

# Labor Pragmatism

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**The Long Gilded Age: American Capitalism and the Lessons of a New World Order.** By Leon Fink. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 216p. \$45.00.

After the Civil War came the age of factories, cities, and powerful business tycoons: Andrew Carnegie, Jay Gould, J. P. Morgan, and John D. Rockefeller. Conventionally, the Gilded Age is thought of as a time when technology and entrepreneurship outpaced workers' demands for better wages, shorter hours, and safer conditions. It was followed, many say, by a new attitude that prevailed from the turn of the century until World War I. In this period, the Progressive Era, reformers reeled in runaway businesses. Leon Fink resists this characterization, though, and prefers to call the whole period the Long Gilded Age. In place of two discrete phases, the entire era was a battle over ideas in American capitalism and how those ideas became codified in laws and court rulings.

Fink's work is reminiscent of the late, "masterful," Eric Hobsbawm (p. 2) and others who take into account long-term patterns of behavior (e.g., see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 1994). Like those authors, Fink is concerned with the interplay between national and international trends and makes use of labels for historical periods. Some labels refer to recent developments, such as the post-2008 Second Gilded Age; other labels refer to several decades of American politics, such as the Long New Deal, which, as the successor to the Long Gilded Age, extended from Franklin D. Roosevelt's election to roughly 1970. But Fink does not overgeneralize. He reminds readers that while periodization is useful, we should not forget the nuances of an era. This is a difficult yet expertly handled task. His writing style belongs to the tradition of Columbia essayists like C. Wright Mills and Richard Hofstadter. In place of jargon-filled prose, Fink writes for his peers, undergraduates, graduate students, and any reader interested in contemplating a distant yet eerily familiar time.

Each chapter, written as a distinct essay, takes up debates on ideas and the strategic decisions of labor activists,

business owners, intellectuals, and political leaders. Although Fink's presentation is more subtle, the following binaries were at stake: property versus community, human agency versus circumstance, technocratic elitism versus social democratic progressivism, statism versus anti-statism, and Americanism versus cosmopolitanism (pp. 9–11).

Of central importance to Fink is how these debates led to actions and laws. Ideas, after all, are not tested in laboratories: Unlike chemicals, humans are aware of rhetorical strategies and often claim (or reclaim) the ideas of their opponents. In the public sphere and in academia, ideas are expressed for a purpose. This was the case with the notion of "free labor." Early on in the republic, free labor was associated with human freedom and emancipation. Owner-producers used the concept to argue—for the courts, convincingly—that individual workers should be free to negotiate contracts with their employers. Their clever slogan would return a century later: the "right to work" (p. 16). Yet the labor movement caught on. Organizers dropped their anti-market stance, instead arguing that the contract was between owner-producers and their workers as a group. Labor successfully used contract principles to argue against wage theft and other egregious forms of wrongdoing. Although they secured measurable gains for workers, labor leaders inadvertently legitimized the contract system. Thus, at least in rhetoric, free labor became the American ideology—what Fink calls "a far-reaching distortion of social reality that nevertheless enjoys a strong grip on the national political and intellectual imagination" (p. 31).

Fink's conclusions are derived from a comparative framework that he calls "grounded globalism" (p. 8). He compares the experiences of the United States with other places, such as Western Europe, Scandinavia, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. And he shows how American thinkers were influenced by European ideas. As a result, he further disproves the notion, at least at a cultural level, that globalization is a recent phenomenon. But more importantly, readers see the complex nature of ideational change. American progressives, for instance, borrowed from like-minded thinkers in Germany and Great Britain, and

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evolved to a place that was at once a descendent of both, yet original in its own right. From German Verein thinkers, American progressives used the university as a place to formulate practical policy programs. From British Fabians, progressives forged extensive links outside of the university (pp. 66–70). The results were tangible and impressive. Fink cites one report claiming that Charles McCarthy’s team at the University of Wisconsin was responsible for over 90% of the Legislative Branch’s accomplishments from 1901 to 1921 (p. 86).

In another essay, Fink shows how American socialists also altered ideas borrowed from their European counterparts. For example, American socialists were less likely to be strict secularists: Though some were nonreligious, others infused European theology into their socialism (pp. 133–40). Still, the author’s overall treatment of American socialism is more puzzling than his consideration of progressivism. American socialists are described as youthful, romantic, idealistic, and naive. Events like World War I and the Russian Revolution, according to Fink, made the world seem more complicated and led to disillusionment. As a result, “formerly freewheeling spirits . . . stumbled toward sobriety” (p. 146). Yet in the final paragraph of his essay, readers learn that Fink is not unsympathetic to the tradition. He writes: “The problem for American socialism was that there was no second act. Like other youthful political upsurges that a 1960s-reared historian well recognizes, this one largely dispersed before it grew up” (p. 147). It is unclear, however, what it means for a movement to grow up—that is, how socialist ideas or practices would be different in mature form. The unintended consequence is a portrait of socialism as a less-than-serious ideology. Paradoxically, this message comes across even as his historical account describes American socialism as a vibrant, diverse, and innovative tradition that, he laments, did not survive.

Still, Fink is also critical of progressives. He thought that Wisconsin School intellectuals could have been more effective. Although readers might consider the Wisconsin School a success by today’s standards, progressive policies were left vulnerable to the whims of politicians in Madison. There was no lasting institutional apparatus dedicated to protecting workers from their bosses (pp. 87–89). In fact, for Fink, the entire progressive movement in the United States fell short in securing a federal institution devoted to arbitrating worker–owner conflicts. While others might prefer to fault historical circumstance, he believes that progressive leaders should share in some of the blame. On arbitration, he writes: “To become institutionalized, it likely needed both a context and a catalyst” (p. 119).

The book instills neither optimism nor pessimism, and it cautions against superficial comparisons to the present.

But underlying Fink’s work is nevertheless a cautious message of hope. For him, the United States was not impervious to the ideas and experiences of other places that developed stronger protections for workers. Contrary to the trope of exceptionalism, which portrayed American politics as self-directing and therefore free from socialism, the American experience was tied to the experiences of other nations. Furthermore, the gains made by labor, in the United States or elsewhere, were not the automatic outcome of favorable long-term structures or near-term conjunctures. In the Long Gilded Age, progress seemed impossible in the face of an organized opposition. Vocal and well-financed owner-producers shrewdly labeled labor organizations as anti-freedom, willing to stand against our national values. Despite obstacles, labor and its supporters proved capable of implementing progressive policies; Fink believes that they could have achieved more. Moreover, the ideas and debates of the subsequent Long New Deal did not represent an aberration in American history; that period also contained anti-progressive voices that made arguments about the dangers of worker protections. Not immune to global trends and ideas, not confined by periodization, U.S. labor policy was created by people.

Readers thus finish Fink’s excellent book thinking about possibilities for the twenty-first century. From *The Long Gilded Age*, we are urged to favor practicality over ideological purity. The author recommends that labor forge ties with government and, “where possible, discover points of overlap with sectors of the business community as well” (p. 152). Such a conclusion will be off-putting for those who criticize moderate labor unions and parties for failing to dream big enough. However, it may be more important—at least in the short term—not to let dreams block the possibility of real-world accomplishments.

We are also reminded that observers of political behavior do not exist outside of the phenomena they study. In addition to political leaders, movement organizations, and other commonly identified agents of progress, academics also have an important role in initiating social change (p. 89). University scholarship can inform worldviews as well as laws. Yet beginning in the postwar years, the social sciences and history have generally steered toward the hard sciences, proclaiming impartiality and avoiding advocacy. Perhaps sensing Nietzsche’s critique of aspiring to historiographical neutrality, many researchers have changed course, albeit slightly, by conducting research relevant to nations. The way to full reform might be found in how we understand “science.” From E.H. Carr, we know that a genuinely scientific history prioritizes accuracy over neutrality (e.g., see *What is History?* [1961]). If the Long Gilded Age is any guide, political change requires persuasive scholarship.