breadwinners, whose wages guaranteed prosperity to themselves and their families. Previously, Chinese thrift, self-control, and hard work had been perceived as the ideal traits of the producer-citizen of old. Now, white male breadwinners saw these traits describing overzealous, servile workers content to live on rice alone. Changing understandings of white male identity transformed Chinese workers into a threat to the American standard of living. Of all the chapters in the book, this is the one that is most accessible and excerptable for undergraduate

courses.

Chapter 3 returns to the themes covered in the opening chapter, discussing the changing understandings of the value of wages among the economists who founded the American Economic Association in 1885. Moving the study of economics beyond mere dollars and cents, the young men who founded the AEA tackled the labor question head on, struggling to explain the longest and sharpest recession that the nation had yet known. Importantly, they challenged some of tenets of classical economics—most importantly, David Ricardo's wages-fund theory, which encouraged employers to slash wages in response to economic downturns. In place of Ricardian economics, underconsumption came to be understood as a major factor in the duration and severity of the Panic of 1873, prompting the economists of the AEA to reevaluate the meaning of wages. No longer just representative of the largesse of employers nor merely the result of negotiations between workers and employers nor even a measure of the value of the work that inhered in the commodities produced, the meaning of wages came to be understood as distinctly social. Given this social meaning, wages no longer represented the reward an individual worker won for a life of toil. In the aggregate, wages came to represent a potential social surplus that would allow workers access to the growing universe of consumer goods. As economist Simon Nelson Patten—one of the heroes of Currarino's book—believed, American workers had a right to share in this social surplus. As the productive capacity of the nation grew, it would become possible to move from a pain economy to the pleasure economy of the future (pp. 84-85).

Chapter 4 is a full-throated defense of the AFL's pure and simple unionism. Recasting Gompers's emphasis on wages, hours, and benefits as a way to stake a claim to the growing abundance of industrial production rather than an accommodation to the ascendancy of corporate capitalism allows Currarino the space to define a politics of more (p. 87). This politics of more allowed Gompers and the AFL to counter the position of the Knights of Labor—namely, the old producerist formulation that wage labor created a weak and dependent working class which lacked the economic autonomy necessary to sustain a virtuous citizenry. Rather than seeking the abolition of the wage system and the establishment of a utopian system (as did many of the AFL's competitors, from the Knights of Labor to the Wobblies), Gompers embraced the expansion of wage labor. He argued instead for higher wages, increased productivity, and, importantly, shorter hours. With enough leisure

time, American workers would have the ability to spend their wages to power an expanding consumer society. Though Currarino makes an important defense of Gompers against charges that he and the AFL were collaborators in the demise of labor republicanism, this defense becomes tendentious and belabored, unnecessarily weakening an argument capable of standing on its own merits.

Currarino closes out her book with a curiously unsatisfying chapter discussing the demise of the nineteenth-century labor question and its replacement with two new concepts that aren't precisely questions, but rather an axis of contention over the meaning of democracy in an era of mass consumption. The two poles of this axis posit a "socialized democracy" as described by Hull House founder Jane Addams against a democracy understood in terms of individual freedom of choice. Those arguing for socialized democracy based their case in the observation that the role of the autonomous producer-citizen was rapidly diminishing. The rise of corporate forms of economic organization meant that few fields of endeavor remained for the individual to make his or her mark on the world. Questions of consumption and production could no longer be sequestered from the public world of politics and relegated to the private sphere of economics. This argument not only opened the way for greater government intervention in the economy, but also allowed reformers like Addams to make the case that democracy ought to be understood in cultural and economic terms alongside formal political ones, such as the right to vote. In short, Addams's response became the foundation for contemporary social democracy. Countering this argument is one rooted in a nostalgic vision of the mythic rugged individual whose self-interested choices power the marketplace. It was this figure who played a prominent role in the long string of anti-worker Supreme Court cases that struck down legislation regulating wages, hours, and working conditions, *Lochner v. New York* (1905) being only the most famous example. It is this figure—in all of its racialized, gendered, neo-producerist glory—that animates condemnations of the undeserving poor (the Heritage Foundation might say that they made the choice to be there by choosing to own a refrigerator or a cell phone). It also animates the beatification of the millionaires and billionaires who call the shots in the new Gilded Age of today.

What makes the final chapter so unsatisfying is that there is no real acknowledgement that—at this moment in history, 2011—it is the second of these two visions of

democracy that is in its third decade of ascendancy. In what feels like a throwaway line, Currarino concludes that this notion of "freedom of choice constrained but could not evade the new democracy's vision of greater social participation in economic life" (p. 144). This sunny comment elides an epic battle between two visions of American democracy that the proponents of Addams's "socialized democracy" would continue to lose until the arrival of the New Deal in 1933. Without a more extensive discussion of this conflict, it is difficult to see how "freedom of choice" has once again become the dominant way of interpreting democracy. What's missing from her discussion of the Supreme Court cases of the *Lochner* period is that these all occurred in the context of a concerted anti-union backlash that erupted in the wake of Theodore Roosevelt's pro-labor intervention in the Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902. Throughout the preceding chapters, Currarino is careful to detail the power struggles surrounding the answer to the labor question of the nineteenth century; however, by the end of the book, she is content to conclude that it "is the questions that matter the most," rather than the answers. This would have surprised folks like Gompers and Addams, who understood the labor question not as a question, but as a power struggle, the outcome of which made all the difference in the world to the lives of the workers she describes.

In her introduction, Currarino notes that there are few books crowding today's shelves discussing "the labor question." For a good deal of the popular economic and management literature this is no longer a question to be answered but a puzzle to be solved or a problem to be managed. In returning it to the status of a genuine question, Currarino also raises the possibility that there are multiple—perhaps more liberatory—answers than the ones implied by Fox News and the Heritage Foundation. In the thrall of the current austerity fetish, Democrats and Republicans alike have forgotten that a widely shared prosperity was once a central goal of this nation. Currarino's *Labor Question* is a useful corrective to the present madness and a call for the American working class to once again start demanding "more."

Note

[1]. Robert Rector and Rachel Sheffield, "Air Conditioning, Cable TV, and an Xbox: What Is Poverty in the United States Today?", *Executive Summary Backgrounder* (Published by the Heritage Foundation), No. 2575 (July 18, 2011): 5.

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