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From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question

Robert Castel

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proposals to curb imports and a proliferation of labor-management cooperation schemes, proved ineffective in resuscitating the union idea. Lichtenstein concludes on a somewhat optimistic note, finding in the Los Angeles labor movement an approximation of the politicized bargaining and labor-community alliances needed to return the labor question to center stage. Yet he also notes the episodic character of union expansion, acknowledging that a special set of historical circumstances is needed in order to create an atmosphere in which the union idea might fully re-emerge.

This is an important, timely book whose focus on ideas and ideology offers a fresh perspective that is sure to generate useful debate over labor's historical choices and current status. At times, however, Lichtenstein gives too much weight to ideological influences in explaining the erosion of working-class solidarity, an integral element in his conception of the union idea. For example, it was not industrial pluralists or the courts that prompted workers to think of themselves as homeowners, taxpayers, and consumers rather than as industrial citizens. When private sector workers have seen their interests as antithetical to those of public sector workers or unionists have allowed racial or ethnic identifications to trump their union or working-class sensibilities, intellectuals and policy makers were by and large not responsible for this unwillingness to demonstrate solidarity. Although Lichtenstein recognizes these tensions within the working class, his eagerness to blame intellectuals and social critics for the decline of the union idea understates the complicated ways in which American workers have historically processed the issue of class and approached the practice of solidarity.

Another area where Lichtenstein seems to overreach is his analysis of the post–World War II era. He minimizes labor's collective bargaining achievements, regards grievance and arbitration machinery as suffocating to rank-and-file activism, and chides unions for failing to aggressively pursue a social democratic agenda. Yet collective bargaining was often a creative, dynamic force during this period that helped propel many unionized workers into the middle class and also benefited workers in related nonunion sectors. Although the grievance/arbitration system could be cumbersome and bureaucratic, it was still seen by many workers as a vehicle by which management's hand could be stayed on the shop floor. Finally, to accuse labor of a "strategic error of the first order" for not pressing for government-provided benefits seems unduly harsh in light of Lichtenstein's acknowledgment, a page later, that "the revival of postwar conservatism had blocked any expansion of the welfare state." To be sure, Lichtenstein is right to point out the limits of collective bargaining and the postwar accord. However, by undervaluing labor's achievements during this period and the genuine difference they made in many working-class lives, he presents too bleak a picture of the union movement's standing and impact during this critical period.

Still, Lichtenstein has performed a most valuable service in his astute delineation of the specific historical circumstances that have both advanced and eroded the union idea during the twentieth century. *State of the Union* should be required reading for those who share his conviction about the social necessity for a strong labor movement and are attempting to make the labor question a matter of mainstream concern.

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From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question. By Robert Castel; translated and edited by Richard Boyd. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2003. xxvii, 468 pp. ISBN 0-76580-1493, $49.95 (cloth).

Robert Castel, Director of Studies at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris, has written a monumental study that reconstructs the development of the "social question" from the fourteenth century to the present day. In the style of Marx, Durkheim, and Foucault, Castel uses the disaffiliated vagabond to show how our concept of social worth has come to be associated with "work" and with "wage labor." He argues that as capitalist society emerged from feudalism, it established a clear line separating the worthy poor, those who worked as wage laborers, from the unworthy, who chose "idleness" over disciplined wage work. This social standard supported capitalist growth and profitability by forcing the poor to choose between wage labor and starvation. But the mix of capitalism and compulsory labor has been unstable. As wage labor has become the social

norm, it has produced a working class able to demand social protection through a strong welfare state; but this has led employers to seek cheaper labor elsewhere, ultimately undermining employment for a growing part of the labor force. Now, Castel argues, France faces a crisis. "The return to full employment is almost certainly impossible," he argues, but "one cannot found citizenship on social uselessness" (pp. 425, 403).

Castel begins his investigation of the nature of wage labor in modern capitalism with the transition from feudalism and the establishment of "free" wage-labor and "free access to labor." The decline of serfdom and, later, the collapse of rural industry and the urban artisanal crafts freed workers from the "ties of proximity" that connected them to social support in their local communities. By dissolving these old connections and old forms of social solidarity, capitalism freed workers to seek employment where they could be most productive and best compensated. But it also freed them from the social supports and security that sustained them outside of wage labor.

Modern society, Castel argues, was built on a wage-earning proletariat, workers bound to work under the management of others because they lacked any other forms of support. Castel explores the creation of modern labor relations by investigating the treatment of vagabonds and other paupers, individuals who sought subsistence outside of wage contracts. Quoting Alexis de Tocqueville, he observes that poverty in nineteenth-century Europe was least common in the poorest countries and most common in the wealthiest (page 196). He finds that this was no coincidence, because the basis of industrial productivity under modern capitalism is the precariousness of jobs that drives the working class to labor. The concept of class struggle, he adds, was invented not by collectivists, but by conservatives and moderates who recognized that the wage-earning proletariat formed "a nation within the nation" located outside of society by its poverty and unemployment but at the center of modernization (page 206).

Castel interprets nineteenth- and twentieth-century social policy as an attempt to reintegrate the proletariat into society by reducing the insecurity and consequent dependency of working-class life. Employer paternalism offered increased security but at the cost of a form of tutelage in which workers accepted a subordinate role. Paternalist efforts foundered on the democratic aspirations of modern polities and the working class itself. More successful were the state-sponsored relief and insurance programs now associated with the modern welfare state. Castel dates the new integration of labor in France to the establishment of paid holidays under the Popular Front of the mid-1930s. Symbolically, this meant that for some days each year, workers were now living outside of the "indignity of wage labor." "On this narrow beach of time," Castel writes, "the working life recovers an essential characteristic of 'bourgeois' existence, a freedom to choose what to do or whether to do nothing" (p. 316).

This, Castel concludes, began the relative integration of the working class into modern liberal society. The rising wages and social protections won during the "glorious 30 years" after World War II would gut the working class of its historical potentialities that had given birth to the workers' movement. But Castel argues they did not abolish "working-class distinctiveness." Rather than creating a new form of society, labor accommodated itself to a subordinate position in a wage-earning society (p. 326). This left it vulnerable to the next capitalist maneuver, the globalizing of labor and product markets that has now created a crisis of unemployment and a deficit of occupiable places. Instead of an exploited proletariat, France now has a supernumerary class of nearly 3.5 million unemployed workers whose jobs are filled by foreigners earning a fraction of what workers have come to expect in modern France. Globalization has thus exposed the flaw in social democracy in any one state or even in a group of states. Rising wages and social insurance have not changed the fundamental insecurity inherent in wage labor.

High unemployment challenges established welfare states, threatening both the financing of entitlement benefits and workers' place within society. But behind his analysis of the crisis of the welfare state, Castel makes claims about globalization that are familiar to American labor economists and may be as overstated as similar claims made for the United States. In Europe, as in the United States, I suspect observers are much too quick to attribute social problems to foreign trade, problems that are largely due to other government policies. High unemployment reflects weak domestic demand for labor that is really due to the restrictive policies of European governments, the Maastricht Accord, the Stability and Growth Pact, and the monetary policies of the new European Central Bank. Globalization and imports from the Third World only contribute to unemployment to the extent that national

governments and the EU allow cheap imports and maintain an over-valued Euro. I suspect that Europe's unemployment problem could be solved by an expansionary monetary and fiscal policy combined with some targeted relief aimed at pockets of high unemployment. European social democracy did not fail; it was abandoned.

Robert Castel takes no joy in seeing modern democracy struggle to reintegrate "a growing number of its members whose only crime is to be 'unemployable'" (p. 406). I suspect he would be delighted if we could return to the "glorious 30" years when growth helped conceal the conflicts and strains inherent in a wage-earning society. Whether we can return to those years of high employment and rising wages remains an open question. But this challenging study shows clearly how important it is that we try.

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Science at the Borders: Immigrant Medical Inspection and the Shaping of the Modern Industrial Labor Force. By Amy L. Fairchild. xiii, 385 pp. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. ISBN 0-8018-7080-1, $48.00 (cloth).

From 1891 (when the federal government finally assumed exclusive responsibility for the design and implementation of the nation's immigration policies) until 1924 (when the Immigration Act of 1924 shifted the issuance of all entry visas abroad to U.S. Consular offices), a medical inspection was required of all would-be immigrants to the United States at the time of entry. During these years, 70% of all entries occurred at Ellis Island, N.Y. (which opened in 1892). There was no annual ceiling on immigration over this time span, but there were a number of exclusions that prohibited designated categories of immigrants from entering. The relevant mandatory exclusions applied to any person with dangerous diseases (for example, trachoma or tuberculosis) or loathsome diseases (for example, fovas, syphilis, or leprosy), as well as to "insane persons" and "idiots." There were also discretionary exclusions that pertained to conditions that might affect the ability to work (for example, heart disease, poor physique, varicose veins, or senility). In *Science at the Borders,* Amy Fairchild analyzes the role that this mandatory medical examination played both as a negative screening device and as a positive "socializing tool" to foster the assimilation of the immigrants into the American labor force.

It fell upon the U.S. Public Health Service to conduct the examinations and the Immigration Service (the name of which changed several times during this period) to render the enforcement decision as to whether any certified medical condition rose to the level of requiring exclusion. Given the massive scale of immigration during this period (over 25 million persons), most of these procedures had to be conducted in a perfunctory manner. Most immigrants at all ports of entry received little more than "a medical gaze" lasting less than 40 seconds. Some were moved aside for more thorough examinations; some were treated for their conditions and held in detention until they could pass. All of this occurred at a time when the science of identifying and assessing the significance of physical and mental disabilities was in its infancy. The facilities where the initial inspections were conducted—especially those performed along the Mexican-U.S. border, the Gulf Coast, and the West Coast—were typically spartan. Inadequate funding and the lack of political clout of the two agencies—problems that bedevil immigration enforcement to this day—made the actual deportation of immigrants difficult. To the immigrants themselves, however, who had little or no knowledge of the Immigration Service's limitations and feared the consequences of a negative decision, passing was of vital concern.

The major contribution of this study, however, is not its disclosure of the immigrants' medical status, or of inspectors' differential treatment of different immigrant groups (although such information is provided). It is, rather, the author's case for her contention that the medical inspection was intended "to control rather than to exclude" (p.106) immigrants. The inspection, she argues, was meant to focus the attention of would-be immigrants—most of whom were from rural peasant backgrounds—on the primacy of good health and hygiene practices if one was to become an efficient and self-sustaining worker in an urban industrial economy.

Despite the severe wording of the laws, therefore, the medical examination was not centered on ascertaining the general health of the immigrants. Rather, it concentrated on detecting those diseases that might disable the body and, therefore, impair the ability of the individual to