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Richard Biernacki. *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914 (Studies on the History of Society and Culture, Vol 22).* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995. $58.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08491-9.

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Richard Biernacki has written a highly original and profound study. He takes apart the concept of "labor" and shows how its commodification, while a standard feature of capitalist economies, was nonetheless understood *and* practiced differently in Germany and Britain. His empirical focus is the textile industry in both countries, and his research into its history is prodigious. He has read widely in the business, technical, and trade union press of the nineteenth century, and has delved into scores of local and regional archives.

For all his extensive historical research, Biernacki's concerns are primarily theoretical. His book is an effort to define the role in social and historical development of the only concept that is more diffuse than "postmodernism," namely, "culture." Hence, *The Fabrication of Labor* involves a lengthy theoretical discussion of the meaning of culture. It is rough going in places, but well worth the ride. The author takes on classic works in social and labor history by E.P. Thompson, Patrick Joyce, William Reddy, Joan Scott, and Gareth Stedman Jones, and estimable theorists like Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, Marshall Sahlins, and Juergen Habermas. Biernacki finds in all of them either reductionist or excessively vague understandings of culture. His goal, he states, is "to highlight culture as the structuring principle of national differences in factory practice" (2), and its independent, constitutive power in shaping other social processes. "Culture" is not simply a means of interpretation, but a "principle [that] *compos[es]*" capitalist production (91), a "symbolic order... [that] is not "external to practice" but is constitutive of practice.

Biernacki does not, however, posit the autonomy of the cultural realm, as many postmodernists would do and as readers might expect from his sweeping theoretical claims. Instead, he locates cultural meanings in the very practice of labor. Indeed, for a work so steeped in theory, the reader is startled by the shift in the first chapter into a highly technical discussion about the calculation of piecework rates in German and British textile factories. The differences discovered by Biernacki are, however, central to the entire argument of the book. In Britain, he finds that piecework rates were based on the density of cloth – the number of weft threads per inch. German rates, in contrast, were calculated by the number of shuttle shots across the warp – in effect, by the time required to produce a given length of cloth. The basic insight that Biernacki draws from this rather prosaic distinction is that in Britain, the commodification of labor was understood as "the appropriation of workers' materialized labor via its products," while in Germany, labor commodification was understood as the "timed appropriation of workers' labor power and disposition over workers' labor activity" (12). British textile workers functioned more like independent contractors who sold their products to their employers; their German counterparts more as the classic proletarians deprived of control of time and space by the owners. In Britain, the product served as the "sign" of labor power; in Germany, the act of labor itself provided the "sign" of labor power.

Biernacki goes on to argue that these varied understandings produced distinctive "constellations" (a term he very much favors) of practices and attitudes in each country. Accounting systems, forms of wage payments, the very architecture of factories, disciplinary procedures, the role of overseers, and the forms and contents of labor protest – all obtained their particular contours from the particular pattern of labor commodification. English workers, for example, were fined for defective cloth once the product had entered the marketplace. Both employers and workers understood this as a form of compensation to the owner who could not sell his wares at the expected rate. German firms, in contrast, fined their employees immediately upon production of defective cloth, and the fines were seen as disciplinary measures designed to ensure better quality work. Both procedures confirmed the existing pattern of labor commodification: in Britain, the "belief that workers transferred a quantity of labor as it was embodied in finished products"; in Germany, "the belief that workers sold the dis-

position over 'labor power' in the production process" (78). In Britain, employers paid the loom, and a worker could send in substitutes, often other family members. Workers looking for a job asked if a firm had "looms to let." In Germany, the firms maintained far stricter control over employment practices, befitting their understanding that they hired labor power directly. Yet controls at the factory gate were more severe in Britain than in Germany. In Britain, the gate served as a symbolic frontier, the crossing of which placed workers under the intense gaze of their employers. In Germany, employers were more concerned with control over workers' labor power, their continuous production once inside the factory.

In a move that further enriches the explanatory scope of his book, the author proceeds to analyze the historical origins of the different regimes of labor and identifies affinities between, on the one hand, classical economic theory and the British form of labor commodification, and, on the other, Marxian theory and German labor practices. In the historical section, Biernacki extends the geographical range into northern Italy and France, where he finds varying admixtures of his two model systems. The author dramatically revises standard treatments of the origins of Marx's thought – curt and crass, the contention that Marx creatively drew from German philosophy, French politics, and English economics – by locating the critical fount in the form of labor commodification specific to Germany. The insight that Marx himself considered so central to his system of thought – the distinction between mere labor and labor *power* [*Arbeitskraft*] – Biernacki finds rooted in the existing language and practice of commodified labor in Germany. Historically, the earlier emergence in Britain of a free market in which independent producers predominated gave rise to an understanding of labor power represented in its product. In Germany, the later emergence of markets and, importantly, the *simultaneous* creation of a market in labor and in commodities, along with the persistence of feudal forms, helped create the system whereby labor power became manifest in *and* was represented as the act of labor subjected to rigorous capitalist supervision. In Biernacki's account, the historical model of Germany provided, ironically, the crystalline example of capitalist relations that Marx, almost unwittingly, drew upon to develop his ideas.

For all of its profundity, Biernacki's book is not free of certain problems. I remain skeptical of a number of the particular contrasts he draws between British and German practices. I wonder, for example, whether the controls at the factory gates were really more severe and rigid in Britain than in Germany. British employers, he contends, shut workers out of the factory even if they were seconds late. Even if the comparison is accurate, it difficult to see why the British practice was not merely punitive but expressive of the understanding of workers as independent contractors who had failed to deliver their product on time (111). The fortress-like structure of British factories, which enabled the gaze of supervisors to survey the comings and goings of the workforce, seems more appropriate to the harsh disciplinary regime of German firms. The maze-like character of German factories that Biernacki describes – a kind of factory version of the room and pillar system prevalent in underground mining – seems instead like an exercise in incoherence in terms of labor control, but ideally suited to maintaining the flow of production.

Furthermore, the writing is in places repetitious and the author's penchant for rhetorical questions quickly began to grate on my sensibilities. More importantly, the book is so tightly wound up in its singular pattern of explanation that it has at times an almost claustrophobic feel. The varying understandings of labor as a commodity becomes the source of explanation for virtually everything – business practices, labor protest, economic theory. The author loses sight of other aspects of the historical context, such as the varying political cultures of the two countries. I am not convinced that the forms of labor protest in Britain, for example, can be explained *only* by reference to the way labor was commodified. While Biernacki effectively critiques E.P. Thompson and many others, it still seems to me that the language and culture of "free-born Englishmen," which long antedated the emergence of the factory system, profoundly shaped the way workers in the early industrial revolution understood and protested their fate. Similarly, the basis for the harsh regime of German factories cannot be reduced to the particular form of labor's commodification. As a very substantial literature attests, the authoritarian elements of Germany's religious, political, and civic culture shaped both managerial strategies and labor organization and protest. If German workers raised demands more frequently than their British counterparts for improved health and safety conditions in the workplace, as Biernacki shows, the key to understanding this distinction does not necessarily lie in the varying processes of labor commodification, but in a constellation of forces – many of whose origins lay outside the labor process – that made German employers more likely to seek control over the work and home life of their employees.

Despite these criticisms, *The Fabrication of Labor* is an excellent work that bears close reading and extensive discussion. It contributes greatly to labor and social his-

tory and to debates in Marxism and postmodernism. It is extensively researched and theoretically sophisticated, and makes an important and often very effective case for the powerful impact of culture. The author explores crucial differences in the ways that the common, capitalist elements of the market, the factory, and the commodification of labor were understood and experienced, a critical insight that adds complexity and nuance to our understanding of the development of industrial capitalism. While not many historians would be able to marshall the theoretical capabilities that Biernacki displays, as a systematic and compelling *comparative* study – far more compelling than what usually passes for comparative work in German history, namely, a collection of essays from different countries on a related theme – *The Fabrication of Labor* stands as a model for future research.

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