

EDITOR'S REMARKS

Popularizers of American history and culture have succeeded in stamping the period between the Great War and the Great Depression as “the roaring twenties”—an age of turbulence and violence dominated by jazz, prohibition, gangsters, lynchings, and Fordism. Historians of American labor have, by and large, viewed the 1920s as undynamic and “lean years” in which the labor movement declined, fell into quietism, or at best defended itself with limited success against a resurgent capitalism. In this issue’s Scholarly Controversy David Montgomery asks us to rethink the experience of American workers in the 1920s. He argues for a different periodization of American labor than the common “trough view” of the twenties—a longer perspective that encompasses the whole period between the two world wars. He urges us to look beyond the apparent decline of mass struggle in the twenties to the staging actions of the working class—party building, strikes for explicit political demands, and new union-building by radicals and progressives—incorporating developments and gains of the prewar decades and bearing fruit in the later development of the Congress of Industrial Organization and local politics of the New Deal. Both these staging actions and their context in the national arena—the effect, for instance, of uneven economic decline on the composition of the labor force and the increase of anti-labor state intervention—prefigured the catastrophic impact of the Great Depression.

Susan Porter Benson criticizes Montgomery for paying insufficient attention to the experience of working-class women in the 1920s and reexamines Montgomery’s analysis through the lens of gender. She argues that trade union agendas and struggles, narrowly focused in male terms, were not perceived by women workers as being in their best interest. That interest was pursued in the twenties by a broad range of women’s organizations outside the union movement. If one examines the period from the perspective of gender, Benson concludes, Montgomery’s emphasis would have to be revised: unions would become less central, the state more important, and deindustrialization more vivid and dynamic in the life of the working class. Charles Maier criticizes Montgomery for failing to carry out his promised comparison of American and European experiences and perceptions of the twenties. He singles out the triumph of managers, the rehabilitation of reformism, and the return to a Ricardian perspective on the subject of unemployment as topics that Montgomery might have explored comparatively to a greater extent in his illuminations of the 1920s from new directions. The call for wider perspectives by the three controversialists is echoed in the review essay of Iver Bernstein. He challenges the established dichotomous view of workers as either politically organized or ac-

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quiescent and calls for broadening our definition of American political life in the industrial era to reveal the arena of class relations and negotiations and the realm of political association and struggle by including the legal system, the daily life of political parties, and the activities of voluntary “reform” organizations.

With this issue we are introducing the long-planned feature of “Reports from Foreign Editors” on new directions and current work in the labor and working-class history of their countries. Michael Schneider has organized his exploration of new currents in the German Federal Republic around two major directions that confront each other but also converge: the first, working backward from the belief that the current crisis of socialism signals the end of the labor movement and the classical working class; the second, responding to the same crisis, searching for the essence of working-class life below the schematic representations of institutional history. In his critical appraisal of the theoretical and methodological pitfalls of both approaches, Schneider deftly lays bare the political landscape of contemporary Germany within which the struggle for “insight” by social and *Alltags* historians unfolded and continues.

Joan Scott’s spirited reply to her critics (*ILWCH*, 31)—a restatement of her position through refutation—is an excellent example of how fruitful scholarly controversy can be, not because the arguments make converts but because they force the controversialists and us to aim for clarity of thought on difficult subjects. We consider none of the controversies aired in *ILWCH* in recent years as closed. We are prepared to reopen and extend them when our readers give us substantive reasons for doing so.

In reaching out to the broadest possible national and international audience we are particularly concerned with reaching younger historians not merely as readers and subscribers but also as contributors to the journal. We welcome their offers to join our panel of reviewers and invite them to tell us about their current scholarship.

H.G.