

3-2016

The Origins of Right to Work: Antilabor Democracy in Nineteenth Century Chicago

William A. Mirola

Marian University - Indianapolis, mirola@marian.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://mushare.marian.edu/fp_hss

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), and the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mirola, William A., "The Origins of Right to Work: Antilabor Democracy in Nineteenth Century Chicago" (2016). *Department of History and Social Sciences*. 7.

https://mushare.marian.edu/fp_hss/7

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Research at MUShare. It has been accepted for inclusion in Department of History and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of MUShare. For more information, please contact emandity@marian.edu.

role of movements, V. O. Key's *The Responsible Electorate* (Harvard University Press, 1966), Carmines and Stimson's *Issue Evolution* (Princeton University Press, 1989), John Zaller's (1992) earlier work in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Rabinowitz and McDonald's "Directional Theory of Voting" (*American Political Science Review* 83) would be better, as would Joe Gerteis's *Class and the Color Line* (Duke University Press, 2007) and Kent Redding's *Making Race, Making Power* (University of Illinois Press, 2003) in sociology.

But the "Real Specters Haunting Heaney and Rojas" (my next wishful subheading) are Marx and Michels. The authors occasionally allude to but never openly acknowledge Western Marxism's concepts of "articulation" and "interpellation" as in their use of Marxist references like "call" and "callings" on pages 5 and 83. They too are better suited to the book's theoretical claims than party ID. Also lurking in the background are "They Who Must Not Be Named." Heaney and Rojas's intellectual alliances prevent them (owing to issues of consistency, epistemology, and so on) from suggesting an alternative mechanism for their blockbuster finding, based in the work of Piven and Cloward and going back to classical theorists of party incorporation, especially Weber, Michels, Sombart, Sorel, Mosca, Pareto, and Ostrogorski. This alternative hypothesis would suggest that the Democrats first infiltrated (mobilization) and then coopted (demobilization) key antiwar activists and organizations into the party. (By the way, it wouldn't be the first time.)

Overall, Heaney and Rojas have done an incalculable service to our understanding of the relationship between parties and movements, but a mechanism like incorporation or interpellation is missing from what Weber would call this otherwise talented account.

The Origins of Right to Work: Antilabor Democracy in Nineteenth Century Chicago. By Cedric de Leon. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. xi+172. \$79.95 (hardcover); \$24.95 (paper).

William A. Mirola
Marian University

In light of recent battles over "right-to-work" legislation in states like Indiana and Wisconsin, Cedric de Leon's historical analysis in *The Origins of Right to Work* is a timely examination of the emergence of antilabor legislation through the lens of the relationship between the American labor movement and the major political parties in 19th-century Chicago. Right-to-work laws prohibit unions from requiring union membership or the payment of union dues or other fees as a condition of employment. Such laws are not recent manifestations of American employers' opposition to organized labor. The right-to-work story begins in the antebellum period, in a changing political landscape in which both Republicans (initially Whigs)

and Democrats each tried to attract the support of the growing numbers of industrial workers for their own political ends but using rhetoric that would resonate with labor's interests.

De Leon's work is a political narrative built on the deliberations and rhetorical framing of party leaders rather than one more typically rooted in the social class conflicts or racial and ethnic divisions of the time. In doing so, de Leon emphasizes the important independent role that political parties played in the fiery industrial battles over labor reform in Chicago. This represents an important addition to research in this field, most of which frames its political rhetoric as simplistic reflections of employer interests only. Politicians have their own institutional interests in entering social struggles, whether over slavery or labor reform, and de Leon's analysis highlights their independence.

Using the concept of political articulation as the guiding theoretical framework for his analysis, the author explores important rhetorical debates over free labor within Chicago's political parties, as reflected in the Democratic *Chicago Times* and Republican *Chicago Tribune* as well as shifting voting patterns in Chicago's wards. De Leon follows the ways in which Whigs and Democrats in the Jacksonian era and later Republicans and Democrats used a changing political rhetoric to build majority coalitions of diverse interests groups that could effectively win elections in the years between 1828 and 1887.

But de Leon's narrative is more than just a straightforward political analysis of the period. It highlights the overlooked paradox in the evolution of the two parties' relationships to labor. The language of democracy and freedom from slavery in its traditional form in the American South and the new "wage" slavery of industrial capitalism in the North was employed by workers to critique the emerging capitalist economic order. Democrats' rhetoric attracted Chicago workers to their side in the antebellum period because it was strongly critical of wage dependency. However, once the question of the Southern system of slavery took precedence in both parties' agendas, it was Republicans' rhetoric of free labor that attracted Northern workers into a wartime coalition. Immediately following the war, however, as a new industrial labor movement organized around laws to reduce the hours of labor to an eight-hour day, both Republicans and Democrats built their political frames around an individualized notion of free labor and freedom of contract. This language became the foundation for both parties' support for the *individual* rights of workers to enter into any contracts they wished, while denying them the ability to do so *collectively*. In other words, the "freedom of contract" arguments so often used by 19th-century employers to oppose any labor legislation that would interfere with business operations were also used by Republicans and Democrats who purported to maintain individual rights to freedom and democracy in the face of organized labor undermining those ideals through collective action.

Consequently, the labor movement became disillusioned with and divided over the strategic use of party politics and turned to strikes, boycotts, and more radical solutions as ways to oppose wage slavery within industrial cap-

italism. Republicans and Democrats themselves played up the unreasonable and anti-free-labor demands of unions to justify the use of state action to limit the collective power of workers in unions. The narrative ends by examining how contemporary challenges to the American labor movement through right-to-work legislation are rooted in political and economic conflicts in the decades immediately following the Civil War. De Leon shows how the political battles in antebellum Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio continue to shape the political outcomes of industrial conflicts today.

De Leon makes an important contribution by reasserting the independent role of political parties in shaping the trajectory of industrial reform and in establishing the limits of organized labor's political influence. However, there is room in de Leon's analysis to explain more than just the historical emergence of antilabor democracy. Readers can see the direct link between the period de Leon ends with (1887) and our own time. However, it is important to note that each party's rhetoric evolved again, not only in ways that undermined labor. Following the upheaval around the eight-hour day movement in 1886 and the events at Chicago's Haymarket, political parties increasingly critiqued organized *capital* as being fundamentally antidemocratic, taking de Leon's narrative full circle in some ways. If the masses of workers becoming radicalized shook the general public, providing a fear-based call to limit the collective rights of workers and to justify state action against unions of all stripes, this same call was invoked against employers. Employers were increasingly portrayed as acting in an imperious fashion in much the same way as Jacksonian Democrats and workers portrayed bankers, financiers, and others as a "paper aristocracy" that threatened the American understanding that democracy could only flourish alongside economic self-sufficiency. Although by the end of the century economic independence no longer was identifiable in the form of independent, skilled craftsmen, that language was applied to the conditions of industrial workers who, if not ever to be self-sufficient, may participate in social and political life as citizens as a result of reforms that reduced the hours of labor, raised wages, and created systems of industrial safety—reforms opposed by employers.

Political rhetoric is shaped by historical context. De Leon does an excellent job in using this point to help explain the historical foundations of today's antilabor political climate. This analysis refreshingly reorients our attention from the macroforces shaping the industrial and now postindustrial landscape to the more microlevel, examining how what groups *say* about these issues influences what they will later *do* about them. Political parties are independent actors in these narratives but not the only actors. This work provides a more complex picture of this important period in American labor history and crafts a more complex analysis of these conflicts in our own time.

Copyright of American Journal of Sociology is the property of University of Chicago Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.