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Difficult Labor: Troublesome Company at the New Birth of Freedom

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Difficult Labor: Troublesome Company at the New Birth of Freedom

Mark Lause's *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* is obviously the product of years of painstaking archival research and sustained attention to the organizational forms that diverse strands of working-class radicalism assumed in the mid-nineteenth century United States. Among the outstanding scholars who have attempted to grapple with the varied, often contradictory attitudes of American workers to slavery and the intensification of sectional crisis, the social and economic transformations brought on by the war, and the untidy evolution of union organization, industrial conflict and class politics in its aftermath—David Montgomery, Bruce Laurie, Leon Fink among them—none brings to bear a more encyclopedic knowledge of the labor and reform currents or the cadre of working-class activists that populate Lause's work.

This sure command of the landscape of confrontation is itself notable, but *Free Labor* gives us something further. More than any previous study, it demonstrates the staying power of a core of labor activists who, through the tumult of war, played such critical roles in holding together and adapting trade union organization, shaping a perspective on the conflict that could orient a broad milieu of labor activists, and responding to the dramatic economic changes the war brought in its train. Some did this from their position in workplaces and local labor federations. Many others found themselves drawn into the ranks of the Union military, seeing in the struggle being waged between the slave South and the 'free labor' North one in which the fate of their fledgling workers' movement was being decided in blood. Lause's documenting of the prominence of union activists in the ranks at Gettysburg is an extraordinary display of diligence in the archives, and one that leaves little doubt that northern labor perceived in the slaveholders' rebellion a stark threat to its own prospects.

The persistence of industrial conflict from the late antebellum period through the war and into its aftermath is one of the striking aspects of the narrative outlined in *Free Labor*, but the sheer volume of detail can obscure the fact that this was a period of constant churning and upheaval, of rapid and unprecedented economic transformation in the North. Lause acknowledges this in places—observing, for example, that while “elements of it clung on tenaciously, the old labor movement, like so many of its members...perished in the Civil War” (52)—but the tectonic shifts reshaping the American economy throughout this period merit a more prominent place in the narrative. The thread of continuity between antebellum organization and the postwar scene is compelling, but this is also a story of a diverse, developing movement being made and remade in a context of continual upheaval and sharp discontinuities.

The war years can best be understood as a bridge between the highly idealized republic of independent producers—disintegrating in the face of oncoming change even before secession—and the rapidly industrializing capitalist economy, galloping ahead at breakneck speed (and trampling underfoot anything in its path) in the quarter century following Union victory. In many ways it was the demands of warmaking that served as the engine of that

remarkable transformation. National economic development remained patchy and uneven even into the twentieth century, of course, but from the end of the war the general trend was clear enough: toward unprecedented concentrations of corporate and finance capital on one end, with state power (including military force) at its beck and call, and the creation of a large, ethnically and racially diverse class of wage earners—women and men—at the other.

One of the recurring problems uncovered in *Free Labor* is the inadequacy of labor's prewar outlook—the reformers' lingering attachment to a notion of shared interests between labor and capital—in a period when the foundations of society were being remade beneath their feet. At the peak of its emancipatory zeal in confronting proslavery forces at mid-century, the free labor ideology espoused by Republicans promised a fluid and harmonious society, overseen by a neutral state and with no permanent class of exploited laborers. Lincoln's depiction of a world in which the "prudent, penniless beginner...labors for wages awhile, saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land[,] labors on his own account[,] and at length hires another new beginner to help him,"¹ was out of step even with antebellum conditions in the prewar North, but the world that emerged from the war—marked by explosive, often violent agrarian and industrial conflict—made a mockery of such a vision.

Labor seemed unable to anticipate such a turn of events. Lause's treatment of women workers during the war—suspended between a new militancy arising out of their deteriorating conditions and an older tradition maintaining them as the objects of philanthropy and paternal reform—captures this dynamic, relevant to labor more generally. As another historian of the period observes, workers' ability to grasp the new circumstances and formulate a response lagged behind actual developments: "The dissident worker," Bruce Laurie writes, "still thought of himself as a 'producer', continued to talk of accumulating a 'competency', and still referred to capitalism as 'wage slavery'. While such radical terminology died hard, radicalism strained to adjust to the industrial order."²

Capital appeared fluid and dynamic, by contrast, in its ability to shape social relations to reinforce its dominant position. Lause understates the degree to which the antebellum labor movement had been the near-exclusive domain of the white male journeyman, and this is one area where the appearance of continuity can be deceptive. The massive influx of immigrants—mainly German and Irish—in the years immediately preceding the war brought a fundamental re-composition of the northern working class. Employers seem to have been acutely conscious of the advantages offered them both by the deeply entrenched racial hostility of whites toward black labor and the newer tensions between native and immigrant, male and female workers. "[C]apital naturally called to its aid every possible form of cheap labor," an earlier study concluded, with "more employment given to women, to young boys as apprentices, to un-skilled labor, negroes, and immigrants, and more use [made] of labor-saving machinery."³ In a context where racial and ethnic antagonism presented such fundamental challenges, it is disappointing that *Free Labor* barely touches on the complicated

function of nativism and that it does not adequately confront the poisonous legacy of racism.

Bruce Laurie's perceptive observation that nativism "pushed simultaneously in two directions"—setting "Protestant worker against immigrant" at the same time that it "bridged the class divide within the native born community" offers a useful framework with which to approach both ethnic and racial antagonism.⁴ It also points toward an explanation for the early estrangement of urban Irish immigrant workers not only from the prewar labor movement but, crucially, from abolition. To some extent these divisions were overcome in the war years. By its end, one study claims, "a remarkable change had taken place" in labor's attitude to immigrants.⁵ For all its limitations, the postwar labor movement's "active recruitment of women, blacks and unskilled whites" marked an important (and strategically essential) "break with the past" and one—it is worth adding—that could only have come about with the overthrow of slavery.⁶

For the war years, scholars have of late been inclined to view events through the framework of identity, an approach most apparent in 'critical whiteness studies'. The malicious racism on display in the New York Draft Riots, Lause correctly points out, is too often presented as the archetypal expression of white working class rage against the project of emancipation. *Free Labor* shows that this was not true even for New York in the tense summer of 1863, that white northern labor overwhelmingly supported the war, and that while some workers influenced by the Democrats deployed terms like "white slavery" in an attempt to undermine the abolitionist project, there were sincere trade unionists and labor reformers capable of seeing clearly the link between the slaves' exploitation and their own.

Free Labor is not agnostic on the problem of racial antagonism, but it does tread lightly on the ways in which racism contorted the mid-century labor movement. With a nod to Du Bois, Lause includes a chapter on "The Great Slave Strike," though here he is mostly revisiting well-traveled ground.⁷ For the wartime North, *Free Labor* presents a mixed record: class anger among whites was often directly aimed at employers and political elites, but at times—and not only when African Americans were deployed as strikebreakers—that fury slipped easily into racial violence in the form of hate strikes and attacks on black communities.⁸ While historians have begun to explore how the great issues of the war affected the changing racial attitudes of white soldiers, we get little sense here of how the upheaval of war affected northern white labor's outlook on race. In places (8, 165) Lause makes clear his dissatisfaction with the explanatory power of 'whiteness', and his evidence points to a more complicated and messy entanglement of racial and class antagonism, but his own conclusions are undeveloped.⁹ Where he does venture to generalize—lamenting that white northerners failed to emulate the slaves' wartime militancy and, in doing so, encouraged "the tendency to racialize modes of worker resistance" (67)—he steps out onto thin ground. The postwar years were hardly marked by peace and tranquility, after all.

David Montgomery once wrote that the American Civil War was “so critical a moment in the formation of the world in which we live that it compels us to contemplate the most basic features and values of modern society.”¹⁰ In important and obvious ways, American society remains deeply marked by the gap between the promise of the free labor revolution consummated in war and the reality of deeply entrenched racism and inequality that outlived that era. The failure of Lincoln’s ‘new birth of freedom’ to deliver on the hopes of freed slaves and the aspirations of northern laborers raises important questions about the Republican Party and the nature of their project. If we welcome the defeat of slavery, we must reckon also with the other consequences of northern capital’s ascent to national power. Emancipation sits incongruously alongside the concentration of capital and the militarization of the state for a new era of explosive industrial confrontation, or the conquest of the Great Plains for full-throttled exploitation of the vast resources of the west—itself a dry run for more ambitious imperial endeavors beyond the Americas. Yet all of these were key components in a single process of consolidation of bourgeois rule in the late nineteenth-century US.¹¹

The attenuation of the free labor promise fell like a staggering blow on the former slaves. Within a mere two months of the Confederate surrender, federal agents were admonishing freedpeople that their choice was to either work or starve: “You do not understand why some of the white people who used to own you do not have to work in the field,” an officer reprimanded laborers at Orangeburg, South Carolina: “It is because they are rich. If every man were poor...there would be no big farms, and very little cotton or corn raised to sell; there would be no money, and nothing to buy. Some people must be rich, to pay the others, and they have the right to do no work except to look out after their property.”¹² In the North, as well, the egalitarianism that had infused the Republican’s wartime rhetoric quickly gave way to an aggressive assertion of the unassailable rights of capital, a defense of concentrated power, and a steady drift toward *laissez faire*.

As it had throughout the period examined in this important study, American labor was slow to find its bearings in these new, unfamiliar surroundings. Its attachment to free labor ideology had by now entrenched two equally ineffectual approaches to working-class resistance. One was pure-and-simple trade unionism, which at times underpinned militant and impressive industrial action but which abstained from politics, or conceded the ground of political action to one or other of the bourgeois parties—a forerunner of the “conservative syndicalism” of the AFL.¹³ The other was a tradition of labor reform—often led by newspaper editors and middle-class ‘friends of labor’ rather than workers themselves—which took up the cause of progressive reform but disdained strikes and workplace organization more generally. This was the negative inheritance of the period that Lause has explored in such detail. Significantly, it was in the ranks of the Union Leagues—based in the Reconstruction South and led by freedpeople—that American labor came closest to overcoming this crippling dichotomy during this period. As tensions mounted toward the end of the nineteenth century workers would begin to break out in new directions, but

the legacy of this sharp separation of politics and economics—with roots in the mid-nineteenth century labor movement—is with us still.

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¹ Abraham Lincoln, "Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin," September 30, 1859, Roy P. Blaser, ed. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press: 1953), Volume III, pp. 478-479.

² Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997 rep.) 216.

³ Emerson David Fite, *Social and Industrial Conditions in the North during the Civil War* (Williamstown: Corner House Publishers, 1976), 187.

⁴ Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 215.

⁵ Fite (195) observes that "[t]en years previously the whole country had been on fire with hatred of foreigners in the Know-Nothing movement" until "the war came on, and the country gave the foreigners such a welcome that was as ardent as the former hatred." David Montgomery argues that the transformation occurred on both sides. The rise of the Fenians, he writes, who "belonged to the same Western intellectual currents of nineteenth-century nationalism as the Radical Republicans [meant that] new intellectual horizons had been opened for thousands of Irishmen....now free to meet reactivated Protestant workers on common grounds." See Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 128, 134.

⁶ Laurie, *Artisans into Workers*, 216; Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 220.

⁷ On the context of Du Bois's publication of *Black Reconstruction* and its reception on the left, see my "Du Bois's Prolific 'Error' and the Break with Color-Blind Orthodoxy," in *Labor: Studies in the Working-Class History of the Americas* 12:4 (2015), 11-15. The most extensive discussion of the slaves' general strike appears in Kelly, "Du Bois, Black Agency and the Slave's Civil War," *International Socialist Review* 100 (Spring 2016): 48-68.

⁸ See for example Lause's discussion of industrial strife in the Boston Navy Yard on pp. 96-97. The Pennsylvania coalfields provide an instructive example of a wartime context where deep class anger among immigrant workers manifested itself in explosive class conflict with no clear manifestations of racial hostility. See Grace Palladino, *Another Civil War: Labor, Capital and the State in the Anthracite Regions of Pennsylvania 1840-68* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

⁹ My own critique of whiteness in relation to the Civil War-era labor movement appears in the introduction to Bernard Mandel, *Labor: Free and Slave—Workingmen and the Antislavery Movement in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013): xxix-xlix.

¹⁰ David Montgomery, "The Civil War and the Meanings of Freedom," Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 24 February 1987 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 1.

¹¹ In addition to Montgomery's seminal *Beyond Equality*, see Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹² Captain Charles C. Soule, "Address to the Freed People of Orangeburg District," 21 June 1865, in Stephen Hahn, ed. *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867. Series 3, Volume 1: Land and Labor, 1865*, pp. 215-22.

¹³ Laurie uses the term in relation to the 'prudential unionism' in *Artisans into Workers*, 219.