

# H-Net Reviews

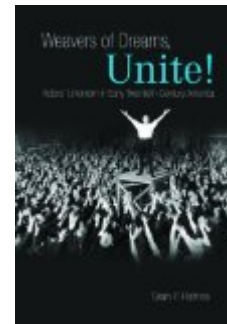
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sean P. Holmes. *Weavers of Dreams, Unite!: Actors' Unionism in Early Twentieth-Century America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03748-1.

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## An Actors' Union or Acting Profession?

The stage has long been recognized as a site of consumption and of battles over the moral order. But Sean P. Holmes reminds us that it was also a workplace. *Weavers of Dreams Unite!* is a history of the Actors' Equity Association (AEA), from its founding in 1913 to 1930. This is a narrow subject in one sense: the AEA represented only the “legitimate” stage—players who stood at the top of the theatrical hierarchy. Yet Holmes expertly mines this organizational history for its broader implications. The resulting study complicates any neat divisions between the working and professional classes, popular and refined culture, and the products and producers of consumer culture. It makes a substantial contribution to the historiography of the Progressive Era and the 1920s.

Like nearly every other industry in the United States, the theater underwent a substantial reorganization in the Gilded Age. After 1870, the old system of resident stock companies, based in a single theater, was displaced by a system that separated performance production from theater management. By the early twentieth century, increasingly powerful syndicates controlled both sides of this equation. They hired a cast, typically featuring a star actor, and then booked the production in a circuit of theaters under their control. The “stars” commanded exquisite treatment, but most actors were the assembly line workers of the theatrical workplace.

The founding of the AEA was one part professionalizing project, one part trade union. AEA leadership saw themselves as “artists” (defined against nonwhite

and working-class actors), but the structure of the theatrical industry limited their professional ambitions. The capital requirements of mounting productions meant actors would always be employees. Without the autonomy enjoyed by doctors and lawyers, they needed a strong union to cultivate solidarity and organize collective action. These dual impulses sometimes acted at cross purposes. A proposed affiliation with the American Federation of Labor was delayed three years because they refused to associate under a vaudeville actors union; apparently being connected with the “White Rats” was too much for their professional aspirations.

Identity notwithstanding, AEA gains came by union tactics. In 1919 they shut down most of New York City's theaters after the Producing Managers Association (PMA) refused their demands for a closed shop and equity contracts. During the standoff, the striking actors used their skills of persuasion and storytelling to transform the walkout into a theatrical event—one their patrons could join. Facing sympathy strikes by other theatrical unions and mounting pressure from investors, the PMA agreed to a compromise. By 1925 a full 97 percent of “legitimate” actors belonged to the AEA and equity contracts had become the de facto standard.

The AEA understood the quid pro quo for these victories was its delivering a reliable and well-behaved workforce. Thus its leaders spent significant resources in the 1920s policing its members. They punished broken contractual obligations, but also moral failures like exces-

sive alcohol consumption and sexual indiscretions. They also staunchly opposed Mae West's famous attempt to repackage cabaret drag acts for the respectable stage. Holmes relates such efforts at "moral uplift" to an old Victorian morality embodied in the "culture of craft unionism" (p. 139). However, historians of Progressive Era religion have largely rejected this temporal binary.[1] Indeed, as Holmes himself notes, differing sexual mores in the 1920s were correlated closely with class identity (p. 132). We also know that the middle-class demands for stringent moral standards on film and broadcast media persisted and that promotional contracts even today are saddled with morality clauses. Thus, a more plausible explanation is the AEA's ongoing flirtation with professionalization. Just as other professions justified their attempts to impose market control with moral claims, this "professional" association of actors would improve the moral climate of the theatrical world.[2]

Since the AEA saw itself as the only legitimate representative for respectable actors, it soon set its sights on Hollywood. But its attempt to organize a strike against the film industry failed miserably. Most film actors considered the AEA a pompous outside group. Moreover, its strike techniques rested on the fact that the commodity of live theater—the performance—was always under the actors' control. Film separated the two through the miracle of celluloid, allowing studios to hold performances in store; most had a five-month supply. And without access to either broadcast or distribution networks, it was impossible for strikers to reach the movie-going public that was diffused throughout the country. Despite significant discontent among film actors, successful unionization would have to wait for the Screen Actors Guild—a union indigenous to the industry and unencumbered by the AEA's professionalizing impulse.

Those searching for a comprehensive institutional history of the AEA might complain that the book's detour into film unduly truncates the story at 1930. The union's relationship to the popular front and its backpedaling during the Red Scare are relegated to brief mentions in

the epilogue, while the end of its moral campaigns are uncharted. Yet, I think this is a price worth paying. By examining the AEA's Hollywood defeat, Holmes pinpoints the structural constraints and social contingencies that can make or break a union. In so doing he offers a helpful addition to Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal* (1990) and Nan Enstad's *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (1999)—affirming the usefulness of consumer culture to organized labor, but also measuring its limits.

Present evangelists of the "gig" economy imagine a world of independent "creatives" choosing from a cornucopia of fairly remunerated work opportunities. It is a utopian world where everyone is a "professional" and labor unions are artifacts of an old economic order. But ask those engaged in this new economy—independent designers or adjunct professors, for example—and a different story emerges. Like the nonunionized theater industry, it is the employers, not the workers, who do the choosing; the excess labor supply keeps remuneration low. Given these parallels, Holmes's story suggests that perhaps old-fashioned worker solidarity isn't so passé after all.

#### Notes

[1]. Current thinking on the relationship of American Protestantism to modernity is found in Kathryn Lofton, "Commonly Modern: Rethinking the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversies," *Church History* 83, no. 1 (2014): 137–44.

[2]. A similar moral impulse in medical professionalization is seen, for example, in Abraham Flexner, *Medical Education in the United States and Canada* (New York: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1910). See also, Julie A. Willett, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); and Jeffrey M. Hornstein, *A Nation of Realtors: A Cultural History of the Twentieth-Century American Middle Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

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