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Lawrence B. Glickman. *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997. xvi + 220 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3357-3.

Reviewed by Richard Schneirov (Indiana State University)
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This book has enormous implications for historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. To understand precisely how first requires a capsule summary of nineteenth century labor historiography. From the 1960s through the early 1980s, U.S. labor historians sought to write a history of the making of the American working class much in the manner done so masterfully for the English working class by Edward P. Thompson. New labor historians located a nascent socialist critique of the wage labor system in a working class version of artisan republicanism grounded in the classical labor theory of value. Most of the new generation of labor historians found that the career of labor republicanism came to a halt in the late nineteenth century with the defeat of the Knights of Labor and rise of the pure and simple or business unionism, commonly associated with the American Federation of Labor. Other historians pushed back the "fall" of labor into the twentieth century, but in most cases a working class that was "made" throughout most of the nineteenth century was "unmade" at some point in the twentieth.[1]

For nonlabor historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, the conclusions of the new labor historians tended to reinforce a much older view of American history as exceptionalist–that is, lacking sharp class divisions and a viable socialist or labor political presence as existed in Europe and Britain. In the newest version of the old story, exceptionalism was not inherent in American history but emerged historically out of working class failure.

A Living Wage is so important because it provides us with some of the conceptual tools required for resolving labor history's impasse. Glickman grounds the fin de siecle crisis, whose resolution created the foundation for modern America, in the dissolution of a producers' understanding of how value was constructed. With the sundering of the labor theory of value from the calculus determining prices and wages–the premise for neoclassical economic theory–the producers' critique of the wage labor system lost its intellectual and ultimately its cultural force. One outcome which Glickman does not discuss is the marginalist revolution, which facilitated the acceptance of corporate administered prices and wages. Glickman's book tells of a different outcome, one that emerged out of the late nineteenth century labor movement. Accepting the modern premise that wages no longer were determined by the cost of labor, trade union activists, inspired by the writings of eight-hour theorist Ira Steward, began to promote a needs theory of value, according to which human needs would have priority over market forces in determining wages. In the terms of the day, labor advocated a "living wage" whose value would be determined by the ever-expanding needs and wants of workers in their capacity as consumers. As Samuel Gompers' associate Frank Foster put it, "It is not the value of what is produced which determines the wages rate, but the nature and degree of the wants of the workers" (p. 70). Whether labor leaders knew it or not, the new regulative principle was quite in accord with the thinking of Marx whose maxim of socialism was "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

The significance of this development has been largely ignored by labor historians because the doctrine of the living wage and its corollary, the need for a constantly rising (American) standard of living, necessarily entailed the acceptance of what was then called "wage slavery." Many historians have viewed the abandonment of the goal of self-employment through producers' cooperation and the acceptance of a consumerist consciousness as equivalent to a passive and narrowly apolitical acquiescence in the inevitability of capitalism. But, as Glickman shows, the living wage doctrine was actively constructed by workers themselves, partly out of the producers' ideal of a moral economy as an alternative to the commodification of toil, but also out of an acceptance of those very relations. In Glickman's view acceptance, rather than being equivalent to acquiescence, was the necessary condition for actively reshaping and regulating market relations according to an ethical standard external to those

relations, viz. workers' self-perceived needs.

Glickman traces the development of living wage thinking from its first flowering in the eight-hour movement of the late 1880s to the rise of the 1890s trade union label movement long associated with business unionism. Inherent in both movements, according to Glickman, was the vision of a "social economy" that abandoned the idea that wages should return to workers the full fruits of their labor. Though much of the old producerist vocabulary continued to frame labor leaders' thinking, Glickman demonstrates that trade unionists tried to reshape and control market relations by making them subject to a socially determined standard of living emerging from the sphere of consumption and collective bargaining.

By the early twentieth century, reformers outside the ranks of labor picked up the living wage ideal and turned it into a Progressive reform, known as the minimum wage. Because the minimum wage was defined as a subsistence wage fit only for those, like immigrants and women, working below the American standard, AFLers pulled back from the movement. Yet, even the minimum wage challenged the prevailing legal doctrine of freedom of contract and the still powerful producerist ethical ideal that wages should be based on an equivalent of services rendered. The idea that wages should be based on consumers' proliferating needs and wants eventually came into its own during the New Deal. In their understanding of the 1930s depression as due to underconsumption, New Dealers and progressive businessmen endorsed the idea that rising purchasing power, which in part depended on rising wages, was necessary for the successful functioning of a mass production economy. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act establishing a minimum wage is for Glickman a monument to the triumph of a nonproducerist and nonmarket criterion of value determination in regard to wages.

The implications of Glickman's book are at least several. It strongly suggests that historians abandon a time-honored view of pure and simple trade unionism as "conservative" and circumscribed by "bread and butter" concerns. To the contrary, Glickman provides us with a way of understanding this consciousness as an integral part of an ongoing class formation that occurred simultaneously with an accommodation to wage labor. Moreover, by demonstrating that socialism could have both a consumerist and producerist foundation, this book furthers the understanding that socialist principles and relations were intermixed in twentieth century corporate capitalist society and in modern liberalism.[2] Finally, it provides a way in which a re-thought labor history can incorporate the history of women workers and feminists whose agency was often focused in the sphere of consumption rather than production.

The book does have several limitations that should be mentioned. First, by promiscuously mixing quotations from the 1880s with those from the early twentieth century, Glickman misses the opportunity to suggest in specific ways how and why this new consciousness developed historically. In this regard, some labor historians will be disappointed that the book does not directly confront the prevalent argument that the living wage was gained only by abandoning skilled workers' control over the workplace. Second, there is a basic ambivalence in Glickman's treatment of consumption. At some points, he argues that organized workers began to view the sphere of consumption as displacing the sphere of production. At other points, he suggests that workers merely understood that the two spheres were interrelated and of roughly equal importance in determining class identity, a more defensible position. Finally, there is an implication in the book that the labor movement was the sole or prime source in defining an American standard of living. This ignores the long nineteenth century history of Whig and Republican sponsored protective tariff proposals that party spokesmen argued were necessary to protect high American wages.

These qualms should not detract unduly from a provocative and important monograph. Glickman's book is concise (162 pages of text), well written, and his argument is easy to follow, making it accessible to undergraduates as well as graduate students. It promises to become a major text for the next round of rethinking labor history in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Notes

[1]. For example, see Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Cornell University Press, 1993); for a survey see Larry G. Gerber, "Shifting Perspectives on American Exceptionalism: Recent Literature on American Labor Relations and Labor Politics," *Journal of American Studies*, 31 (1997): 253-74.

[2]. Martin J. Sklar, *The United States as a Developing Country: Studies in U.S. History in the Progressive Era and the 1920s* (Cambridge, 1992); James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1910* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-1897* (University of Illinois Press, 1998).

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