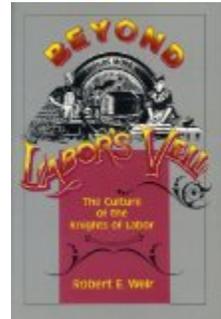


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert E. Weir. *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996. xx + 343 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 0-271-01498-9. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-01499-9.

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The Knights of Labor (KOL) was the first national movement of the American working class. At its peak in 1886 the KOL brought together nearly a million members among skilled and unskilled workers in factories and farms from California to Maine, from Minnesota to Louisiana. More remarkable than its large membership, dwarfing any contemporary organizations, was the KOL's policy of solidarity. Trade unions organized workers of common craft or trade, often excluding women and workers from racial and ethnic minorities in order to reduce the supply of labor to their trade. But the KOL united all workers without regard for trade, race or gender. Under the slogan "an injury to one is the concern of all," the KOL sought to advance the condition of all through solidarity. A fraternal movement of productive workers would transform society, ushering in a new era of concord, social harmony, and good fellowship.

Despite its successes and pioneering strategy, the KOL has drawn relatively little sympathetic attention from historians. Less has been written about the KOL, for example, than about the much smaller and less influential Industrial Workers of the World, not to mention the KOL's offspring and rival, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Much of what has been written about the KOL has been hostile. To the classic labor economists and historians John R. Commons and Selig Perlman, the KOL's mix of evangelical religion and trade union action made an incoherent stew. The KOL served only one useful purpose: its failure made obvious the superiority of the trade union form of organization upheld by the AFL over the mixed organization uniting workers without regard for skill or trade. And, the AFL's triumph put to rest illusions that an organization dedicated to fraternity and broad social reform could succeed.

More recently, some historians have reexamined the work of the KOL and reached more favorable judgments. Two notable studies, Leon Fink's *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) and Richard Oestreicher's *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), present the KOL as an effective union pursuing trade union ends through industrial organization and political action. A more recent study by Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), goes further. Voss attributes the KOL's ultimate failures not to its own internal weakness but rather to the exceptional force that employers mobilized against it. Rather than proving its weakness, Voss argues that defeat was a sign that the KOL pursued a strategy so effective that it threatened the bases of class rule in America.

In the new approach, the KOL is no longer the ineffectual fraternal order denounced by Commons and Perlman. Instead, it is a proto-CIO, advancing the interests of all workers through industrial solidarity and radical political action. Robert Weir's book is indebted to this new approach. He joins Fink, Oestreicher, and Voss in celebrating the KOL's triumphs and blaming its ultimate failure on the opposition its success aroused among employers and the business community. "For all the KOL's failures," he writes, "neither socialists nor the IWW came close to its achievements [in promoting solidarity] and few AFL craft unions bothered to try" (p. 324).

But Weir's work is much more than a restatement with new examples of a new consensus. Instead, he

breaks new ground in ways that challenge the new labor historians as much as their older counterparts. The new consensus defends the KOL by treating it as an industrial union. But to Weir, the KOL was successful precisely because and only when it was not a union. The KOL successfully built solidarity not by promoting workers' material interests but by uniting workers in a fraternal movement around ritual, song, poetry, and story. Following anthropological rather than economic historians, Weir argues that the KOL must be understood through its rituals, songs, poems, stories, and such material paraphernalia as pins, gavels, playing cards, and bookmarks. "Knighthood," Weir argues "was an idea as well as a set of organizational arrangement" (p. 274), and it was constructed through ritual and by involvement with material object more than through the rational assessment of interest and advantage. In constructing solidarity in the KOL, "[o]bjects played an important role in the process by which abstractions were bonded to institutions." For "many Knights," Weir argues, "their identity was as much shaped by a dime-sized lapel pin as by the weighty pronouncements of convention delegates" (p. 231).

Weir's revised history of the KOL emphasizes its cultural expression rather than the industrial disputes and political contests stressed by previous labor historians. Instead of the traditional drama of ideological struggle between socialists and reformers, and advocates of industrial organization against craft unionists, Weir's KOL is divided over the nature of the secret ritual, the color of union labels, and the choice of poetry and song. In this way, Weir presents a new interpretation of the KOL's rise and fall. Admitting the power of employer opposition to the Knights, Weir nonetheless places responsibility for the collapse of the KOL elsewhere. "Material desires," he argues, "ultimately undid the Knights of Labor" by leading the KOL away from ritual and fraternal bonding. By abandoning secrecy and ritual, by "pushing aside the veils of secrecy and taking its crusade for a cooperative commonwealth to the workplace and the street," Weir laments, "the Knights attracted attention, but not always the kind it wanted" (p. 64). Had the KOL continued the slow but steady work of building a fraternal counter-culture secretly and through the meticulous observance of ritual, then, Weir suggests, the KOL would have been able to stand up even against employer and state repression.

Weir's work provides valuable insights for labor historians and others interested in KOL. By assuming rational individualism, economists and many labor historians have been blind to the role that ritual, culture, and

irrational emotion play in shaping social life. Weir is surely right that the KOL drew on deeper sources than the rational pursuit of individual material interest; one may question how such concerns could ever lead anyone, worker or employer, into collective action. The KOL must, as Weir argues, have built solidarity on emotional connections. But it is less clear that these connections were made, as Weir argues, by ritual and cultural objects, or whether they were forged by participation in social action. The substance of much labor history, public action, is slighted by Weir's focus on private ritual. But it could be that public demonstrations were more important than the rituals he emphasizes, in shaping the KOL's culture of solidarity. Weir notes the importance of public demonstrations of solidarity in his discussion of KOL parades, picnics, and athletic events. But he is curiously oblivious to the equally important, or more important, public demonstrations of solidarity around the traditional events of labor history, including strikes and political rallies. Here the question becomes not whether culture and emotional connection mattered but whether the cultural artifacts central to Weir's study are at the root of the solidarity created, however ephemerally, by the KOL or whether they are epiphenomena, a sign of sentiments nurtured elsewhere, and whether these emotional connections were really nurtured in the events described in the traditional labor history.

Seen in this way, Weir's dichotomy of cultural history versus traditional, economic-determinist history appears forced. Like many historians of his generation, Weir appears determined to break history away from economics and away from anything about which economists have written. But far from discounting the industrial disputes and political conflicts central to earlier labor histories, Weir may well have shown again how important these events can be, precisely because it is in these events, more than any other, that emotional connections are made that bind workers together.

Despite these reservations, I would recommend Robert Weir's book to all economic historians and labor historians. Weir has written a valuable book that should be read by all regardless of interest in the Knights of Labor. His study challenges our conventions not just about the Knights or the late-nineteenth-century American labor movement, but about social life in general.

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