

moment. They had to focus on the ways that people constantly create and re-create their identities; it was argued that it may be all one can do to explain that process of conscious and unconscious creation of self in a world that cannot be known as a whole.

To make matters more difficult for labor historians, as poststructuralism questioned the very categories historians had used to make sense of the past, beginning in the 1980s the political world around them was destroying the very institutions—labor unions—that had given the field coherence. Given the near decimation of organized labor, the decline of manufacturing jobs, and the diversification of the politics and social positions of working-class people, historians have had to rethink the assumptions of the field. No longer could it be taken for granted that a kind of interest-group politics and “business unionism” would be part of the American political economy.

As the implications of Reaganism and Thatcherism, as well as the triangulating centrism of the “New Democrats,” became clearer, historians began to explore labor and working-class history in a kind of blue mood.³² Some have pushed to “bring the state back in” to the story of working-class history in order to highlight the persistent dominance of anti-labor law and government subsidization of finance and manufacturing, as well as the concomitant weakness of workers in the capitalist system.³³ Others have focused on why American workers have built a mode of labor so deeply intertwined with the ideologies and institutions of private property, empire, and racial and gender exclusion.³⁴ For many, the watchwords became hegemony, agency, infrapolitics, resistance, identity, and culture, as they sought to shed light on the power of the state, corporate leaders, and employers to bring about workers’ accommodation to regimes of inequity or, alternatively, how even the most subordinated workers had managed to make their own history. This latter work, which had been initiated earlier by feminist and black historians, reshaped the investigations of all workers, bringing questions of whiteness, gender identity, and sexuality to the fore.³⁵

The nearly complete triumph of anti-union politics, together with the global resurgence of economic inequality, has been so dramatic that historians have become skeptical of the value of recovering histories of workers’ agency. To be sure, with the ripples of mass militancy in the early 21st century there has been some effort to recover lost traditions of radicalism.³⁶ But, generally speaking, the current conditions have become so reminiscent of the turn of the 20th century that historians have come to look for continuities not just of radicalism, but also of the connections among American imperialism, economic growth, and workers’ positions in a persistently unequal global economy. The historian Leon Fink, for instance, has joined a growing group of scholars in arguing that the history of American workers must be understood in light of transnational economic and political dynamics, and the evolution of global capitalism.³⁷ In part, these histories counter notions that we live in a postracial, classless society where inequality is a sign of a healthy economy. But they are also attempts to make a clear-eyed assessment of the continuities in combined corporate and state power, whether one looks, for example, at the control of workers in the Panama Canal Zone or at the place of “unskilled” workers in a globalizing economy in the “Long Gilded Age.”³⁸

From this perspective, the period between 1935 and the mid-1970s—the prime years of the “New Deal Order”—when the United States enjoyed its longest period of sustained economic growth along with the greatest equality of income in the industrial era, is really “the long exception.”³⁹ If this is true, some argue that historians ought to look to the period between 1896 and 1945 for the most pertinent lessons on how workers have struggled to reconcile their values and traditions in an individualistic consumer society, when they have fought or accommodated with the realities of corporate dominance of the political and economic systems, and how those struggles both made great gains for