

the consumerist industrial society and as one interest group among many in the political system.

Discussion of the Literature

The historiography of labor and working-class life and struggles in the United States originated in the labor economics movement of Progressive Era intellectuals. This was the stuff of big institutions. John R. Commons at the University of Wisconsin built on the work of earlier labor economists, including Richard T. Ely. Together, Commons and students like Selig Perlman developed a new field of institutional labor history. Taking for granted the growth of industrial production and market relations, they rather optimistically sought to understand the role that workers' self-organization had played in the rise of labor in a U.S. context defined by American workers who were generally narrowly "job-conscious" rather than broadly "class-conscious" in their engagement with the state and industrial corporations. Emphasizing the significance of organized labor, and of trade unionism more specifically, as the key expression of American workers' economic consciousness, the Commons School of labor history necessarily underestimated the importance of the vast majority of workers who were unorganized, and particularly missed the significance of women and racial minorities in the workforce.²⁷

The Commons School of institutional labor history would eventually give way to broader conceptions of the history of work and labor struggles in the context of workers' community and culture. In part, this was because some more radically minded historians did not share the Commons School's commitment to trade unionism; such scholars would recover a long history of labor radicalism in the United States. Scholars focusing on immigration history, women's history, African American history, and urban history would also revise the Commons School's arguments, seeking to understand the ways that working-class culture and economic politics manifested themselves outside of the trade union movement. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, scholars such as Melvyn Dubofsky, David Montgomery, Herbert Gutman, and David Brody had begun to examine what would be known as the "new social history" or the "new labor history."²⁸ Given shape by E. P. Thompson's monumental *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963),²⁹ this impulse to study the ways workers create, and are created by, the world around them inspired more than a generation of work that sought out the connections between work, community, and power in the United States, where a Marxist-style class-consciousness had never been predominant. The new labor history also gave rise to scholars, perhaps inspired by the black freedom struggle and other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, who sought to recover the history of women, slaves and free blacks, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans.³⁰

Since the 1980s, there has been a persistent sense that the field of labor history has been in a crisis, even as the production of labor and working-class scholarship has hardly slowed. With the cast of characters growing and local case studies multiplying every year, some observers wondered if a synthesis of the literature was possible. Was there ever such a thing that could be defined as *the* American labor and working-class history? Moreover, poststructuralism and postmodern cultural criticism called into question whether "class" could serve as a unifying concept. As Joan Wallach Scott would explain, it was not enough just to add women (or black workers, or immigrant workers, etc.) to the stage of history.³¹ It was not even enough to recover the experiences of previously underrepresented workers as some sort of objective evidence for what it meant to be different kinds of working-class people. Historians had to give up the notion that any social category—race, class, gender, sexuality—had any content outside of its historical context in that