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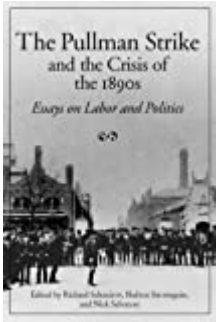

Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, Nick Salvatore, eds. *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999. 258 pp. $21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06755-6; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02447-4.

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Confrontation, Capitulation and Conciliation: The Pullman Strike

This a rich and diverse collection of essays on the decade of the Pullman railroad strike. Symptomatic of the flexible boundaries of the field of labor history, the book unites two studies focusing on organized labor and industrial relations with six essays exploring the strike's broader public context, political ramifications, and intersection with the state. The 1894 strike forms the hinge for all of these studies, but it is generally placed in a broad comparative or temporal context.

Two essays focus on trade union strategies. Robert Weir offers a detailed analysis of the New York Central Strike of 1890, which he considers a "dress rehearsal" to the upheaval of 1894. Internal divisions among the labor movement, Weir argues, proved most responsible for the disastrous outcome of both strikes, as the exclusive and cautious railroad brotherhoods refused to back the industrially-based Knights of Labor and American Railway Union (ARU), respectively. Solidly mobilized employer associations, well-financed and obstinate to public calls for arbitration, proved too formidable an opponent for organized labor. Like Weir, Susan Hirsch places the strike in comparative perspective. Contrasting the failed Pullman walkout with a successful railroad strike in 1922, Hirsch contends that only when workers' national identity outweighed their communal roots could they wage successful nation-wide battles. The Delaware Pullman shops, the company's only branch east of Chicago, serve as the author's test case. Here, workers in 1894 were too imbedded in an elite-dominated community to be willing to back the ARU's call for a boycott. By 1922, Delaware workers held firm roots in a national trade-union movement and joined the strike, despite a continued conservative local environment. Several decades of steady government intervention in the railroad industry, Hirsch contends, help explain this change of consciousness among East Coast workers. This is an interesting, if somewhat mechanical, explanation for the failure of the Pullman boycott to extend to the Eastern U.S.

Given the magnitude and timing (at the eve of the Progressive Era) of the Pullman strike, it is not surprising that this collection places the greatest emphasis on public perceptions and reactions to the dispute and the larger

social crisis it epitomized. In an excellent article, Janice Reiff shows how prior and during the strike, employers, striking workers, and the press presented the dispute in terms of paternalistic responsibilities. George Pullman's goal to appear as a caring employer-father backfired during the early phases of the strike, as the press attacked Pullman, not for cutting wages, but for raising rents at a time of economic depression. Pullman, however, soon made a point of hiring single women as the first strikebreakers, who he presented as the most needy of his good will. Notions of paternalism thus proved critical in workers and employers' strategies during the walkout, and would inform the rising reform consciousness as well.

One voice critical of the paternalistic consensus was Chicago reformer Jane Addams, who in her essay "A Modern Lear" criticized Pullman for treating his workers–men and women–like dependent children. Yet as Victoria Brown forcefully argues, Addams also intended to promote the possibility of social consensus, between labor and capital as well as between fathers and daughters. Addams' vision of social reconciliation–criticized by her contemporaries and many later historians as a sign of personal weakness and/or naivete–in fact represented a consistent and prophetic philosophical stand on how to overcome the social divisions of the 1890s. Only about twenty years later, when the country was ripe with a progressive reform discourse, did Addams succeed in getting her article published.

If Reiff and Brown both explore public reactions to the strike, Larry Peterson deals with one of the main tools of public discourse: visual representation. The Pullman strike occurred during a transitional moment of the visual imagery used in newspapers, as illustrative drawings competed with photographs. Neither form of representation, however, proved adequate to represent this major social crisis to the viewing public, a fact that only aggravated people's insecurities. According to Petersen, photographs undermined the credibility of illustrations as an objective form of news and helped to expose the artistic conventions behind them. Yet photographs still lacked the technical and cultural sophistication to fully replace their predecessors. Only several years later would the press recognize the power of photographic realism and use it to argue for reform measures. Given the changing nature of the public sphere during the 1890s, this analysis of visual communication, though somewhat awkwardly written, is extremely important.

With regard to changes in public attitudes, the Pullman strike thus can be seen as an initiating moment that would gradually give rise to a new reform consciousness, one based on a paternalistic consensus (Reiff), on a newly formulated notion of societal commonweal (Brown), and on a new form of visual representation (Peterson). Yet, as all three essays argue, that transition proved far from evident at the moment of crisis in the 1890s.

A final group of essays treats questions of politics. Melvyn Dubofsky charts the U.S. judiciary's attitude toward organized labor. He rejects interpretations of the critical legal school that present legal discourse as "determinative" of social action. Judicial language and logic was a reflection as much as a shaper of the country's popular culture. Moreover, judges' attitudes soon became more benevolent toward trade unionism. Here again, the Pullman strike is seen to occur during a transitional moment, as the judiciary moved from an individualist, natural rights stand to a gradual acceptance of group rights.

Moving from legal discourse to political ideology, the essay by Shelton Stromquist describes important changes in the political philosophy of the labor movement. A series of defeats and disagreements among labor leaders, including those involved in the Pullman strike, led to a marginalization of a nineteenth century producerist, class-based vision of society and gave rise to a "pure-and-simple" trade unionism dedicated to reconciling the interests of labor and capital within the framework of the corporate capitalist order. Liberal, middle-class reformers would thus be willing to enter cross-class alliances with Samuel Gompers and his cohorts. Apart from the Pullman strike–specifically the refusal of the AFL to call for a general strike in support of the ARU–two other events in 1894 contributed to that transformation: the defeat of the United Miners Workers in the bituminous coal fields; and the failure of labor leaders to agree on a program for independent political action. Although offering a good narrative of these occurrences, Stromquist's analysis, in my view, suffers from an overly rigid categorization of social class and political thought. For one, his contrast of nineteenth century-labor producerism as class-based with twentieth century trade unionism as an interest-based vision appears too simplistic.

Richard Schneirov's essay offers a different interpretation of the same occurrences: the debacle of Pullman, the shattering of the labor-populist political coalition, and the rise of a new liberal politics. Unlike Stromquist, he celebrates the democratic potential of this cross-class coalition of trade unionists and civic reformers. Charting the dynamics of Chicago politics during the 1880s and 1890s, he demonstrates how skilled craft unions played a

crucial role in initiating and furthering a reform agenda, including questions of arbitration of labor disputes and government regulation of public utilities. Schneirov thus challenges the pessimist view of the late nineteenth century by Stromquist and many other labor historians. If Stromquist proves too critical, Schneirov presents a too optimistic view of the possibilities of this reform coalition. By the early twentieth century, the Civic Federation and the Chicago Federation of Labor would sharply divide over questions of urban reform.[1]

In the epilogue, David Montgomery, finally offers what was missing in the book's introduction: a conceptual framework. Drawing on Karl Polanyi's classic study, he considers the century since the Pullman strike in terms of societal reactions against the destructive aspects of a free-market economy.[2] On the side of capital, that adjustment meant a move from an economy of individual competition to one based on corporate administration–a transition underwritten by the disciplinary, regulatory, and distributive functions of the state. On the side of organized labor, it consisted in ambitious but ultimately failed organizing drives to form industrially-based unions, represented by the ARU and later the Industrial Workers of the World. Industrial unionism revived during the 1930s, but during the Cold War would be "shorn of the revolutionary edge" (p 244). The revived free-market orthodoxy of the 1990s, seeking global fiscal discipline, a curtailed welfare state, and a weakened labor movement, leaves the question of societal responses alive and well. Montgomery's conception of "society" includes organized labor and capital, yet makes little consideration of other social actors, cross-class reform coalitions, and the broader public treated by previous essays.

Ironically, in this collection we learn little new about the dynamics of the strike itself. In several essays, especially those on labor politics, the dsipute appears as one of many occurrences. Moreover, none of the essays conveys a sense of the drama of the conflict (as Jeremy Brecher's *Strike* [revised, 1997] managed to do), a shortcoming especially important when thinking of assigning the text to undergraduate students.

Yet the context of the event is well charted, as the articles effectively demonstrate how the Pullman Strike provoked new perspectives on forms of labor organization, ideology, and politics, the organization of capital, as well as public discourse about industrial relations and social reform. Without falling into an overly teleological treatment, these essays convince us of the transformative qualities of this important moment of crisis.

Notes

[1]. Georg Leidenberger, " 'The Public is the Labor Union': Working-Class Progressivism in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago," *Labor History* 36 (Spring 1995).

[2]. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1944).

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