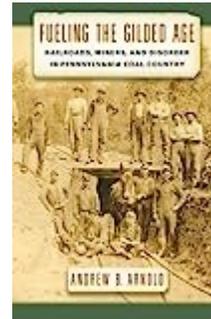




Andrew B. Arnold. *Fueling the Gilded Age: Railroads, Miners, and Disorder in Pennsylvania Coal Country.* Culture, Labor, History Series. New York: New York University Press, 2014. 288 pp. \$49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-6498-5.



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Searching for Order in Gilded Age Pennsylvania

In *Fueling the Gilded Age*, historian Andrew B. Arnold argues that coal miners, coal mine operators, and railroad managers competed and colluded in complex ways during the Gilded Age for what each considered their fair share of the economic pie they helped create. By the early 1900s, large railroad corporations benefited much more than miners or operators from the economic changes, but the disorderly journey to railroad dominance took unexpected turns, resulting in a less-than-complete victory for the railroads that didn't achieve order as much as it froze a disorderly system in place (p. 220).

Arnold covers the development of the coal industry in north central Pennsylvania from 1872 to 1902. The narrative focuses on how community unionism within a regional economy gave way to national trade unionism within an expanding economy. Prior to 1872 coal miners and operators adhered to an antebellum work code in which each recognized the necessity of the other and coexisted within the same community. During strikes workers retained a right to their job, violence was rare, and the entire process was dictated by community cus-

tom. In 1872 this broke down. Operators went against the traditional right to a job by bringing in strikebreakers and in at least one instance workers resorted to violence. The courts found the violence illegal and by 1875 they ruled striking illegal. As the 1870s evolved, operators worked with emerging railroad lines by taking a decisive anti-union stance in an effort to limit workers' gains. Workers responded, with some trepidation, by joining the Knights of Labor. Miners preferred local autonomy but the Knights allowed them to control most actions locally, at least at first, and the secret nature of the organization allowed miners to agitate safely given the recent legal attacks on strikes and unions. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, more formal organizational entities, such as a coal operators association and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), became the norm. By 1902 a more familiar capital versus labor arrangement existed.

This general transformation, as the author acknowledges, was not surprising nor terribly disorderly. What was disorderly and the heart of this book was the inabil-

ity of any party to rationalize the economic enterprise of mining and shipping coal for singular or mutual benefit. A tacit understanding existed that if wages, coal production, and freight costs were rationalized everybody could make money. Greed and mistrust prevented the desired result and led to rapidly shifting strategies. For example, operators originally joined with railroads to limit gains made by miners through their union activities. As wages went down operators did not see their profits rise; instead, railroads raised their shipping rates to syphon off what miners lost. Operators soon saw railroads as more problematic than unions, leading to combined efforts of miners and operators to limit railroad greed. Railroads further tried to dominate the economy by making secret deals with favored coal operators, attempting to gain monopoly status by driving competitors out of business through rate wars, and crushing operators' efforts to find alternative trunk lines or limit production. Plenty of money was made, but not very efficiently.

While the operators tended to lose out to the railroads, workers lost the most. Still, they managed to achieve some success in forcing business leaders to recognize some of their concerns. Miners changed their demands from a fair share of economic output in the 1870s to a living wage. This change reflects not only the declining economic status of miners but also an intellectual victory in the recognition of basic human rights as part of the emerging political economy. The demand for more than starvation wages showed that miners could not be treated as economic commodities subject to market forces; they needed to earn enough to live. Miners also retained their hard-earned victory to have union checkweighmen weigh coal along with company operatives. They also began the process of formal union recognition, even if they remained leery of the necessity or desirability of national unions. These were no small concessions by business leaders, thus demonstrating their lack of total control over economic change.

This book contributes to old and new themes in Gilded Age history. The themes of artisan republicanism and the search for order after community breakdown echo throughout. For example, when miners joined the UMWA insisting that the national organization serve their goals, not the other way around, they sought to restore an earlier form of community unionism and worker democracy without losing autonomy to a far-away organization (p. 154). The book also adds to a growing body of scholarship demonstrating how Gilded Age capitalists struggled to control America's changing economic landscape. Much like the industrial barons of the transcontinentals in Richard White's *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (2012), Arnold's business leaders in the East shared the same ambition and inability to rationalize the industry, but with less political corruption. In both books, the working and middle classes were not there to be merely run over by the forces of modernization. Their confrontation with big business significantly shaped American culture going into the twentieth century by beginning to define the limits of free market capitalism and the extent of worker rights.

The strengths of this book are the author's ability to weave together business, labor, legal, and social history, and his impressive primary source research. These strengths, however, contribute to the book's weakness, which is a lack of narrative flow. Chapters are sometimes choppy as the author moves between topics, for example, going from an in-depth explanation of a legal decision to a detailed recounting of a strike negotiation. This is hardly an indictment because the book still holds together. The book would have been improved, too, by including state and regional maps of railroads and mining communities. Arnold's solidly researched and persuasively argued book deserves a wide readership by scholars and graduate students specializing in business, labor, and Gilded Age history.

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