

## SURVEY

### “Mind Forg’d Manacles” and Recent Pathways to “New” Labor Histories

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**ABSTRACT:** Since the 1990s, labor history has been presented as “in crisis”. This negative evaluation is an overstatement. It has nevertheless prodded historians, often productively, to rethink the basic orientations of working-class history. This survey article explores three recent pathways to a “new” labor history: the turn to transnational and global study; the “new” history of capitalism; and the study of slavery as unfree labor. These new approaches to labor history highlight an old dilemma: how the structured determinations of laboring life are balanced alongside dimensions of human agency in understanding the complex experience of the working-class past. It is argued that we need to consider both structure *and* agency in the researching and writing of labor history. If an older “new” labor history accented agency, new pathways to labor history too often seem constrained by “mind forg’d manacles” that limit understandings of workers’ past lives by emphasizing structure and determination.

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In any writing on the history of subordinate groups, such as the working class, how we present our empirical findings and analysis is a product of diverse influences and inclinations. Latitudes can be consciously extended, while limitations are sometimes unacknowledged. Among the latter are the fetters on human consciousness that constrain important sensibilities, including appreciations of the ways in which the oppressed and exploited have sought paths to liberation.

This was recognized in William Blake’s song of commercial capital’s experience, “London”, penned in 1794:

I wander thro’ each charter’d street  
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow.  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every man,  
 In every Infant's cry of fear  
 In every voice; in every ban,  
 The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

"London" is a song of early capitalism's capacity to degrade; of class and gender as foundational cornerstones in the oppressive commerce of metropolitan capital, whose tentacles reached around the globe, where the ravages of diverse regimes of brutalizing production fed the bourgeois epoch's insatiable appetite for accumulation. It is a poetic articulation of "experience" as determination's exacted costs, and of how some of the price paid by the dispossessed is expressed in anguished resignation. In the "mind forg'd manacles" lie barriers to the making of oppositional movements and mobilizations, to histories of resistance. Capitalism's "charter'd" landscape left its mark on the countenance of the plebeian masses and laboring people, but so, too, did the internalized defeats and deformations of thought and possibility conditioned by the omnipresent repression that Blake saw shackling the agency of oppressed humanity.<sup>1</sup>

In another of Blake's songs of this late eighteenth-century saga of acquisition, and its willing branding of innocent human bodies and souls as chattels, Blake traced the "marks of weakness, marks of woe" to southern plantations. It was there that slavery's "charter" powerfully augmented the banking houses lining London's streets and outfitted the ships making their way along the Thames and other conduits of capital:

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
 And I am black, but O! my soul is white;  
 White as an angel is the English child:  
 But I am black as if bereav'd of light.<sup>2</sup>

Class, race, and gender, then, have long been recognized as central components in the making of the modern world, figuring forcefully in material life and the varied ways in which labor has been recruited, organized, and exploited. They register in the forms of resistance and accommodation arising out of both the "innocence" that questions oppression ("my soul is white") and the "experience" that conjures up oppression ("bereav'd of light"). This two-sidedness of historical process is foundational to the nature of Blake's elegant poetics. In all of this, as activity *within* history, as well as analytic engagement with this working-class past, the "mind forg'd manacles" that constrain both historical actors and

1. For insightful commentary on Blake's poem see E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York, 1993), pp. 174–194, which includes the entire version of the short poem, "London". Also useful, for situating Blake's poem, is Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford, 1992).  
 2. David V. Erdman, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (New York, 1982), p. 9.

historical interpretation are invariably a part of the past *and* a feature of the analytic present.

In what follows, developments in the field of labor history are addressed as a way of looking at how research and writing on the working class has changed. Central to this essay, however, is a critical engagement with three recent historiographical “turns”, all of which grew out of destabilizing developments of the late 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, generally taken to designate a historiographic crisis that halted the advance of labor history.<sup>3</sup>

### *Destabilizations*

Lenard R. Berlanstein, writing in 1993, provided an early post-mortem:

Recently, the collapse of communism, the ostensible universal enchantment with the marketplace as liberator, and the strength of ethnic over class identities do not lend credence to the role of the working class as an agent of change. At the same time, flourishing women’s movements have cast doubt on the claims of a male-dominated left to speak for the emancipation of all people. The changed political climate forces historians to wonder if they have been posing the right questions.<sup>4</sup>

Almost a decade later, similar positions were also being espoused by Elizabeth Faue, a gender historian of labor. She concluded, in 2002, that the analytic failures of Marxism, postmodernism, and masculine-centered accounts of the workplace, in conjunction with the collapse of the Soviet Union, left class, as an interpretive category, wanting in both substance and audience: “More and more class to me looks less like a structure and more like an empty vessel into which all pour content. It exists even now in mainstream American culture as an origin story that has lost its claim on the popular imagination. Since the dismantling of the Soviet bloc, it has lost in scholarly sectors as well”.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, there were commentators who refused to see labor history as having entirely succumbed, taking the opportunity, as did Ira Katznelson, to insist that:

[A]ssessed by the standards of the craft of history, more excellent work is being done now than ever before. Read as an empirical genre, irrespective of trends in

3. I do not accept the declension narrative, but recognize that much historiographic commentary assumes this decline and thus furthers a social construction of the demise of a field. In what follows, I refer mostly to writing on labor in Canada and the United States, but the trends referred to have a wider resonance. For informed comment outside of these specific histories see, among many possible texts: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890–1940* (Princeton, NJ, 1989); Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Oakland, CA, 2005); Jan Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern, 2006).

4. Lenard R. Berlanstein, “Introduction”, in Berlanstein (ed.), *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 1993), p. 5.

5. Elizabeth Faue, “Retooling the Class Factory: United States Labor History After Marx, Montgomery, and Postmodernism”, *Labour History*, 82 (2002), pp. 109–119.

the world or normative commitments, labor history has never been better, more diverse or richly textured. Impressively, it is the site of important epistemological debates. Further, labor history has extended its domain to include subjects such as drink, crime, leisure, sexuality and the family it once either ignored or relegated to the periphery of its concerns.

Katznelson conceded that, in William Sewell's words, labor history was mired in some "continuing intellectual doldrums", and his impression was that the field had suffered a loss of élan, directionality, and intellectual purpose. That said, Katznelson did not agree that the field was in crisis, and offered a way forward, via the "new institutionalism" of political science and sociology, whereby labor historians could return to Geoff Eley's and Keith Nield's earlier provocation to revitalize the study of the political. For Katznelson, this might productively be engaged by addressing the "bourgeois" dimensions of subjects such as law and the state, both of which had considerable purchase on working-class lives.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the apparent waning of working-class history in the 1990s had become so dominant a decade later that this political scientist's push to critically engage with labor history in 1994 was dubbed a mourning, cited one-sidedly, conveying an exaggerated assessment of interpretive malaise.<sup>7</sup> Almost a decade later, Sven Beckert would write of the denouement of labor history's American "golden age" in ways that reconfigured the demise politically. Beckert explained that:

With the labor movement found wanting, workers' collective identities, especially as expressed in the realm of culture, increasingly moved to the center of attention. The inability to find a socialist project among the American working class that matched, a cynic might say, the perhaps exaggerated expectations of historians, led scholars ultimately to make do with collective picnics in the park.

Needless to say, this retrospective (and rather condescendingly dismissive) view of the history of the working class was unsustainable, and Beckert concluded that, by the 2000s, "graduate students and their mentors had lost enthusiasm for the history of workers and their institutions".<sup>8</sup>

6. Ira Katznelson, "The "Bourgeois" Dimension: A Provocation About Institutions, Politics and the Future of Labor History", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46 (1994), pp. 7–32; William Sewell, "Toward a Post-materialist Rhetoric for Labor History", in Berlanstein, *Rethinking Labor History*, p. 16; Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?" *Social History*, 5 (May 1980), pp. 249–271. For examples of labor history and the study of the law see the essays in Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Work on Trial: Canadian Labour Law Struggles* (Toronto, 2010) and Marcel van der Linden and Richard Price (eds), *The Rise and Development of Collective Labour Law* (Bern, 2001).

7. Contrast what Katznelson actually says in the opening paragraph of "The "Bourgeois" Dimension", with how the essay is quoted in Leon Fink, "What is to be Done – In Labor History?" *Labor History*, 43 (2002), p. 419.

8. Sven Beckert, "History of American Capitalism", in Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr (eds), *American History Now* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011), pp. 317–318.

Within this declension deconstruction, the drift to new interpretive panaceas proliferated. They have changed with striking rapidity over the course of the last four decades, with an astute commentator on the signs in the street of American working-class historiography, Leon Fink, offering a series of mappings and prognoses.<sup>9</sup> In his latest, 2011 assessment, Fink offers an optimistic statement on “how a field survived hard times”, detailing, in his view, labor history’s resilience in the face of the organized trade union movement’s collapse and the demise of 1960s-style mobilizations for progressive social change. Neoliberalism’s ravages aside, Fink sees two “nutritive supplements” sustaining labor history through tough times. First, a fresh focus on “multidimensional borderlands”, in which former peripheral regions and work sites have come to the research forefront, explorations that often involve transnational inquiries, new regional studies of frontier zones within the United States, and occupational histories far removed from traditional concerns with factory, mine, and mill. Second, labor history has been revived, relatedly, by new refusals to take “for granted a neat division among slavery, contract, and ‘free’ labor systems”.<sup>10</sup>

It is Fink’s *understanding* of this historiographic trajectory that is perhaps most intriguing. On the one hand, a humanistic interest in ordinary working people and the diversity and richness of their cultural lives took the study of workers in many positive and imaginative directions in the post-1960s writing, influenced by E.P. Thompson, Herbert G. Gutman, and David Montgomery.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, all of this lent new purpose and passion to labor history, recasting understandings of the institutions, politics, and struggles that had long been regarded as central to the oppositional substance of class under capitalism. These two “identifiable sources of inspiration” had produced a library of impressive studies by the 1990s, and published research would continue to appear, but by this late date Fink suggested that the shelf life of this project “had largely expired”.<sup>12</sup>

9. Leon Fink, “Looking Backward”, in Carrol J. Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (eds), *Perspectives on American History: Problems of Synthesis* (DeKalb, IL, 1989), pp. 5–29; *idem*, “Culture’s Last Stand: Gender and the Search for Synthesis in American Labor History”, *Labor History*, 34 (1993), pp. 178–189; *idem*, “What is to be Done”, pp. 419–424; *idem*, “The Great Escape: How a Field Survived Hard Times”, *Labor: Working-Class History of the Americas*, 8 (2011), pp. 109–115.

10. Fink, “The Great Escape”, pp. 109–115.

11. The undeniable influence of E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), was paramount, but in the United States the different approaches of Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1976) and David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, 1979) also registered decisively.

12. Fink, “The Great Escape”, pp. 109–110.

What new kind of shelf now supports the study of labor? What is the state of the art of labor history as a field? At the current conjuncture, three new pathways to the creation of a reinvigorated labor history are heralded as decisively important, championed as routes out of the apparent malaise of a field desperately in need of reconstruction. In the transnational turn to a global labor history, in reconfiguring working-class history as an integral component of “the history of capitalism”, and in stretching consideration of class experience beyond waged workers to a range of “unfree” toilers, including slaves, the promise of a “new” history of the working class is ostensibly to be realized. These new turns, it must be said, promise not only new subjects of study, but new ways of conceiving class relations, accenting economies and varied kinds of work across spectrums of differentiation, in which the wage is no longer hegemonic and informal regimes of toil challenge the dominance of clearly regulated and market-ordered employments.

*Recent Paths, I: The Transnational Turn and the  
Rise of a Global History of Labor*

Not surprisingly, in an age of globalization, and as new social movements arose in the aftermath of the post-Seattle World Trade Organization protests of 1999, labor historians began to accent the transnational in their studies. To be sure, comparative and transnational studies of the working class are hardly new, with Eric J. Hobsbawm’s essays exhibiting, from the 1960s to the 1980s, an increasing concern with the comparative dimension of labor’s national experiences.<sup>13</sup> Labor internationalism has long captivated historians of the working class, with one of the more recent collections of essays indicative of the important role feminist influence in the broad field has exercised, addressing as it does suffrage and socialist women and the important place of transnational organization.<sup>14</sup> Arguably the most prolific of the comparative, transnational historians of the working class, Neville Kirk, has been writing in the field from the early 1990s, and has produced an extensive body of work touching down on Britain, the United States, and Australia, focusing on labor politics.<sup>15</sup> Historians of race and empire, such

13. See E.J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964) and *idem*, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York, 1985).

14. See R.W. Postgate, *The Workers’ International* (New York, 1920); Lewis L. Lorwin, *Labor and Internationalism* (New York, 1929); Marcel van der Linden and Frits L. van Holthoorn (eds), *Internationalism in the Labour Movement, 1830–1940* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 1988); Victor Silverman, *Imagining Internationalism in American and British Labor* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 1989); Pernilla Jonsson, Silke Neunsinger, and Joan Sangster (eds), *Crossing Boundaries: Women’s Organizing in Europe and the Americas, 1880s–1940s* (Uppsala, 2007).

15. Neville Kirk, *Labor and Society in Britain and the USA*, vol. I: *Capitalism, Custom and Protest, 1780–1850* & vol. II: *Challenge and Accommodation, 1850–1939* (Aldershot, 1994); *idem*,

as Laura Tabili, have inevitably conducted their research in a transnational vein,<sup>16</sup> as have Americanists such as Leon Fink, intent on tracing migrant and seafaring labor in ways that transcend borders.<sup>17</sup> Much of the provocative analytic *chutzpa* of this transnationalism was evident in Peter Linebaugh’s and Marcus Rediker’s excavation of the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic, a path-breaking study of slaves and sailors.<sup>18</sup>

Transnational and comparative working-class history necessarily confronts issues of labor recruitment and displacement central to capital’s mobility, a story as old as the indentured servitude that fed the appetite of accumulation in settings as varied as Transvaal gold mines or Assam tea plantations.<sup>19</sup> In North America, as well, this has proven a subject of long-standing interest. To be sure, the forms this broad subject has taken throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries differ significantly, as evidenced in Canadian studies of “labor continentalism”, be this topic addressed by Robert Babcock, Sally Zerker, Peter Way, or, more directly, in my own exploration of the colonization of the eastern Ontario “backcountry” by the Goodyear tire enterprise in 1990.<sup>20</sup> The cluster of important recent monographs emanating from United States and Canadian

*Comrades and Cousins: Globalization, Workers, and Labour Movements in Britain, the USA, and Australia from the 1880s to 1914* (London, 2003); *idem*, *Labour and the Politics of Empire: Australia and Britain from 1900 to the Present Day* (Manchester, 2011); *idem*, *Transnational Radicalism and the Connected Lives of Tom Mann and Robert Samuel Ross* (Liverpool, 2017). See also Mary Hilson, *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective: Britain and Sweden, 1890–1920* (Lund, 2006).

16. Laura Tabili, “We Ask for British Justice”: *Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); *idem*, *Global Migrants, Local Culture: Natives and Newcomers in Provincial England, 1841–1939* (New York, 2011).

17. Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morgantown: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); *idem*, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World’s First Globalized Industry from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).

18. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000); Linebaugh, “All the Atlantic Mountains Shook”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 10 (1982), pp. 87–121. See also the pioneering pairing of Canadian and Australian labor historians in writing transnational labor histories in the jointly published issues of *Labour/Le Travail*, 38 (1996) and *Labour History*, 71 (1996).

19. Peter Richardson, *Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal* (London, 1982); Rana P. Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude: Political Economy of Tea Plantations in Colonial Assam* (New Delhi, 2014).

20. Robert H. Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: A Study of American Continentalism Before the First World War* (Toronto, 1975); Sally Zerker, *The Rise and Fall of the Toronto Typographical Union, 1832–1972: A Case Study in Foreign Domination* (Toronto, 1982); Peter Way, *Common Labor: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1760–1860* (New York, 1993); Bryan D. Palmer, *Capitalism Comes to the Backcountry: The Goodyear Invasion of Napanee* (Toronto, 1994). See also, for the United States, Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, NY, 1999).

working-class historians' invigorated interest in cross-border studies reveal much about the movements of labor and capital, their respective places in forging the bonds of economies and empires, and the contradictory experiences of class collectivity. They also address fragmentations of labor, immigrant diasporas, agents of regulation/incorporation, and the place of gender and kin in the chain of migration.<sup>21</sup> This extended reach of North American labor history was detailed in a 2011 edited collection that published a number of essays on "workers across the Americas".<sup>22</sup>

If this fin-de-siècle turn to the transnational never quite managed to grasp the kind of wider global labor history that was being promoted by Marcel van der Linden, Jan Lucassen, and others associated with the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, it nevertheless broke down some long-standing barriers inhibiting the capacity to situate the working class in truly international ways.<sup>23</sup> The range of methodologies, sensibilities, and subjects that might be exhibited and explored through the transnational study of workers trending in the direction of a global labor history is nonetheless sufficiently wide-ranging that it would prove difficult to categorize the work in this burgeoning field in ways that marked out distinct orientations. But something of a tendency was perhaps discernible: the more transnational histories veered towards the comparative and the political, the more they retained something of a connection to earlier social histories; the more they accented the global and labor market striations, the more they took on the trappings of the sociological, in which the model-building of a Wallersteinian world-systems approach was likely to be influential.<sup>24</sup>

21. Way, *Common Labor*; Aviva Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870–1940* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1996); *idem*, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Columbia, and the Making of a Global Working Class* (Durham, NC, 2008); Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York, 2009); Jacob A.C. Remes, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 2016). On immigrant diasporas and labor history see Franca Iacovetta with Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca (eds), *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s–1960s* (Toronto, 1998); Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta (eds), *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto, 2002); Franca Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada* (Toronto, 2006); David Goutor, *Guarding the Gates: The Canadian Labour Movement and Immigration, 1872–1934* (Vancouver, 2007).

22. Leon Fink (ed.), *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York, 2011).

23. Lucassen (ed.), *Global Labour History*; Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward A Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2008).

24. See, for instance, Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, in which the imprint of Immanuel Wallerstein's multi-volume account of the development of the modern world system is pronounced: *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the World*



The impetus to transnational, global histories of labor was certainly given further credence with the far-reaching economic crisis of 2007–2008, which ravaged North America and Europe, its impact felt across continents. Manifesting itself acutely within the United States, where a subprime mortgage meltdown decimated a working class prone, in a neoliberal era of forced trade union retreats, to accept rising housing prices as a banked bulwark against declining real wages, the impact of the crisis was devastating. The continuities and realities of class subordination, seemingly disrupted and obscured by the “end of history” ideology, were now all too tragically exposed. In this context, it was not surprising that Marx was resurrected. Class was put back on the agenda of discussion, not so much by labor historians as by progressive journalists and business commentators. This paved the way for a social democratic French economist to make a considerable splash with a fat, dense, graph-littered book addressing inequality under capitalism.<sup>25</sup>

*Recent Paths, II: “The History of Capitalism” as Labor History*

Capitalist crisis and its class discontents were now very much topical considerations of historical interpretation; Marxist political economy and its categories of analysis seemed resuscitated; and postmodernism and its assault on “metanarratives” of capitalism, inequality, and social stratification downgraded to a post-status.<sup>26</sup> But the new shelf that would support and sustain labor histories in this context was an odd one. Even as capitalism foundered, and class and its injuries, no longer quite so hidden, seemed forced into the public discourse, a revival of labor history could, apparently, only take place through a kind of consumer rebranding. Thus, a truly “new” labor history was to be launched under the auspices of a somewhat commodified “new history of capitalism”, heralded as encompassing workers and businessmen, politics and the state, racialized

*Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York and London, 1974); *The Modern World System II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World Economy, 1600–1750* (New York, 1980); *The Modern World System III: The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Modern World Economy, 1730–1840s* (San Diego, CA, 1989).

25. For the popular, journalistic discussions coming out of the 2007–2008 crisis see, as a sampling only: “Is Class Back?”, *The Economist*, 15 December 2008; Michelle Golderberg, “A Generation of Intellectuals Shaped by 2008 Crash Rescues Marx from History’s Dustbin”, *Tablet*, 14 October 2013; Michael Schuman, “Marx’s Revenge: How Class Struggle is Shaping the World”, *Time*, 25 March 2013; Ross Douthat, “Marx Rises Again”, *New York Times Sunday Review*, 19 April 2014; Timothy Shenk, “Thomas Piketty and the Millennial Marxists on the Scourge of Inequality”, *The Nation*, 5 May 2014. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), was the beneficiary of this groundwork.

26. Leon Fink, Joseph A. McCartin, and Joan Sangster (eds), *Workers in Hard Times: A Long View of Economic Crises* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 2014).

populations and gendered experiences, wage earners and slaves, metropolitan economies and hinterland habitats.

For many older practitioners of the so-called new labor history, this orientation of approaching working-class experience through the history of capitalism was something of a sleight of hand; they had always thought their research and writing situated within understandings and appreciations of capitalism's development. As David Montgomery said in a 1981 interview, "[a]lthough my specialty is working-class history, the subject I am trying to get at is the history of capitalism".<sup>27</sup> Skepticism on the part of many labor historians with respect to their seeing "the history of capitalism" as a new field was perhaps deepened when it was grasped that this approach was unfolding without a precise definition of what capitalism was, the most commonplace understandings equating capitalism loosely with wage labor, markets, and money-making, bridging periods and practices of mercantilism, colonialism, and industrialization.<sup>28</sup>

Stephen Mihm made the case for the integrated interdisciplinarity of an all-encompassing "history of capitalism" approach, insisting that what was novel in this orientation was its ostensible capacity to combine fields "that began growing apart in the 1960s". He elaborated:

The great efflorescence of social history – especially labor history – was a kind of history of capitalism, but told the story largely from the worker's perspective. [...]

27. Mark Naison and Paul Buhle interview with David Montgomery, in Henry Abelove, *et al.* (eds), *Visions of History: Interviews by MARHO* (New York, 1983), p. 176. For a recent history of unwaged workers consciously constructed through exploration of capitalism and its endemic crises see Bryan D. Palmer and Gaetan Heroux, *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto, 2016).

28. On the disinterest on the part of the new historians of capitalism for conceptual clarity see Seth Rockman, "What Makes the History of Capitalism Newsworthy?", *Journal of the Early Republic*, 34 (2014), pp. 442–443; and the lengthy discussion in "Interchange: The History of Capitalism", *Journal of American History*, 101 (2014), pp. 503–536, where the lack of definition of capitalism was often alluded to, as by Naomi Lamoreaux, who stated, "no one is clear about what capitalism is", or Stephen Mihm, who noted that the new history of capitalism was "maddeningly vague about its methods, its focus, even its politics. [...] It is a blank screen onto which people from a wide range of fields project their interests and ambitions". Louis Hyman insisted that, "defining capitalism is a bad idea". Thus, a benchmark study such as Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2015) seems oddly uninformed by and unconcerned with debates that have animated past generations of historians, as recognized by Robin Blackburn, "White Gold, Black Labour", *New Left Review*, 95 (2015), pp. 151–160, who notes that the cavalier "handling of concepts comes at a cost for the analytic structure of the book". Blackburn is particularly critical of Beckert's loose notion of "war capitalism", and suggests that much of what Beckert is addressing through such terminology was less capitalistic than "inter-feudal conflicts" among absolutist states. This history is addressed, of course, in Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974). In contrast, see Jürgen Kocka, "Capitalism: The Reemergence of a Historical Concept", and Marcel van der Linden, "Why the Concept of Capitalism Exists", *ISHA Newsletter*, 5 (November 2016), pp. 1–7 and 7–14.

The history of capitalism attempts to see capitalism from multiple angles using multiple methodologies. That means writing works of history that deliberately erode disciplinary barriers. It means, for example, doing history “from the bottom up, all the way to the top” [...].

Sven Beckert pursued labor history’s relationship to the “history of capitalism” further, offering the view that an older historiography of workers constituted a narrowing field that had “reached an impasse”, a subject “in need of new perspectives”. By embracing “history of American capitalism”, Beckert insisted, United States labor historians could “link [...] their work [...] to the concerns of a broader field that is arguably central to the American historical profession”.<sup>29</sup>

But what happens to the working class when this kind of “history of capitalism” is indeed written? For the most part, what is developed best is the history of labor’s objectification: the processes of recruitment that culminate in the development of specific labor regimes and the ostensibly determinative structural coordinates that situate workers in particular employment spaces, often within a world system. There ends up being very little agency exhibited by the working class, resistance is acknowledged, but aligned as an endnote to the elaborations of capital’s circuits, in which what rises and falls seldom does so in ways that either give workers voice or allow them vibrant visibility. Thus, in Beckert’s fine study *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2015), which has many attributes and is a welcomed addition to our understanding of a commodity that figured decisively in the making of the modern world, the chapter on the “global reconstruction” of the cotton economy at the time of the American Civil War and its immediate aftermath repeatedly addresses “new systems of labor”, but reference to freed slaves, sharecroppers, and others appear as abstractions of accumulation, objects of coercion and discipline. The next chapter, addressing the “destructions” that followed with the rapid rise of industrial capitalism and its ramifications within “cotton’s empire” explores how in the United States, India, Egypt, China and elsewhere metropolitan capital integrated rural production and urban manufacturing, a process of consolidation in which states orchestrated contract law, property rights, transportation systems, and imperial control over territories the better to rationalize and extend markets and discipline labor. For the actual producers, this spelled, in Beckert’s word, “social catastrophe”. From the 1870s to the 1890s, destitution stalked the cotton-producing regions of India, as landless agricultural laborers and former weavers “died like flies”, millions succumbing to famine-induced starvation. Beckert acknowledges that the violent imposition of market discipline and its lethal uncertainties provoked

29. Mihm, “Interchange: The History of Capitalism”, pp. 503–536; Beckert, “History of American Capitalism”, p. 315.

rebellion, but this appears as a brief afterthought, an add-on to the much more developed outline of capital's transformative power.<sup>30</sup>

For histories that struggle to bring together labor and capital there *are* existing accounts relevant to this process that have attempted to situate labor more directly at the center of narratives of political economy. There is nary a mention of W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America* (1935) in Beckett's *Empire of Cotton*, for instance, even though this classic statement contains commentary that is directly pertinent. DuBois wrote:

That dark and vast sea of human labor in China and India, the South Seas and all Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States – that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry – shares a common destiny; it is despised and rejected by race and color; paid a wage below the level of decent living; driven, beaten, prisoned and enslaved in all but name; spawning the world's raw material and luxury – cotton, wool, coffee, tea, cocoa, palm oil, fibers, spices, rubber, silks, lumber, copper, gold, diamonds, leather – how shall we end the list and where? All these are gathered up at prices lowest of the low, manufactured, transformed and transported at fabulous gain; and the resultant wealth is distributed and displayed and made the basis of world power and universal dominion and armed arrogance in London and Paris, Berlin and Rome, New York and Rio de Janeiro.

DuBois's understanding of this capitalism *never* loses sight of labor, black *and* white, and it is a pioneering statement of how freed slaves fought for emancipation, mounted what DuBois designated a General Strike, and, through aspirations and actions, attempted to reconstruct democracy in America.<sup>31</sup>

What this suggests is that “the new history of capitalism” framework might well prove restricted with respect to labor, a shortcoming that is perhaps understandable given the global sweep of this emerging orientation. The problem is not so much a bibliographic lapse, as in the non-referencing of DuBois, however, as it is the ways in which the interpretive scale of a global history of capitalism adapts to an imposed limit on interpretive sensibilities, restricting understandings. There is something of a dissonance, then, in Marcel van der Linden's admonition to create global

30. Beckett, *Empire of Cotton*, pp. 274–349. I am, of course, not disputing capital's victories, only that a “history of capitalism” that is developed in this manner, paying such little attention to labor's resistance, cannot claim to have integrated “the history of labor” into its narrative. See, as well, Giorgio Riello, *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (New York, 2013); and Behal, *One Hundred Years of Servitude*.

31. W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York, 1935), pp. 15–16. For a reminder of DuBois's importance, and his influence on a radical engagement with labor history, see Interview with Montgomery, *Visions of History*, p. 178.

understanding of how unique events, “widely separated in time and place, reveal, when brought into relation with each other, regularities of process”. The words that Van der Linden offers come from E.P. Thompson. Yet, there is too little acknowledgement that the method of Thompson’s historical works, which involved deep research into particular aspects of working-class history at very specific, often local, junctures, translate awkwardly into the kinds of generalized, wide-ranging, and sometimes abstracted histories, with their accent on the structural rather than subjective features of laboring life, which both “the history of capitalism” and “global” approaches tend to nurture.<sup>32</sup>

Even when “the history of capitalism” approach unfolds within the discrete research focus of a specific terrain, as in Seth Rockman’s study of slavery, wage labor, and survival in early Baltimore, such writing tends to place the analytic accent on the disciplines of work and the market. This frames the mechanisms of adaptation of working people (an emphasis enhanced by the early period of study, in which organizations and systems of oppositional thought tend to be less developed than in subsequent eras), highlighting resilience over resistance.<sup>33</sup> In a review of Michael Zakim’s and Gary J. Kornbluth’s edited collection, *Capitalism Takes Command* (2014), Rockman addresses women’s experience in the early American republic along such lines, suggesting how “working people’s strategies in the informal sector may reveal a competing history of finance and speculation. Because the early republic labor market was so functionally dependent on categories of social difference, work provides the clearest vantage on capitalism’s investments in patriarchy and white supremacy”. This is a far cry from how Herbert G. Gutman addressed the Lowell mill girls in his famous article, “Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America”.<sup>34</sup> Small wonder that Rockman notes that the editors of *Capitalism Takes Command* offer “a new set of questions to guide historical inquiry: not “Who built America?” but rather “Who sold America?” or perhaps more to the point, “Who financed those sales?””<sup>35</sup>

32. See Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, esp. p. 378, and contrast this with the statement in the preface to Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 9–14, where the peculiarities of particular cultures are recognized and the specificity of sources acknowledged.

33. Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD, 2008). Not all of this accent on resilience versus resistance can be attributed to the period of study. Note G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 1981), addressing *struggle* and the focus on resilience in Craig Heron, *Lunch-Bucket Lives: Remembering the Workers’ City* (Toronto, 2015), a detailed history of workers in an archetypal early twentieth-century industrial-capitalist city.

34. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornbluth (eds), *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago, IL, 2012); Herbert G. Gutman, “Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919”, *American Historical Review*, 78 (1973), pp. 531–588.

35. Seth Rockman, “What Makes the History of Capitalism Noteworthy?”, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 34 (2014), pp. 439–466, esp. pp. 464, 453. The shift away from “Who built America?” is an obvious reference to the suggested value of distancing scholarship from the Gutman-inspired

Jeffrey Sklansky has recently discerned that much of the recent “history of capitalism” literature on financialization and crises, such as Scott Reynolds Nelson’s unfortunately titled *A Nation of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of America’s Financial Disasters* (2012), constitutes the “return of a form of consensus history in which capitalist dictates confront no serious rivals”. Thus, for Sklansky, a “conspicuous feature” of a good deal of this new scholarship is to “project backwards into the past the character of twenty-first century capitalism”, in which, as far as class struggle goes, a conservatizing pessimism of the intellect definitely and even defiantly trumps any semblance of a revolutionary optimism of the will.<sup>36</sup> Beckert has said much the same thing, noting that, “[w]orkers are seen as much less autonomous and powerful than in the accounts of an earlier generation of historians, perhaps expressing among other things the darker prospects of labor in the twenty-first century”.<sup>37</sup> But why is it that, if labor is decidedly in retreat in 2015, then it must necessarily have been so in 1885, 1945, or 1965?

This tends to carve out a place of prominence for works like labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein’s excursion into the ways in which the modern retailer, Wal-Mart, exemplifies the “the mutability of capitalism across chronologies and geographies”, integrating “Chinese and American capitalism”.<sup>38</sup> Labor historians are advised to engage seriously with “the surrounding political economy of state and business enterprise”, always a good approach, but one that could well,

and Stephen Brier/Joshua Brown continued American Social History Project, whose major attempt to synthesize working-class history first appeared as American Social History Project, *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation’s Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society*: vol. 1 – *From Conquest and Colonization Through Reconstruction and the Great Uprising of 1877* (New York, 1989); vol. 2 – *From the Gilded Age to the Present* (New York, 1992).

36. Jeffrey Sklansky, “Labor, Money, and the Financial Turn in the History of Capitalism”, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 11 (2014), p. 34; Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A Nation of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of American’s Financial Disasters* (New York, 2012). To be fair to Nelson, he does end his book with a vague reference to Occupy Wall Street, insisting that the “ghostly malcontents”, “reformers who demanded transparency, public accounting, and direct federal oversight”, are with us still and these alternative voices should be heeded. That said, this study of financialization and its crises hardly alludes, as Sklansky suggests, to the politics of an oppositional class struggle. This, however, is central in the important discussion in Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London, 2012).

37. Beckert, “History of American Capitalism”, pp. 325–326.

38. Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Crated a Brave New World* (New York, 2010); *idem*, “The Return of Merchant Capital”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 81 (2012), pp. 8–27; Rockman, “What Makes the History of Capitalism Noteworthy”, pp. 442–443; Beckert, “History of Capitalism”, p. 324. See also Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, MA, 2009). Note as well the discussion in Nelson Lichtenstein, John D. French, Susan Strasser, Sven Beckert, and Peter A. Coclanis, “Always Low Wages? Wal-Mart and the New Global Economy”, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 4 (Spring 2007), pp. 17–64.

under the pressures of the current moment, re-vision class struggles of the past through a lens of softening placation of irreconcilable interests.<sup>39</sup>

If there are clearly no class struggle alternatives, it is not surprising to come to the end of Beckert’s *Empire of Cotton* only to discover that the ravages of capitalism’s development can be smoothed over somewhat. There is an obligatory nod to resistance and the oppositional stands of “the least powerful members of cotton’s empire”, but Beckert looks not so much to a history of “domination and exploitation”, and the struggles it gives rise to, as to a “a parallel story of liberation and creativity”. With the capacity to consume and the necessity to labor lessening in the United States, Beckert notes that the “average American family [...] spends only 3.4 percent of its household income on much more ample clothing – that is, the equivalent of approximately eight days of labor”. Capitalism, Beckert suggests, has enabled “a growth in the churning out of goods that has never been matched by any other system of production”. He is encouraged by the “human capacity to organize our efforts in ever more productive ways”, suggesting that this should “give us hope, the hope that our unprecedented domination over nature will allow us also the wisdom, the power, and the strength to create a society that serves the needs of all the world’s people – an empire of cotton that is not only productive but also just”. No idle dream, this vision of a better acquisitive individualist world’s in birth might well be capable of realization, for “[t]he capitalist revolution, after all, perpetually re-creates our world, just as the world’s looms perpetually manufacture new materials”.<sup>40</sup>

### *Recent Paths, III: Slavery, Capitalism, and Labor*

There remains within the historiography on United States labor an understandable fixation on “free labor” as an intrinsically important analytic

39. The admonition is from Fink, “The Great Escape”, p. 112, but see Fink’s reconsideration of some “Great Strikes” of the Gilded Age in Fink, *The Long Gilded Age: American Capitalism and the Lessons of a New World Order* (Philadelphia, PA, 2015), pp. 34–62. Studies that explore the constellation of state, enterprise, and labor through an examination of repression and anti-union initiatives include David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1993); Chad Pearson, *Reform or Repression: Organizing America’s Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia, PA, 2015). For accounts of repressive citizens’ committee activities, which make it rather difficult to reconcile class antagonisms, see William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903–1947* (St. Paul, MN, 2001); Reinhold Kramer and Tom Mitchell, *When the State Trembled: How A.J. Andrews and the Citizens’ Committee Broke the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto, 2010).

40. Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, pp. 442–443. Blackburn, “White Gold, Black Labour”, expresses surprise (perhaps coyly) that in its claims to address labor, *Empire of Cotton* concludes on the note that it does, but this is arguably precisely because the approach to the working class on the part of “historians of capitalism” understates working-class agency. Contrast this with Blackburn’s acknowledgement of the importance of addressing agency in *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation, and Human Rights* (London, 2011), esp. pp. 318–327.

category in the era of the Civil War, which witnessed significant beginnings of working-class organization and the birth of a unique tradition of labor reform.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, recent studies in North America have often turned to the “unfree” experience of the *padrone* system, prisons and the chain gang, and coolie/indentured labor;<sup>42</sup> historians have long been interested in the role of forced migration and the coercions of the Middle Passage in the making of trans-Atlantic capitalism.<sup>43</sup>

Particularly rich have been accounts of the American south, in which discussions of the plantation system and a racialized slave mode of production have been central building blocks in both the “new history of capitalism” and the impetus towards global histories of labor, studies of slavery understandably opening out into discussions of the triangular trade, merchant capital, and the central role of specific commodities, especially cotton, tobacco, and sugar. There is, of course, no intrinsic reason why so-called free wage labor is necessarily the only site within which histories of workers can be written. As Marcel van der Linden has argued, global histories of labor necessarily grapple with chattel slavery, indenture, and other forms of work organization. Restricting the study of workers to waged labor necessarily inhibits understanding of how work has historically been conducted in diverse settings and contexts.<sup>44</sup>

41. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York, 1967); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); Mark Lause, *Free Labor: The Civil War and the Making of an American Working Class* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 2015).

42. Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* (New York, 1996); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930* (New York, 2000); Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man* (New York, 2006); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD, 2006); Ted McCoy, *Hard Time: Reforming the Penitentiary in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Athabasca, 2012). For indentured labor in Canada the experience of early *voyageurs* and *coureurs de bois* is instructive. See Edith Burley, *Servants of the Honourable Company: Work, Discipline, and Conflict in the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1770–1879* (Toronto, 1997); Carolyn Podruchny, *Making the Voyageur World: Travelers and Traders in the North American Fur Trade* (Lincoln, NE, 2006); Gilles Havard, *Histoire des coureurs de bois. Amérique du Nord, 1600–1840* (Paris, 2016). Note, as well, Matthias van Rossum, Christian De Vito, Juliane Schiel, and Jesus Agua de la Roza, “Moving the “Free and Unfree Labour” Debate Forward”, *ISHA Newsletter*, 5 (November 2016), pp. 15–17.

43. Paul E. Lovejoy and Nicholas Rogers (eds), *Unfree Labour in the Development of the Atlantic World* (London, 1994); Emma Christopher, Cassandra Pybus, and Marcus Rediker (eds), *Many Middle Passages: Forced Migration and the Making of the Modern World* (Berkeley, CA, 2007); Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, 2007).

44. Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, pp. 17–78; also Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and Unfree Labor: The Debate Continues* (Bern, 1998). Van der Linden tends to pose his arguments about broadening our appreciations of labor beyond its waged form against what he refers to as “orthodox Marxism”, suggesting that this conceptual framework inhibits understanding of slaves (and others whose work and survival depends on activities that are in some way



The history of workers in the United States, moreover, has never been able to be written without appreciation of the role slave labor played in the making of class relations and American development. This has been evident for some time, as even a reading of scholars writing in the 1930s and 1940s, such as DuBois and Louis Hacker, would suggest, and as historians like David Montgomery, Herbert G. Gutman, and Ira Berlin later made abundantly clear.<sup>45</sup>

unfree) as laborers because it is premised on the notion that capitalism is ordered by the contradiction between bourgeois and proletarian, with the latter defined as free wage workers. This is congruent with recent “history of capitalism” perspectives, but it elevates the forms of class relations, which can of course be characterized by a wide diversity of possibilities, over the essence of these relations. It can be argued, for instance, that the central feature of class relations under capitalism is not ordered by the wage, but by dispossession, which Marx discussed with respect to “primitive accumulation”. In this sense, while he tended to accent the creation of a wage laboring class as a consequence of dispossession, Marx never wrote in a systematic way about slave labor within a world system of capitalist development, but he was aware of the reciprocities of so-called free wage labor and slave labor, writing that, “the veiled slavery of the wage-workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery pure and simple in the new world” (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, vol. I (Moscow, n.d.), pp. 759–760; also Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p. 224. This seemingly coincides with Wallerstein’s view that a combination of free skilled labor in the core countries of capitalist development is paralleled by coerced less skilled work in peripheral regions, with Wallerstein claiming that this “combination” is “the essence of capitalism”. (Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy*, p. 27). Such an orientation is unduly orchestrated by a mechanical binary opposition of regionalized labor forms. The discussion, then, is not so much about slaves and free wage workers counter-posed to one another, with slaves as somehow outside of discussions of labor under a global system of developing capitalism, but a larger discussion of whether, within this developing capitalism, slavery would eventually pose an opposition to capital’s advance, a brake on its further expansion and accelerating dynamic. History suggests that this was indeed the case, and that is why the dialectical relationship of slavery and capitalism is the issue, rather than some kind of oppositional ordering of free versus unfree labor. This issue runs through much of what follows in this section, but for now see Michael Denning, “Wageless Life”, *New Left Review*, 66 (November–December 2010), pp. 79–97; Bryan D. Palmer, “Reconsiderations of Class: Precariousness as Proletarianization”, in *The Socialist Register, 2014: Registering Class, 50 Years, 1964–2014* (2014), pp. 40–62; Sidney W. Mintz, “Was the Plantation Slave a Proletarian?”, *Review*, 2 (1978), pp. 81–908; Mary Turner (ed.), *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (London, 1995), and the complex and sophisticated arguments in Philip McMichael, “Slavery in Capitalism: The Rise and Decline of the U.S. Ante-bellum Cotton Culture”, *Theory and Society*, 20 (1991), pp. 321–349; Dale W. Tomich, *Through the Prism of Slavery: Labor, Capital, and World Economy* (Lanham, MD, 2004).

45. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction*; Louis M. Hacker, *The Triumph of American Capitalism: The Development of Forces in American History to the End of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1940); Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*; *idem*, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1994); Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, ed. by Ira Berlin (New York, 1987).

Rightly seeing the history of slavery as a history of labor, works structured around understandings such as Walter Johnson's "slave labor capitalism" not surprisingly adopt an approach to agency congruent with those who have recently studied workers within the "history of capitalism" framework. Johnson has posited views "on agency" that echo certain Foucauldian governmentality theorists, who eschew studies of resistance. Johnson argues that addressing agency can only be done as an act of caricature and self-righteous conceit, in which, "if we are to draw credibility by doing our work in the name of the enslaved and then seek to discharge our debt to their history by simply 'giving them back their agency' as paid in the coin of a better history, some knowing laughter, and a few ironic asides about the moral idiocy and contradictory philosophy of the slaveholders, then I think we must admit we are practicing therapy". Agency annihilated in this manner, Johnson calls upon us to "re-immers[e] ourselves in the nightmare of History rather than resting easy while dreaming that it is dawn and we have awakened".<sup>46</sup>

Slavery as capitalistic nightmare is certainly one way to describe Edward E. Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (2014), a book championed for situating slavery at the crossroads of capitalist development in ways comparable to what Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* does for a critical commodity in global history's political economy.<sup>47</sup> Marx recognized that capital's reign was embedded in a

46. "Slave racial capitalism" is from Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, 2013), which describes the cotton frontier of plantation slavery as "full throttle capitalism". The comments on agency appear in Johnson, "On Agency", *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2003), pp. 113–124. In eschewing how historians have addressed "agency", "experience", and "resistance", Johnson's position can perhaps be likened to the extreme Foucauldian governmentality repudiation in Mariana Valverde, "Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis", *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 33 (2000), pp. 59–77, and Johnson cites favorably Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience", *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), pp. 773–797. For a Canadian engagement with "experience" see, in contrast, Joan Sangster, "Words of Experience/Experiencing Words: Reading Working Women's Letters to Canada's Royal Commission on the Status of Women", in *idem*, *Through Feminist Eyes: Essays on Canadian Women's History* (Athabasca, 2011), pp. 359–390. Johnson has recently written on slavery, racial capitalism, and justice, addressing the pivotal importance of DuBois's *Black Reconstruction* and Cedric J. Robinson's *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London, 1983). Many issues arise from this discussion, but one important feature of DuBois's centrally-important work was surely the agency attributed to black workers in the periods of slavery and Reconstruction. See Johnson, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice", *Boston Review*, 26 October 2016.

47. Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014); Dan Rood, "Beckert is Liverpool, Baptist is New Orleans", *Journal of the Early Republic*, 36 (2016), pp. 151–168; Fergus M. Bordewich, "'The Half has Never Been Told' by Edward E. Baptist", *Wall Street Journal*, 5 September 2014; Felicia R. Lee, "Harvesting Cotton-Field Capitalism: Edward Baptist's New Book Follows the Money on Slavery", *New York Times*, 3 October 2014.

“primitive accumulation” that included racialized global plunder and dispossession: “The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”<sup>48</sup> Baptist would no doubt find this acknowledgement insufficient and, unlike Marx, but very much like recent “historians of capitalism”, he pays too little attention to defining what was capitalistic about slavery and what, within slavery, may well have coexisted in contradictory tension with capitalism’s long-term development.<sup>49</sup> Such questions tend to be displaced in Baptist’s entirely justified moral outrage at how black lives mattered so little to the slave-owners who drove them, under the brutal, tortuous use of public punishment, to produce more so that plantation profits could be sustained. He offers a richly-detailed narrative of what was done *to* African American slaves, and this *is* a story that can never be told too often. But Baptist is simply wrong to insist that the horrors of slavery as coerced labor have never been recounted before, as more than one commentator has stressed.<sup>50</sup>

Baptist presents his story of slavery as a sweeping corrective, a truth tale that can, unlike virtually any previous research, produce a proper redress.

48. Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 751.

49. The relationship of slavery and capitalism is a complicated one, behind which lie rich theoretical and historiographic literatures, as suggested in footnote 44 above. Consider, for instance, the discussion in John J. Clegg, “Capitalism and Slavery”, *Critical Historical Studies*, 2 (2015), pp. 281–304. James Oakes suggests that the issue is not so much whether slavery was or was not “capitalist”, but that investigations look at the “complicated relationship between capitalism and slavery”. See James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (London and New York, 1998), p. xii.

50. Note, in particular the comments of Trevor D. Logan in “Round Table of Reviews: *The Half Has Never Been Told*”, *Journal of Economic History*, 75 (2015), pp. 919–931. At the risk of understating the extent of the scholarship that has addressed issues Baptist raises, for instance, consider the contributions of Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); *idem*, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); *idem*, and Philip D. Morgan (eds), *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, VA, 1993). On one specific and crucial issue, Baptist presents much comment and intriguingly new interpretation of the place of whipping in the driving system dedicated to increasing slave productivity, but one commentator (Clegg, “Capitalism and Slavery”, pp. 287–288) suggests that the analysis in *The Half Has Never Been Told* may well be seriously flawed. Avoidance of the claims and counter-claims around questions of productivity and whipping in past historiography are striking. See Robert William Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston, MA, 1974) and Herbert G. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game: A Critique of Time on the Cross* (Urbana and Chicago, IL, 1975). Fogel and Engerman, of course, argued that slavery was modern, productive, and capitalistic, as does Baptist. But they also argued that the lash was applied sparingly by slave-owners, which Baptist rejects, and which Gutman (and other historians of slavery) long ago refuted.

He lays waste the historiographic artifacts of the pre-1940 era, which he regards as little more than representations of slavery as “a school in which patient masters and mistresses trained irresponsible savages for futures of perpetual servitude”. But Baptist also has little time for the subsequent historiographic stress on “showing African Americans as assertive rebels”, because this kind of analytic orientation “implied an uncomfortable corollary. If one should be impressed by those who rebelled, because they resisted, one should not be proud of those who did not. And there were very few rebellions in the history of slavery in the United States”.<sup>51</sup> Slavery, Baptist writes, was a labor regime of plantation capitalism that “stole everything” from those who managed to survive it. Enslavers “looted the riches of black folks’ minds, stole days and months and years and lifetimes, turned sweat, blood, and flesh into gold. They forced people to behave in the fields as if they themselves were disembodied, mechanical hands that moved ever more swiftly over the cotton plant at the wave of the enslavers’ hand”. Baptist thus reifies the admittedly brutalizing subordination of the slave, reducing the humanity of violently coerced labor to a “new zombie body of slavery, stretched by new kinds of power, new technologies of exploitation, new markets, and new forms of credit”.<sup>52</sup>

This “vision” of slavery produces a particular kind of history. As Trevor Logan has pointed out in the pages of the *Journal of Economic History*, Baptist’s study is less about the slaves themselves than it is about “slaveholders, Northern interests, and regional politics”. For all the recourse to the authentic voice of the slave narratives, Logan concludes that *The Half Has Never Been Told* is much more concerned with “the people who bought and sold other people for profit, the way that they organized the people that they bought and sold, and how they fostered relationships with those that did not own people to further their cause”. Not surprisingly, “[t]he subject is rarely the object of analysis”.<sup>53</sup>

To be sure, Baptist does detail some of the ways in which African American slaves cultivated uniquely materialized expressions of their oppression and subordination in musical genres and other cultural creations, especially, in George Rawick’s phrase, “from sundown to sunup”.<sup>54</sup> On balance, however, he finds this approach counter-productive. “A focus on the development of an independent black culture”, writes Baptist in introducing his study, “led some to believe that enslaved people actually

51. Baptist, *Half Has Never Been Told*, pp. xvii–xviii.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. xix, 142, 147, also 113, 188.

53. Logan, “Roundtable of Reviews”, pp. 919–931.

54. George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (New York, 1973); John Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1972); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987).

managed to prevent whites from successfully exploiting their labor. This idea, in turn, created a quasi-symmetry with post-Civil War memoirs that portrayed gentle masters, who maintained slavery as a non-profit endeavor aimed at civilizing Africans”. Recoiling against such a caricature, Baptist tends to create a skewed portrait. It is true enough that slave lives were “ripped asunder so that their market value could be extracted”. But leaving analysis at that, until abolitionism and armed insurrection in the Civil War championed an end to slavery, feeds into a particular view of slave humanity, which was not simply a contradiction in terms. Baptist declares that, “enslaver-generated chaos could ultimately, if it went on long enough, steal one’s capacity to recognize even one’s closest kin”. The human cost of this history of degradation registers in Baptist’s recognition that, “[i]f you didn’t know your family, you didn’t know yourself. And if you didn’t know yourself, what sorts of disasters could you bring down on yourself and others?” It does not lessen the awful magnitude of slavery’s horrors to suggest, as did Herbert G. Gutman in the 1970s, that this surely is not the entirety of slavery’s American experience, and that Baptist is, at the very least, understating the resiliency of the enslaved in general and of the black family in particular. Given the prodigious researches that lay behind Gutman’s *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976), it is off-putting to see this text referenced alongside the above statement with respect to “incest tales” and their “symbolic meaning”, to have the book described as a classic example of the “strong patriarchal family” position.<sup>55</sup> It is not pushing the argument too far to suggest that Baptist’s book, as an example of the new “histories of capitalism/labor/slavery”, presents laboring slaves in ways that historicize working lives, albeit on the extreme end of exploitation’s spectrum, with a surfeit of determination and an underwhelming skewed accounting of agency. The repugnance of real manacles forges manacles of the mind that clamp down on analytic sensibilities.

### *Conclusion: Oppositional Refusals/Refusing Oppositions*

“Histories of the working class only get written”, wrote Richard Johnson in 1979, “when the larger part of the population is held to matter enough to be

55. Baptist, *Half Has Never Been Told*, pp. xvii, 296, 472–473. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York, 1976) was less concerned with something designated the patriarchal family than it was with kinship ties and domestic arrangements among slaves, and a critique of views that poor African Americans in the twentieth century were ensnared in a “tangle of pathology” that originated with the destruction of the black family under slavery. See Richard Sennett, “Were black families split and demoralized by slavery? No says a new and crucial study”, *New York Times Book Review*, 17 October 1976. See also, Ira Berlin and Leslie S. Rowlands (eds), *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African American Kinship in the Civil War Era* (New York, 1996).

an object of inquiry”.<sup>56</sup> At the time, few would suggest that labor did not count. Decades later, with so many different social, cultural, economic, and political tides having turned against the working class, registering in ways that call into question the significance of laboring people, it is not surprising that scholarship is less concerned with how such people made themselves and more likely to pursue narrative and interpretive paths ordered by considerations of how they were made by others so much more powerful. In the process of going down certain roads to a new and revitalized labor history, is it possible that losses are being registered as older accomplishments are either bypassed or overtly denigrated? In historiographically breaking the metaphorical chains that bind the study of workers in particular ways, can we discern some new and unnecessary “mind forg’d manacles”?

Not all the ways in which histories of workers are being written are either wrong or insignificant, and much that is now done in the name of labor history is remarkably suggestive, insightful, and illuminating. There is no denying that transnational and global turns in recent accounts of workers promise much, and expand our horizons considerably. The long-standing insistence that class needs to be examined with due attention to gender and race, religion and consumption, as well as understandings of the state, law, and the nature of capital, is both necessary and undeniably valuable as an injunction to write histories more totalizing and less particularistic. Class conflict needs its researchers, as do a plethora of ways in which class interests are mediated by ameliorative forces, conducive of accommodation. Histories of capitalism are not, in and of themselves, different than histories of labor; global histories of class formation and organization are not necessarily counter-posed to social histories of working-class resistance bounded by time and place; gender, race, and class are co-joined in the development of history, as opposed to standing somehow alone and apart; and workers past and present can never really be appreciated without understanding how waged and unwaged toil have always combined elements of the free and the unfree, recognizing that at the extremes of this spectrum, such as racialized slavery, there are specific ways in which domination and dissent demand different and innovative interpretive strategies. Labor systems, as commentators on the Global South have repeatedly reminded us, are never structured only by the formal, contractually/legally regulated market regimes of exploitation and the extraction of surplus value that working-class historians of the advanced capitalist economies have often studied. Recent concerns and the literatures scaffolded on them have made this abundantly clear. To address all of this,

56. Richard Johnson, “Culture and the Historians”, in John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson (eds), *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London, 1979), p. 42.

in any work of historical examination, is difficult and challenging at best, unrealizable at worst. Historians of labor need to be humble in the face of the daunting task that confronts them in their efforts to explore the complex dimensions of class as lived experience and structured determination, situated at the all-too-often poorly signed crossroads of a global capitalism that developed in uneven ways.

A part of labor history's robust and resilient nature is precisely that it necessarily contains analytic and political diversity, spawning serious debate. This has always leavened and enlivened the intellectual nature of an oppositional field. As a research endeavor, working-class history generally refuses to accept conventional wisdoms, especially mythologies that confirm and ideologically shore up the logics of class rule/subordination. At this juncture, however, it is perhaps long past due to suggest that research on class, with its varied inclinations to stake out grounds of refusal, needs itself to refuse an animating opposition that rests uncomfortably at its core. Labor historians can no longer justifiably and indeed actively embrace an oppositional dichotomization of agency and determination. There is, in much of the current writing, a tendency to distance recent trend-setting studies from past accounts, with their stress on resistance and active creation of alternative. This is as counterproductive as any attempt on the part of those who have struggled to resurrect the “lived experience” of workers in the past would be if their efforts were somehow premised on claims that workers never confronted objective, structural, materially-ordered determinative boundaries that set limits within which the lives of subaltern groups unfolded.

If, indeed, we recognize, as we should, that men and women do make their own history, but not entirely as they please, it is incumbent upon all labor historians to at least agree that history is made at the interface of objective constructs/constraints and subjective creations/aspirations, the place where apparent destiny and the project of desire meet, and often clash. Neither side is untouched by the other, nor are they easily reduced to “ideal types”. To be sure, if the past writing of labor histories is instructive, it is likely the case that different histories will line up on one interpretive side of this false divide or another. The subject studied, the methodologies and conceptual frameworks adopted, the canvass on which the general or the particular part of labor's history is painted, with strokes broad and bold or fine and finite, not to mention the politics of interpretation, will all influence how specific writing in the field leans. But let us do our best to ensure that while we tilt in one direction, our hands waving in analytic animation, we at least ground our feet in acknowledgement of other ways of seeing. Labor history, as a field of study, needs this many-sidedness, this diversity of analytic possibility, if it is to continue to play a small role in wresting apart some of the “mind-forg'd manacles” that shackle understandings of the past and their reciprocal relations to the present, as much of the imaginative

writing of feminist working-class historians shows. This might just push us in the interpretively creative directions that could register in our present, contributing, however marginally, to a new and more humane future. In this way, perhaps, labor histories can make a small if much-needed contribution to finally overcoming the “marks of weakness, marks of woe” that Blake discerned in London’s “charter’d” streets of the 1790s.

TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS  
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Bryan D. Palmer. “*Les menottes par l’esprit forgées*” et les voies récentes vers de “nouvelles” histoires du travail.

Depuis les années 1990, l’histoire du travail a été présentée comme étant “en crise”. Cette évaluation négative est une exagération. Elle a cependant incité les historiens, souvent de manière productive, à reconsidérer les orientations fondamentales de l’histoire du travail. Cette étude examine trois voies récentes vers une “nouvelle” histoire du travail: le tournant vers une étude transnationale et globale; la “nouvelle” histoire du capitalisme; et l’étude de l’esclavage en tant que travail aliéné. Ces nouvelles approches de l’histoire du travail mettent en relief un vieux dilemme: comment les déterminations structurées de la vie du travail sont-elles équilibrées à côté de dimensions de pouvoir humain pour comprendre l’expérience complexe du passé de la classe ouvrière. Il est soutenu que nous devons considérer à la fois la structure et le pouvoir, lorsque nous faisons des recherches et écrivons sur l’histoire du travail. Alors qu’une “nouvelle” histoire du travail antérieure mettait l’accent sur le pouvoir, de nouvelles voies vers l’histoire du travail semblent trop souvent gênées par “les menottes par l’esprit forgées”, qui limitent les compréhensions de la vie passée des travailleurs en insistant sur la structure et la détermination.

Traduction: *Christine Plard*

Bryan D. Palmer. “*Geistig geschmiedete Fesseln*” und jüngere Zugänge zu “neuen” Arbeitsgeschichten.

Seit den 1990er Jahren heißt es von der Arbeitsgeschichte, sie sei “in der Krise”. Bei dieser negativen Einschätzung handelt es sich um eine Übertreibung – die allerdings Historiker, auf oft produktive Weise, dazu angeregt hat, die grundlegende Ausrichtung der Historiografie der Arbeiterklasse zu überdenken. Dieser Überblicksartikel erkundet drei neuere Pfade zu einer “neuen” Arbeitsgeschichte: die Wende hin zu transnationalen und globalen Untersuchungen, die “neue” Geschichte des Kapitalismus und die Untersuchung der Sklaverei als unfreier Arbeit. Diese neuen Herangehensweisen an die Arbeitsgeschichte werfen ein Schlaglicht auf eine alte Frage: Von welchem Verhältnis zwischen den strukturbedingten Determinierungen des arbeitenden Lebens und den Dimensionen menschlicher Handlungsfähigkeit sollten wir ausgehen, wenn wir die komplexen Erfahrungen der Vergangenheit der Arbeiterklasse begreifen wollen? Es wird die These vertreten, dass wir bei der historischen



Forschung und in der Historiografie sowohl Struktur als auch Handlungsfähigkeit berücksichtigen sollten. Setzte eine ältere “neue” Arbeitsgeschichte den Akzent auf die Handlungsfähigkeit, so scheinen die neuen Herangehensweisen an die Arbeitsgeschichte oft in “geistig geschmiedeten Fesseln” zu liegen, die das Verständnis der vergangenen Leben von Arbeitern durch die Betonung von Struktur und Determiniertheit begrenzen.

Übersetzung: *Max Henninger*

Bryan D. Palmer. “*Los grilletes mentales*” y las recientes tendencias en las “*nuevas*” historias del trabajo.

Desde la década de 1990 la historia del trabajo se ha considerado que está “en crisis”. Esta consideración negativa es una exageración. De forma distinta, ha servido para estimular a los historiadores, a menudo de forma muy productiva, a la hora de reflexionar sobre las orientaciones básicas de la historia de la clase obrera. En este artículo de perspectivas se analizan tres tendencias recientemente desarrolladas en una “nueva” historia del trabajo: el giro hacia un estudio de lo transnacional y lo global, la “nueva” historia del capitalismo, y el estudio de la esclavitud y el trabajo forzado. Estas nuevas aproximaciones a la historia del trabajo ponen de relieve un viejo dilema: cómo las determinaciones estructuradas de la vida en el trabajo se combinan con las dimensiones de la acción humana a la hora de comprender la compleja experiencia del pasado de la clase obrera. En el texto se considera que es necesario tener presentes ambos aspectos, tanto lo estructural como la capacidad humana de intervenir, a la hora de investigar y de escribir la historia del trabajo. Si un viejo “nuevo” historiador del trabajo enfatiza el factor del agente humano, las nuevas tendencias en la historia del trabajo demasiado a menudo parecen encorsetadas por “grilletes mentales” que limitan la comprensión del pasado de los trabajadores, enfatizando los aspectos de la estructura y la determinación.

Traducción: *Vicent Sanz Rozalén*