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David Montgomery. "Workers' Movements in the United States Confront Imperialism: The Progressive Era Experience." 2007 SHGAPE Distinguished Historian Address. *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7.1 (January 2008): 7-42.

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The subspecialty of organized labor and international affairs remains one of the neglected backwaters in the currently turbulent field of U.S. foreign relations history. Although a few of William Appleman Williams' students and associated revisionist scholars pioneered in researching organized labor's corporatist partnership with the government in promoting U.S. foreign relations during the twentieth century, interest in the issue waned when revisionism fell out of favor as the dominant paradigm in the field in the 1990s.¹ The much touted new cultural turn in diplomatic history has focused primarily on the gender, racial, and cultural values of policy makers and elites; its adherents have neglected class analyses of international affairs and have only rarely examined international issues from the "bottom-up," grass-roots perspectives popular among social historians.² Given the dearth of recent research on U.S. labor and international affairs,

¹ See especially, Ronald Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy: The Cold War in the Unions from Gompers to Lovestone* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969); Thomas McCormick, "Drift or Mastery? A Corporatist Synthesis for American Diplomatic History: *Reviews in American History* 10 (December 1982): 318-330; Michael Hogan, "Corporatism," *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 153-160; Elizabeth McKillen, "The Corporatist Model, World War I, and the Public Debate over the League of Nations," *Diplomatic History* 15 (Spring 1991), 171-197; idem, "Organized Labor" in *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Relations* 2d ed., Alexander DeConde et al. eds. (New York: Scribner, 2002), 45-60. Gregg Andrews, *Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, the United States and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1924* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). See also, the works of Ronald Filippelli, Carolyn Eisenberg, and Howard Schonberger.

² For a summary of the new cultural turn in the field and some representative articles using this approach, see Michael J. Hogan, Thomas G. Paterson eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* 2d ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Significantly, this edited volume contains separate articles on gender and race as well as several on culture, but none on labor: trade union issues are discussed only in Michael Hogan's article on corporatism. Exceptions to the general pattern of neglecting grass-roots labor and social history perspectives for the early twentieth century include Elizabeth McKillen, *Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy: 1914-1924* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); idem,

eminent labor historian David Montgomery's forty-two page article on workers' movements and imperialism from 1898-1920 is a welcome addition. In refreshing contrast to most diplomatic historians, Montgomery emphasizes that workers' movements in both the United States and in U.S.-controlled colonial outposts were active agents in shaping and in opposing imperial relationships. An impressive piece of synthesis, the article is nonetheless suggestive rather than definitive; it necessarily contains gaps in coverage that will only be adequately redressed in a longer study. The analysis could also be sharpened by a further integration and consideration of recent literature in U.S. foreign relations history.

Montgomery focuses his attention primarily on the AFL, emphasizing that it was far more directly involved in foreign affairs than either the Socialist Party or IWW prior to 1914. His central thesis is that during the twenty-one year period from the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War to the Versailles Peace Treaty, the AFL changed from a "vehement foe of imperial expansion" to an important "participant in its exercise." (41-42) During the 1890s, AFL leaders expressed "profound anxiety that the division of the world into colonial spheres dominated by the Great Powers threatened world peace as well as the ability of trade unions to improve the lot of working people within the domestic economy." (41) The AFL never officially endorsed or opposed the war with Spain over Cuba due to the fact that it occurred between sessions of the AFL convention, a point that Montgomery does not make entirely clear.³ But the AFL became a more vociferous opponent of the annexation of colonies in its aftermath than most European socialist and labor parties (9).

Although AFL leaders clearly betrayed racist attitudes toward the people in colonial areas during the debate over empire, Montgomery does not believe that race entirely explains the AFL's opposition to colonial annexations. Racial arguments, he points out, were used both to support and oppose empire. Instead, the AFL's opposition to colonialism was rooted in economic concerns that have a surprisingly modern cast to them. AFL leaders feared that "capital would flow to the colonies, where it would be possible to fabricate products so cheaply that they would undercut jobs and wages in the United States." (12) In addition, annexations might encourage the immigration of low wage labor to the United States. Montgomery notes that the AFL's formulations about the undesirability of colonies were quite different than those of the Hearst newspapers regularly read by American workers; as is well known, these newspapers avidly supported empire during the Spanish-American war. Yet Montgomery fails to probe the questions raised by Kristin Hoganson as to whether U.S. workers were significantly swayed by the chivalric paradigm the Hearst

"Ethnicity, Class, and Wilsonian Internationalism Reconsidered: The Mexican-American and Irish-American Immigrant Left and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1914-1924," *Diplomatic History* 25 (Fall 2001), 553-587; Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); idem, "Anti-Imperialism in the Wilson Era," paper presented at the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Annual Meeting in Kansas City, 2006. On labor leadership during the Cold War era, see the recent books of Edmund Wehrle, Victor Silverman, and Yvette Richards.

³Delber Lee McKee, "The American Federation of Labor and American Foreign Policy," (Ph.D., Stanford, 1952), 65.

newspapers promoted. The omission is unfortunate for labor historians might well be able to cast critical light on the limitations of cross-class appeals based on a gendered solidarity among white men in promoting national foreign policy goals. As Montgomery has made clear in other contexts, the gender values of working-men in the late nineteenth century were quite different than those of middle-class men. Some of these divergences were apparent in AFL convention debates over the war and empire.⁴

Despite the AFL's initial fervor in opposing empire, "protests against annexing colonies simply disappeared from AFL proceedings" over the next decade." (17) Montgomery points to several diverse factors in explaining this phenomenon. Among these were the nation's economic growth and continued economic expansion abroad, the growth of the union movement itself, the new spirit of class collaboration fostered by the National Civic Federation, the growing reform impulse in Washington D.C that began with Theodore Roosevelt, and the realization that empire could sometimes foster closer relations between white labor and the state—as happened in the construction of the Panama canal. Equally important, in some colonial areas indigenous trade unions actually supported annexation as a way to achieve gains for workers and sought the help of the AFL in their struggles. This was particularly true in Puerto Rico, where prominent labor organizer and socialist Santiago Iglesias viewed the Puerto Rican economic elite favoring independence with suspicion and favored U.S. annexation of the island in order to protect workers from the repressive Spanish labor laws that remained on the books. Iglesias cultivated a strong friendship with Samuel Gompers and when Iglesias was arrested on charges of violating an old Spanish labor law, the AFL president intervened on his behalf by appealing directly to President Theodore Roosevelt. The Puerto Rican Supreme Court then overturned Iglesias's and other trade unionists' sentences. Events such as these convinced AFL leaders to focus on securing U.S. government support for their organizing efforts and collaborations with colonial labor movements rather than on continuing to pursue anti-imperialist agitation.

In Canada and Mexico, "branch plant" economies developed that were heavily dependent on U.S. investments, and local trade unions sometimes sought AFL affiliation and/or support as a way to counteract the growing power of U.S. corporations. (13) In Canada local unions joined internationals that were affiliated with the AFL and the AFL soon meddled extensively in the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada. Mexican anarcho-syndicalists sought the AFL's assistance in preventing U.S. military intervention in the Mexican revolution and in securing the Wilson administration's recognition of the Carranza regime. Against this diplomatic backdrop, both the AFL and some Mexican trade union organizations such as the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicano became increasingly important instruments of state policy. The AFL's growing partnership with the Wilson

⁴Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); David Montgomery, "Work Rules and Manliness in the World of the Nineteenth-Century Craftsman," *Major Problems in the History of American Workers*, Eileen Boris and Nelson Lichtenstein eds. (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath, 1991) 284-297. *Proceedings of the Convention of the American Federation of Labor, 1898*, 16-96; "American Manhood for Cuban Libre," *American Federationist* v (1898), 53.

administration may help explain why it remained mute on the U.S. military occupations of Haiti, Santo Domingo, and Nicaragua between 1915-1917.

Already close, the relationship between the AFL and Wilson administration became even closer during World War I, when the AFL loyally supported the government war effort and was rewarded for its efforts with appointments to multiple wartime agencies. But Montgomery makes clear that many U.S. workers strongly opposed the AFL's policies and strike levels remained high throughout the war. Dissent also festered at war's end when Gompers tried to rally working-class support for the Versailles Peace treaty, the League of Nations, and the International Labor Organization. This dissent was not, as is so often argued, merely a misdirected manifestation of outrage over the Wilson administration's repression of domestic dissent during the war. Rather, it constituted an important anti-imperialist moment for U.S. labor, with rank and file workers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds rejecting the compromises made at Versailles and demanding a more democratic diplomacy and a more democratic blueprint for the future League of Nations. The primary beneficiary of this discontent, however, was not the socialist or incipient labor party movement, but the Republican party. After the popular repudiation of the Wilson administration's handiwork at Versailles in 1920, the AFL redirected its attention to the Western hemisphere, using the Pan American Federation of Labor to proclaim a "Monroe Doctrine of Labor" in the Western hemisphere that many criticized as a corollary to U.S. imperial designs for the region (41).

Montgomery's tale of the AFL's evolution from opponent to supporter of empire during this era will not be entirely unfamiliar to diplomatic historians, since early accounts of the AFL's foreign policy also highlighted these developments. But Montgomery breaks new ground by emphasizing the interactive process that led AFL leaders and trade unionists in colonial or branch plant economies to support or oppose particular imperial policies. Too often, older corporatist literature portrayed AFL leaders as unilaterally imposing a brand of trade union imperialism on unwilling labor movements in other countries. But in at least some instances it was trade unions in colonial or branch plant economies that sought AFL help. Montgomery also demonstrates that—contrary to earlier appraisals—the AFL's close alliance with the federal government sometimes paid dividends, enabling the AFL to solve concrete economic problems facing workers in both the United States and other countries, and providing it with the clout necessary to counteract some kinds of business war-mongering.⁵

But in other respects, Montgomery's analysis of the political and international power of the AFL remains underdeveloped. For example, one issue neglected by Montgomery is the AFL's decision not to pursue independent labor party or socialist politics during this era. Yet the AFL's hostility toward third party politics may have been critical in shaping its attitude toward empire: without a working-class party the AFL lacked any independent forum for promoting an anti-imperial agenda after the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War. Its opposition to empire may therefore always have been more rhetorical than real

⁵ See especially, Radosh, *American Labor and United States Foreign Policy*.

and its decision to support the imperial policies of Progressive era Presidents may have been less the result of rational economic calculations than of visceral hostility to socialist and independent labor party politics. Comparing the evolution of the AFL's attitude toward empire with that of the Socialist party would likely yield some interesting results. Although it is true that the Socialist party was not terribly concerned with empire in the early twentieth century, the Mexican revolution marked a turning point, driving it to embrace a democratic and anti-imperialist labor foreign policy far different from that of either the AFL or anarcho-syndicalist organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World and the Los Angeles-based Partido Liberal Mexicano.⁶ Only by considering the historical contingencies available to early twentieth-century workers can historians assess the wisdom of the collaborationist path chosen by the AFL.

Montgomery's analysis might also benefit from more consideration of a set of issues that often preoccupy diplomatic historians: the links between public opinion, electoral politics, and Congressional foreign policy decision-making. Diplomatic historians often try to gauge public opinion by focusing on national media outlets and by relying on public opinion polls. But reliable opinion polls did not yet exist in the World War I era and the influence of national newspapers in shaping working-class foreign policy opinion is at best speculative. It is also unlikely that AFL leaders played much of a role in shaping working-class foreign policy opinion, their claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Instead, as Montgomery himself highlighted earlier in his career, local working-class and immigrant subcultures were often more important in shaping the political behavior of workers. But while Montgomery occasionally integrates stories of continued rank and file dissent within the labor movement into his narrative, his analysis of the role of local immigrant and working-class subcultures in shaping the foreign policy behavior of American workers in ways at odds with that of the AFL leadership needs further development. For example, the outrage of immigrant workers over the Versailles Peace treaty did not simply dissipate into a protest vote for the Republican party in 1920; in a fairly direct way Irish-American and German-American working-class voters fuelled Robert LaFollette's successful campaign in the Senate against the International Labor Organization, a League of Nations-affiliated agency that Samuel Gompers played a major role in constructing at Versailles in 1919.⁷ If

⁶ *Appeal to Reason*, July-November 1916; Diana Christopulos, "American Radicals and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1925," (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1980).

⁷ David Montgomery, "Nationalism, American Patriotism, and Class Consciousness among Immigrant Workers in the United States in the Epoch of World War I," in *Struggle a Hard Battle: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, Dirk Hoerder ed., (DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 1986) 327-350. *Congressional Record*, 66th Congress, 1919, 1st Session, 7669-8759; McKillen, "Beyond Gompers: The AFL, the Creation of the ILO and American Labor Dissent," forthcoming; John Milton Cooper, *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 235. Perhaps the most promising model within diplomatic history for understanding the multiple ways in which workers influence foreign policy was posited by McCormick, in "Drift or Mastery." (see footnote 1). McCormick argued that important pluralist residues of political power persisted even as economic elites were incorporated into corporatist networks at the executive-branch level of government. Applied to labor, this model provides a conceptual framework for understanding how workers could influence foreign policy through electoral politics in ways often quite at odds with the agenda of AFL leaders.

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future scholars take seriously the task of blending the insights of diplomatic historians about public opinion and Congressional politics with the insights accrued among labor historians about local working-class subcultures, grass-roots immigrant labor activists might ultimately come to be viewed as more powerful shapers of working-class foreign policy behavior, and therefore of American foreign policy, than AFL leaders.

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See also, Melvin Small, "Public Opinion," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* 1st ed., Michael Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 165-176.