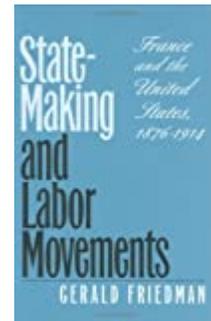


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Gerald Friedman.** *State-Making and Labor Movements: France and the United States 1876-1914.* Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998. xiv + 317 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-2325-3.



**Reviewed by** Melvyn Dubofsky (Departments of History and Sociology, Binghamton University, SUNY)

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Gerald Friedman, an associate professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, has written a book that resonates with the spirit of the last decade of the twentieth century. Although his subject is the growth, character, and composition of the French and U.S. labor movements in the era of the Second International, the apogee of Marxism, Friedman views the past through the lens of the present, a time when labor retreats, Marxism has been declared dead, and “there is no alternative (TINA)” in sight to a voracious global capitalism. Based on his comparison of the U.S. and French labor movements between the 1870s and World War I, Friedman concludes first, that workers cannot advance their interests without non-working-class allies and a sympathetic state, and, second, that “orthodox” Marxists, then and later, were wrong in their economic determinism (historical materialism) and revolutionary teleology.

Friedman uses the comparative history of U.S. and French labor movements to make his case. Not only that; he also attempts to reverse the conventional portrait of the two national labor movements. He suggests that an increasingly radical and militant French labor movement led by revolutionary syndicalists grew more rapidly than its U.S. counterpart; better served the material interests of its members; and succeeded in organizing the “towering heights” of the French economy, its

mass-production enterprises. By way of contrast, after 1904, a “conservative” “pure and simple” U.S. labor movement failed to advance; did little or nothing for the great mass of workers; and failed absolutely to penetrate the dominant “Fordist” sector of the economy. How does Friedman explain the relative success of French labor and failure of U.S. labor? Simply put, he argues that trade unions and the labor movements in both countries were too weak alone to counteract the greater power of capitalists. In France, however, Republicans could not defend the Third Republic against Monarchists and reactionaries (with whom businesspeople allied) without the support of labor. Hence the French state protected unions against attacks by capital and encouraged public mediation in place of private or public repression. In the U.S., however, a liberal state faced no challenge from anti-Republican reactionaries, hence had no need to build alliances with labor, and thus enabled employers to crush unions and, on occasion, used public power to the same end. Put another way, as Friedman does, the dynamics of French politics and state-making enabled labor to drift left and remain rhetorically revolutionary while the political process in the U.S. left labor no choice but to practice “prudential unionism” and the principle of *sauf qui peut*.

Does Friedman establish his case? Here I remain less

convinced. As an economist trained in the use of statistics and quantification, Friedman deploys a variety of data bases, tables, graphs, standard deviations, and regression analyses to prove his points. A review of this length is not the place to engage in a debate over the validity of such quantifiable evidence. Suffice it to say that the meaning of Friedman's numbers can be interpreted in more than one way. I prefer to focus on more substantial shortcomings. Are France and the U.S. actually a good comparison, and is it true, as Friedman claims (p. 12), that the economic and political differences between the two nations "were relatively small." Yes, the U.S. and France were both capitalist economies and republican polities. Beyond that, however, it seems to me that enormous differences loomed. One nation was a centralized, unitary state administered by a trained bureaucracy and governed by codified legal principles under Roman law. The other was a decentralized, federal state lacking a trained cadre of administrators and governed by a common law regime that gave judges enormous autonomy and authority. One nation had a relatively, large and stable agricultural sector characterized by small-scale peasant farming and a manufacturing sector dominated in the main by relatively small enterprises dependent on skilled craftsmen adept at small-batch production. The other had an agricultural sector that declined quite rapidly relative to the non-agricultural sector and in which large holdings increasingly characterized the dynamic staple-producing, export-driven side of farming; it also had an industrial sector increasingly characterized by gargantuan enterprises employing armies of machine operators to mass produce capital and consumer goods. Should one expect comparable trajectories for labor movements in Fordist and pre-Fordist economic regimes?

And what of Friedman's portrait of the histories of the French and U.S. labor movements? Was the French movement relatively successful as compared to the one in the U.S.? Did French unions really succeed before World War I in unionizing among employees in large-scale, mass-production enterprises? Were U.S. unions as loath to organize the less skilled and as disdainful of workers in the mass-production sector as Friedman claims? Friedman's own statistical and written data fail to answer those questions. If typical French locals were as small as Friedman's data indicate, indeed on average far smaller than U.S. union locals, how could they be characterized as examples of successful industrial unionism? For an economist trained in quantification, Friedman provides precious little data in the way of comparative wage rates, annual earnings, hours of work, working conditions, and

consumption standards, to judge the relative impact of French and U.S. unions on the lives of their members. Did U.S. unions fail to organize less skilled mass-production workers because their leaders were narrow-minded, selfish, chauvinistic, and sexist individuals or because their adversaries were too powerful, as Friedman's own evidence suggests?

Does Friedman's explication of comparative business history and politics in the two nations work any better? His businesspeople on both sides of the Atlantic proved equally anti-union but were French entrepreneurs more reactionary, even Monarchist, hierarchical paternalists than their U.S. republican, individualistic brothers in capitalism? Did French employers seek to keep their employees out of unions by playing the "good father" to obedient, deferential workers, while U.S. employers designed welfare capitalism to encourage competitive individualism among their more skilled employees? I suggest that Friedman read carefully the testimony of leading "welfare capitalists" before the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations (1913-15) to see how they perceived their loyal workers as children who preferred not to think or to act on their own. Or that he visit Binghamton, New York, the home of one of the most notable practitioners of welfare capitalism, the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company (mistakenly called Endicott-Peabody in the text, p. 197, and index) and view the statue of George F. Johnson erected in George F. Johnson Recreation Park which features the patron patronizing two adorable children, or the two arches erected by local shoe workers to honor their patron. Finally, what of politics? Was the French state and its republican majority more dependent on working-class votes and more solicitous of working-class interests than its U.S. counterparts? Again I find Friedman's evidence problematic. One of French labor's friends in power, Georges Clemenceau, as described by Friedman, in 1906 sent troops to the Nord and the Pas de Calais to break a coal miner's strike and repress riotous behavior by the strikers. Yet in Friedman's words, Clemenceau "restrained labor militancy...to preserve republican order, to protect the Republic. But he never acted merely to bolster capitalist authority, never acceded to the demands of employers and the right that he crush organized labor or reject the right of workers to form unions and to strike. Instead he continued to support labor organization and to promote collective bargaining as the basis for social peace and a new republican order (p. 202)." How did this differ from Theodore Roosevelt's logic four years earlier during the strike of anthracite coal miners in northeastern Pennsylvania, when he threatened to send troops not

to repress labor but to seize the mines? Or from the labor policies of Woodrow Wilson on the eve of World War I or Herbert Hoover in the 1920s? Workers voted in the U.S. as well as in France; their leaders also sought to practice coalition politics; and some, if not all, office-holders sought labor's votes.

Friedman also might have done well to temper his criticism of Karl Marx and "orthodox Marxism." After all, Marx's voluminous writings are like scripture, subject to multiple interpretations and open to the principle that "seek and ye shall find." Moreover, in his haste to make a case for historical contingency and human agency, Friedman might have done well to recall Marx's sage words from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, that man indeed makes his own history, but only "under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." In his neglect of that astute advice, Friedman misconstrues Marx's faith in human agency as well as his "third thesis on Feuerbach." In that thesis Marx did not write declaratively, as Friedman cites him (p. 297) "that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself." Rather, Marx asked in response to those who believed that education could alter society, "Who educates the educator?"

Lest I appear too critical of Friedman's effort to make us think more critically about the past and also to remind us about paths not taken as a result of human volition, let me close by suggesting that this is a book well worth reading and pondering. Whether its author is right or wrong in many of his claims, he does make readers consider carefully significant historical and contemporary issues. And he is certainly right that labor cannot advance its material and moral interests without non-working-class allies in state and society, a truth perhaps more to the point today than ever in the past.

Melvyn Dubofsky is Distinguished Professor of History and Sociology at Binghamton University, SUNY. This spring the University of Illinois Press will publish a collection of his essays titled *Hard Work: The Making of Labor History*. It will also publish a new abridged paperback version of his history, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*.

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