Rocky Mountain Interdisciplinary History Conference Proposal

Slaves, Animals, or Machines?: Strategies of Resisting and Defending Taylorism through the Stop Watch (1911-1916)

Abstract:

This paper investigates the origins of the 1915 prohibition of the stop watch in government work. In the context of advancing industrialization, the consolidation of monopolies, anti-labor violence, and the rise of Taylorism—the potent ideology of optimization and management largely attributed to the achievement of Marx's transition from the labor to the labor power—this paper asks, why did workers and their political elite allies react so strongly to the stop watch as opposed to other technologies of capitalist discipline? Why did this strategy have purchase? Through a close read of the 1911-1912 Congressional Special Committee on the Taylor and Other Forms of Shop Management which provided the foundation of the 1915 ban, I argue that the stopwatch conjured images of slaves, machines, and animals that gave both workers and scientific managers a language to rationalize the conceptual shift from human-based labor to depersonalized, commodified labor power along acceptable terms. The committee investigation is a valuable study for two reasons: first, as the first investigation into Taylorism in the United States, the investigation was widely circulated and directs us to the origins of the tropes of scientific management; second, it uniquely features multiple registers of worker ideals put in rare conversation, not only from top to bottom in the shop, but also from individual to national scales. Through this approach I find that the stopwatch—considered by managers a way to manage the "alloy" of human energy as they would a machine and by workers a "whip" that stripped them of the dignity of the "American" man—became a simple yet connotative way to put a stake in the ground on labor dignity and articulate broader anxieties related to class and race. However, focus on the stop watch elided efficiency engineers' underlying visions of hierarchies of intellect and a social order in which the benefits of technological progress need not be distributed across all strata of labor. The symbolism of the stopwatch in the early twentieth century gained meaning through reference to deeper historical trends like American artisanal craftsmanship and white republicanism, yet this also made the stopwatch into an easy metaphor, which in turn garnered disproportionate interest in subsequent legislation that missed the forest for the trees with regard to working class subjugation. Ultimately, I offer a methodological strategy that works at the intersection of history and literary studies, encouraging others to similarly consider how discursive battlegrounds (here, of class interests) are particularly valuable sites of inquiry because they produce portable metaphors and rhetorical specters with thicker intertextual meaning, more readily deployed across time.