

perhaps overestimating the extent to which they did direct the members of “their” unions. On the other hand, no one before Sheridan has so clearly identified the interdependence of the ALP government’s economic and industrial relations policies, such that the government used any subterfuge to delay growth in labour costs, and by 1949 unashamedly “kicked the communist can” to isolate the miners to this end. It was the ALP, more so than the CPA, which turned industrial relations of the period into a political contest for the allegiance of the working class.

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GERSTLE, GARY. *Working-class Americanism. The politics of labor in a textile city, 1914–1960.* [Interdisciplinary perspectives on modern history.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 1989. xii, 356 pp. Ill. £ 27.50.

In the years after the First World War, the mass mobilization of industrial workers, many of them so-called “new” immigrants, brought the realities of class and class conflict home to the United States. Like their European counterparts, American capitalists and factory managers confronted a working-class social movement that threatened both their own class position but perhaps also America’s ambitions to world power.

Gary Gerstle examines this immigrant working-class mobilization in microcosm, looking at the nexus of immigrants, unionization, ideology, and politics in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, a small New England cotton and woolen town that became a cutting edge of 1930s industrial unionism in the Northeast. Gerstle charts the growth of the textile industry in Woonsocket from the 1840s, the immigration from Quebec of the town’s largely French-Canadian workforce (whom labor statistician Carroll Wright described as “the Chinese of the Eastern States”) (p. 23), and the influx, after 1905, of French and Franco-Belgian radicals who, escaping the blacklist in their own countries, gravitated into skilled trades in Woonsocket where they played a leading political role. By the 1930s, the city’s Independent Textile Union (ITU), which the latter founded, embodied an imported vision of social democracy and socialist transformation that united the French-Canadian majority around a class-based program transcending the provincial confines of *la survivance*, the impulse for cultural preservation that had formed the cultural centerpiece of French-Canadian group life.

With Popular Front inspiration, Woonsocket’s radicals won political success by adapting the “language of Americanism”, the *lingua franca* of American politics, toward their own ends. The language of Americanism proved a convenient umbrella under which to gather the disparate elements of Woonsocket’s working class. Gerstle finds that, rather than a fundamentally conservative force, Americanism was contested ideological terrain, a complex and contradictory set of values and symbols composed of nationalist, democratic, progressive, and traditionalist elements that lent themselves toward a variety of political applications, including a radical social vision.

As radicals had hoped, Gerstle's French-Canadian workers did find the Americanist idiom an easy route toward Americanization – and out of the politically stultifying confines of their ethnic culture. In following it, they, like historian Olivier Zunz's Detroit workers, traded an identity based upon ethnicity for one based upon class. Union radicals, however, had not prepared themselves “for the kind of American identity that began coalescing in the ranks of French-Canadian workers: anticapitalist but anticommunist, patriotic but parochial, militant but devout” (p. 195). By the 1940s, as these workers absorbed the principles of democratic politics, they demanded more say in union affairs. Infused with Catholic anti-communism and corporatist moral doctrine, skilled, largely French-Canadian mulespinners subsequently ousted the European-born radicals from power and scrapped their radical union platform, rejecting the politics of class conflict for a belief in class cooperation, the assertion of workers' control for the recognition of management rights, and the vision of social transformation for the practice of patronage politics. Yet amidst the patriotic fervor of the Second World War, Gerstle argues, their own incipient, communal-based critique of capitalism was dissipated: the State intruded to squelch shopfloor militance and workers lost control of the language of Americanism, thereby forfeiting the key to their empowerment.

In the hands of the State, in the interests of the war, and with the cooperation of organized labor, Americanism no longer prescribed industrial democracy but a social unity which Gerstle describes as “cultural pluralism”. In it, white and black, Jew and Catholic, labor and capital all shared in the “universal brotherhood of man”. With “*la survivance* already severely eroded” (p. 328), cultural pluralism appealed to the so-called “ethnic corporatists”, Gerstle argues, because it secured their own acceptance in American society. Meanwhile, their own practical pursuit of a union strategy of particularism, one that focused on textiles and Woonsocket (and hence the French-Canadian enclave), left the union and its members vulnerable during the postwar deindustrialization that effectively wiped out the industry in their region, decimating their communities by destroying their jobs and, in the process, rendering Woonsocket an “industrial junkyard” (p. 327).

Because it aims at – and seemingly has accomplished – such a sweeping reassessment of working-class patriotism and because it already has caused a reworking of the historiography in the field of twentieth-century American labor history, *Working-Class Americanism* warrants especially close critical scrutiny. It lies not so much in what Gerstle has done as what he has not done that weakens the force of some of his conclusions and calls others entirely into question.

Given their apparent similarities, it seems strange that *Working-Class Americanism* makes no attempt to connect the language of Americanism to working-class republicanism, the ideology that David Montgomery and others have shown undergirded the nineteenth-century “craftsmen's empire”. Gerstle in effect has modified and extended the synthesis of labor historians like Sean Wilentz, Christine Stansell, and Richard Oestreicher into the twentieth century, but has not explored the points of possible connection and contrast between his work and theirs, an undertaking that would have rendered this a more ambitious book.

To have done so might have prompted Gerstle to identify the interesting similarity between the ideology of the two centuries – that *both* republicanism and

Americanism were contested terrain – but also to have discovered a critical difference that seems to distinguish the late twentieth from the mid-nineteenth century. Underestimating, it could be argued, the hegemonic nature of his language of Americanism in the post-World War Two period, the book wistfully argues that, by the 1980s, Americanism became a conservative property by default, abandoned by a New Left that looked to Marxist ideological wellsprings instead. But perhaps the Marxists had it right, but simply lost. Gerstle's assertion notwithstanding, with the rise of the imperialist state, we might fairly ask who finally owns the symbols of patriotism and what fundamentally have they come to mean? The flag has implied unambiguous associations to those Third World peoples who have cowered under (or fired at) American helicopter gunships; in a symbolic world of such incontrovertible meanings, invocation of the language of Americanism for progressive or reformist purposes might ultimately prove not only thankless but even dangerous business indeed. Recalling that private property rights stood at the center of America's bourgeois revolutions, of which Old Glory became the principal symbol, in large measure might explain how the language of Americanism could become the archetypal prop of, for example, the advertising industry, the anti-abortion crusade, and the oil-hungry State.

Given the place that race (and racism) have held in twentieth-century American politics and how much they have served to divide America's working class, it therefore also seems incongruous that Gerstle could conclude that American workers cashed in their faith in industrial democracy for what Gerstle wrongly describes as cultural pluralism. The universal brotherhood of man (the notion to which they in actuality putatively subscribed), was a far more assimilationist (and utopian) formulation, less akin to Horace Kallen's "cultural pluralism" than to a vaguely Jeffersonian (and therefore perhaps in some ways still very much republican) human melting pot. But did those workers, too many of whom had joined the "White flight" from the cities and who, in the name of patriotism, endorsed neo-colonial interventions and imperialist wars against peoples of color, in fact subscribe to any such thing, regardless what either their union, their party, or their church directed. In practical terms, the real melting pot of "middle class" workers (as they oxymoronically described themselves) may have been mass culture, mass consumption, and suburb, leading us to observations about working-class embourgeoisement, that is to say, to conclusions even more dismal (and less original) than those Gerstle has reached here. Arguably, most important in producing this outcome was neither a devolution in the language of Americanism nor its cooptation by the hegemonic State (both of which forces Gerstle credits), but the relentless operation of postwar American capitalism that repeatedly proved itself vastly more energetic, creative, resourceful, and ruthless than any of its enemies perhaps ever imagined it could be.

Gerstle makes intriguing use of the iconography pictured in the ITU publication, *ITU News*, as a source for the uses and content of the language of Americanism, noting that masculine (and sometime patriarchal) images predominated. Clearly, the ITU's male leaders seemed rather oblivious to the fact that, by 1940, women comprised fully fifty per cent of the union's membership. But Gerstle too shows a blindspot to matters of gender, affording women mention on a mere thirteen of the book's 336 pages. Gerstle's choice not to look at women in the families, homes,

neighbourhoods, and communities reflects a rather limited notion of where and how class happens. In short, for Gerstle, class takes place largely on the shopfloor and there only for men. Thus, echoing the work of Alex Keyssar, the unemployed cease to be “workers” and likewise, by logical extension, women presumably also are excluded from Gerstle’s “working class” when they do not hold paid jobs. With apparently such a self-narrowing conception, little wonder that women are largely absent from Gerstle’s working-class world and that gender fails to interest him.

But, of course, a growing scholarship (by historians like Elizabeth Faue, Vickie Ruiz, and Jacquelyn Dowd Hall), as well as our own experience, tells us that women formed a vital part of the working class – as workers, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, and wives. In largely omitting them, Gerstle has told only a part of working-class Woonsocket’s history; and, when he concludes that “working-class Americans had lost the ambition and the ability to re-create their world”, we might wonder whether *white, male workers* is really what he means. We might rejoice that, even lacking control over the language of Americanism, the women, Hispanics, and African-Americans who comprise the majority of the American working class in the 1990s today have found different idioms to express grievances and articulate alternatives that have stood them in good stead. Drawing on other sources of political mobilization, such as feminism and Black nationalism, they have selected languages of their own that encourage possibilities in many ways far more pointed and more progressive than many of those envisioned by Joseph Schmetz himself.

*Working-Class Americanism* nonetheless offers rich insights and provocative interpretations that make it a significant work. Adding to the growing literature on industrial workers and their unions by scholars such as Robert Zieger, Patricia Cooper, James Barrett, David Goldberg, Joe Trotter, John Bodnar, Ruth Milkman, Ronald Schatz, and Nelson Lichtenstein, the book underscores the complexity of working-class politics, ideology, and community life. Rejecting attempts at characterizing immigrant industrial workers as “conservative” or “radical”, the book poses and tries to answer a different, and more useful, question: “What made an alliance of different working-class constituencies possible?” (p. 125). The book emphasizes the centrality – and malleability – of ideology in working-class mobilization. Challenging conclusions reached by historian Christopher Tomlins in *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880–1960*, which readers might wish to consult as a companion volume, Gerstle acknowledges the importance of the modern, bureaucratic state in both limiting but, ancillary, also creating opportunities for working-class empowerment.

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