

REPORTS

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO COMPARATIVE MINING HISTORY

The Study Group on European Labor and Working Class History sponsored a panel on mining history during the December 1975 national meeting in Atlanta of the American Historical Association. John Laslett (UCLA) was the main speaker and devoted the bulk of his paper to a criticism of two previous theories of comparative international mining history, Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel's "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike – An International Comparison" in A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin and A. M. Ross (eds.), *Industrial Conflict* (New York, 1954), pp. 189–212 and Gaston Rimlinger's "International Differences in the Strike Propensity of Coal Miners: Experience in Four Countries," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. XII, No. 3 (April, 1959), pp. 389–405. Laslett criticized Kerr and Siegel for seeing miners as universally strike-prone and radical because of their isolated work settings. He suggested that miners appeared more radical because their large numbers gave their politics an impact on local communities which was lacking in the case of workers in less concentrated industries. Laslett emphasized the variety in mining caused by differences in market structures which resulted in wide differences in price levels and market stability. Miners in fields subject to wider fluctuation would be less secure and hence more militant. He also pointed out that strikes are not the same as radicalism: while the United States had the most strikes by miners, it was the least radical in terms of miners' politics; Germany had the fewest strikes, but the most radical miners. Finally, Laslett emphasized that a comparative study of mining is possible because of the physical characteristics of the industry. He urged historians to pay more attention to the importance of geological structures, such as the width of the coal seam, in determining work processes and patterns of struggle for miners.

Laslett effectively refuted Rimlinger's exclusive concentration on differences in state policy in determining miners' politics. He showed that there were important regional differences in miners' political behavior in every major country, and that the policies of the church and employers were just as important as those of the state. His paper had a subtlety which was completely lacking in the work on mining done in the 1950s, both by the author which he criticized and by such historians of mining as R. Page Arnot, whose multi-volume history of mining in Britain completely failed to ask the kinds of questions which Laslett posed. Laslett gave, however, no indication that he possessed an adequate methodology to answer his own questions. His approach remains untheoretical, impressionistic and negative. He seemed uninterested in quantitative techniques and failed to spell out any measure or group of measures of mining radicalism, class-consciousness or propensity to strike. His exclusive focus on Britain and the United States obviously diminishes the comparative value of his work. Yet Laslett's projected study gives every indication of providing an important contribution in understanding the role of coal markets, geological structures and work processes in the political and strike behavior of miners.

Steve Brier (the American Labor History Film Project/WGBH in Boston) commented on American miners and joined Laslett in criticizing Kerr and Siegel for their pluralist, consensus approach. He emphasized the importance of strike demands, rather than mere frequency of strikes,

as a gauge of militancy. Brier showed how the emergence of a national market for coal in the United States after 1880 led to increased shortweighting, screening of coal, company stores and payment in scrip as high-wage coal fields attempted to compete with the low wages paid in southern fields. Strikes shifted in the mid-1880s from defensive strikes against wage reductions to aggressive challenges to employer control over work processes. Brier cast doubt on the Kerr and Siegel hypothesis of miners as an "isolated mass" by pointing out that most Pennsylvania coal miners lived close to major urban centers such as Scranton. Even the southern Colorado coal miners, whom Brier has studied in detail, were in close contact with Trinidad, a town of 10,000. The theory that miners had low levels of social and geographic mobility was contested by Brier. He found that 75% of the Italian immigrant miners in southern Colorado moved out of the county within four years of the 1903 strike. Thus miners could be radical in spite of high rates of mobility. Further study is needed of both isolation and mobility among miners, for southern Colorado miners were living in a social situation where a very high percentage of the local population was made up of a homogeneous group of Italian immigrant coal miners. Their mobility may be related to their defeat in a particularly bitter strike and not indicate much about mobility among miners in general.

Jean Joughin (American University in Washington, D.C.) reported on her research into the miners of Montceau-les-Mines in eastern France. She found these miners to be neither isolated, nor militant nor individualistic. Although they were of peasant origin, Joughin called peasant individualism a "bourgeois myth." The town of Montceau grew up around mining after 1813, and from 1830 to 1900 it was a tightly-controlled, repressive company town, directed by an intensely Catholic and intensely paternalistic family of mine-owners. Religion was an important catalytic force in the politics of Montceau miners, for the attempts of the owners to use the church to enforce obedience led to a strong anti-clericalism among the workers. Although granted the vote in 1851, Montceau miners were apathetic regarding the possibility of social change through electoral politics. In 1900 company control of Montceau was destroyed by the intervention of an anti-clerical government. Quickly thereafter Montceau miners formed a union and a producers' co-operative, and took over control of local government. The old order of company domination of churches, stores, and savings societies was abolished. After 1900 many Montceau miners looked to the state rather than to the company as a new paternalist institution, and hoped that the state would guarantee access for them to the dominant bourgeois culture, including both education and social mobility. Montceau union leaders were willing to cooperate with the national power structure to solve local problems. In asserting that French miners in general were friendly to the state and anxious to integrate themselves into bourgeois culture, Joughin went further than her evidence warranted. It is questionable how far one can generalize from the experience of such a repressed town as Montceau, and it is certain that the miners of the Nord had a more antagonistic attitude toward the state and bourgeois culture than the Montceau miners.

Robert Kern (University of New Mexico) reported on the miners of Spain and emphasized the differences between the mining regions there. Mercury miners were the smallest group, accounting for only 2% of all Spanish miners, and were the least political, least radical and least strike-prone. They worked for a Spanish-owned company in the south of Spain. But most Spanish miners

(c. 70%) worked in Asturias coal and iron mines. The other important mining centers were the Rio Tinto copper mines, under Rothschild ownership, and the coal mines of Catalonia. Most of the large mines in Spain were owned by foreigners and from the foundation of miners' unions in Spain in the 1880s, the workers were consistently hostile to foreign ownership. This gave Spanish mining politics a "Third World," anti-imperialist character, unlike the situation in the United States, Britain, or France. Although the bulk of unionized workers in other industries were affiliated with the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, most miners, and especially Asturias coal miners, were affiliated with the socialist-affiliated UGT. Miners looked to the state to nationalize foreign-owned mines, and this accounted for their socialist politics. Spanish miners fought violent strikes in both 1917-1923, when the issue was union recognition, and in the 1930s, when political reforms were at stake. Miners made up a central element in Loyalist forces in the Spanish Civil War, and many communist leaders of the Republic were of miner origins. Spanish miners had originated in the peasantry, and they always kept close ties to the peasants, so that demands for land reform became an important issue in mining strikes in the 1930s.

Robert Wheeler (USC) discussed the miners of Germany and described them as among both the most and least radical groups of German workers. Although they originated in the peasantry, German miners developed as skilled craftsmen with their own semi-guild institutions, the *Knappschaften*. In addition the Prussia state paternalistically oversaw the conditions of many German miners, and miners had a relatively privileged position among workers until the late nineteenth century. Miners were consequently slow to identify themselves as workers, and preferred the title *Bergmann* (miner) to *Bergarbeiter* (mine worker) as a sign of this distinction. Mine owners in Germany were notoriously authoritarian and upheld the *Herr-im-Hause* mentality which led them to fire any unionists. Recognition of the miners' union came only in World War I under government pressure. After the war, the *alter Verband*, the miners' union connected to the Social Democratic Party, was the leading supporter of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* ("social partnership") with the employers' federation. Yet a large number of mine workers rejected the conservative approach of the *alter Verband* and in 1919 spontaneous strikes broke out, demanding the socialization of the mines. Throughout the Weimar period, German miners remained deeply divided along political lines. In the Ruhr, where the great majority of Germany's miners were located, factory council elections revealed the following average political breakdown: 40% *alter Verband*; 20% Catholic trade union; and 30% communist and syndicalist unions. Catholic and Polish miners remained closely tied to religious or nationalist politics and unions, while the communists maintained a strong presence among miners in the Ruhr, Upper Silesia and central Germany throughout the Weimar period.

Wheeler suggested a number of factors as important in influencing German miners in a radical direction: youth; recency of mine opening; and lack of skill. Recent mines like the lignite mines of central Germany were generally more radical than the older mines, partly because they had younger workers. The displacement of unskilled workers during the rationalization of mining in the mid-1920s led to a loss of militancy. These working hypotheses were not developed in detail and remain to be tested by further research. Wheeler did not deal with the important differences between mining regions in Germany, with the radicals centered on the mining regions

located in intensive districts of heavy industry, such as the Ruhr, Upper Silesia and Halle-Merseburg in central Germany, while the conservatives were found in smaller mining regions elsewhere in Germany. He also overlooked the wide variation between mining towns within a district such as the Ruhr; mining politics were not random within each mine, but rather each mining town in the region had its own autonomous political configuration.

In the audience discussion following the papers, Melvyn Dubofsky (SUNY–Binghamton) emphasized the importance of internal union conflicts in promoting radicalism. Challenges by “outs” were usually couched in terms of a denunciation of the lack of radicalism of the “ins.” Even John L. Lewis could write “Your’s for the Revolution” in the heat of a union campaign. Bernard Moss (USC) pointed out the important chronological differences in the strike behavior of miners. In the nineteenth century miners were not as heavily unionized as workers in other industries, and were consequently less inclined to strike. But in the twentieth century, organized miners have developed a pattern of more frequent strikes than other workers. Tilly and Shorter put too much emphasis on the earlier period and missed the later shift in the strike behavior of miners.

The whole session on comparative international mining history showed the great gains in analytic precision made by labor historians in the last decade. Laslett’s paper posed the important questions of the political sociology of miners within a structural framework which simply did not exist when Kerr and Siegel and Rimlinger were writing. The other papers varied in their sensitivity to the central methodological and analytical problems involved in comparative mining history, but all of them had important contributions to make to an understanding of the experience of miners. The session should be a reminder of the labor historian’s responsibility, even when dealing with national or local movements, to contribute the vital local data necessary for developing an international and comparative understanding of working class history.

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FEMINISM AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY IN PRE WORLD WAR I EUROPE

The recent AHA meeting in Atlanta included a session entitled “Separatism and Equality – or Unity and Subordination: A Cross-Cultural Investigation of Women’s Participation in Socialist Movements before World War I.” It was, by far, the best panel I have attended in a long time: informative, provocative and entertaining. The participants – Karen Honeycutt, “Conflicting Loyalties: German Social Democrats Confront the Woman Question,” Charles Sowerwine (University of Melbourne) “Causes and Choices: French Working Women in the Face of Feminism and Socialism, 1899-1914” and Barbara Evans Clements (University of Akron) “Russian Social-Democracy and the Woman-Question, 1905-1914” – had exchanged papers well in advance of the session; issues were carefully chosen and developed in concert.

The panelists set out to test an hypothesis: that the emphasis of Marxist doctrine on unity,