

Pre-Industrial New York City Labour Revisited A Critique of a Recent Thompsonian Analysis

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REVIEW ESSAYS/NOTES CRITIQUES

Pre-Industrial New York City Labour Revisited:

A Critique of a Recent Thompsonian Analysis

Edward Pessen

Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press 1984).

CHANTS DEMOCRATIC, ADAPTED AND updated from a prize-winning Yale doctoral dissertation of 1980, is an important contribution to the literature on ante-bellum labour and society. Its author, Sean Wilentz, has read widely in strikingly diverse sources bearing on England and the Continent as well as the United States, and has obviously thought hard about the implications and significance of his evidence to produce a fascinating book. As the title, drawn from Whitman, and the subtitle make clear, Wilentz has sought to make a major statement that goes well beyond mere description of the changes overtaking the lives of working people in one city. Although, as I shall try to show, *Chants Democratic* abounds in puzzling and questionable statements, its severest critic must concede that it is indeed a major statement. More ambitious than any previous study of early nineteenth-century American labour, the book likewise attains a level of interest that is matched by few if any of its predecessors. Blessed with a lively and original intelligence that insists both on viewing everything afresh and tossing out provocative judgements on whatever matters it treats, Wilentz is worth attending, however one reacts to this or that observation. Presented firmly and confidently, Wilentz's appraisals are at best illuminating, at worst certain to inspire lively controversy. What more can one ask of intellectual discourse?

Edward Pessen, "Pre-Industrial New York City Labour Revisited: A Critique of a Recent Thompsonian Analysis," *Labour/Le Travail*, 16 (Fall 1985), 233-237.

The substantial catalogue of very good things in *Chants Democratic* ranges far beyond the thorough research in primary and secondary sources on which the book is based. The ambitiousness of the book's design is breathtaking, its range and scope are unprecedented in histories of American labour and matched by few books on whatever subjects. Wilentz artfully exploits quantitative data or statistical evidence on large numbers of people as well as detailed, vivid evidence on particular events and individuals to flesh out and bring to life his generalizations about groups. Although Wilentz is drawn to those large themes about which he delights in making bold interpretive statements, he is by no means impervious to those mundane, seemingly undramatic matters that constituted the essential element in the lives of his subjects. Far from it. Among the best things in the book are its patient, informed, nuanced descriptions and discussions of the dissimilar working conditions of small masters and large in the pre-industrial era, journeymen and -women's lives in and out of the shop in the "mercantile city," artisans' parades and public demonstrations (whose hidden meanings, given Wilentz's intellectual predisposition, he inevitably — and interestingly — seeks to fathom), the way in which "small mechanized workshops" of the early and mid-nineteenth century operated, the nature of the clothing industry, and the importance of "outwork" to ante-bellum industrial production.

Many of the subjects Wilentz treats, as he is fully aware, have been dealt with by others before him, but invariably *Chants Democratic* presents new approaches, insights, or information that enhance our understanding. He agrees with this reviewer, for example, that the history of the New York City Working Men's party is a much-told tale, but he proceeds to offer the fullest treatment yet available of the infighting that afflicted the party between 1829 and 1832. Wilentz's version of these events is not much different

from those offered by others of us. Where he differs, as in the distinction he emphasizes between what he calls "the radical Working Men's movement" and "the entrepreneurial Working Men's party," his arguments will not be persuasive to all of us. Yet there can be no question but that his discussion of the warfare between Thomas Skidmore and his opponents provides a valuable new point of departure.

Plucking at random from the assortment of good things in the book, there is an excellent chapter on the industrializing of the crafts by 1850, and insightful discussions whether of the ideology of master craftsmen, the Washingtonian temperance movement, or the varied responses of masters and journeymen and -women to temperance. Nothing escapes Wilentz's notice, no matter how short-lived, seemingly inconsequential, or previously ignored by historians. Working-class nativist and Protestant benefit societies or the attention paid by some journeymen and -women's societies to the problem of recent immigrants in turn attract the attention of the author. As a sometime quantifier, I was impressed by the way Wilentz coordinates tax assessments, jury books, and city directories to track down the property holdings of masters. That, as I shall show, his handling of the tax data is flawed does not detract from the ingenuity and intelligence of his methodology in this particular.

Wilentz presses his arguments firmly and confidently, never failing to engage us in silent debate even when we question his judgements. Previous historians of American labour, we are told, have mistakenly judged it in terms of European models of class and class consciousness, failing thereby to understand the uniquely American militance it displayed. Much impressed by the recent work of Pocock, Bailyn, Wood, and Shalhope, Wilentz argues that New York city — and other American — working people were strong adherents of the "republican ideology."

Prior to the 1820s, masters and journeymen and -women thus saw eye to eye in sharing the republican ideals of the Revolutionary era "against the static, deferential harmony of unquestioned elite supremacy." (76) Gently admonishing several practitioners of the "new labour history," whom he politely does not name, he suggests that "rather than construct two opposing mutually exclusive ideal types — pleasure-seeking benighted 'traditionalists' or abstemious enlightened 'rebels' — it is more useful to consider the republicanism of the Bowery (of the streets) and the republicanism of the unions as different but at times overlapping expressions of the journeymen's fears and aspirations". (270) While others will doubtless share my puzzlement at Wilentz's conclusion that "of all the developments of the (post-1837) depression years, the mass movements for temperance reform best expressed the workmen's shock at the prolonged depression and the collapse of the unions." (306) there can be no question but that the argument is clearly stated.

Chants Democratic puts one in mind of the fabled little girl in the nursery rhyme, who, when she was good, was very, very good, but when she was bad, she was... shall we say, disconcerting? That, in my catalogue, the questionable and negative features of the book outnumber the positive does not mean that my praise is an exercise in polite balancing. It signifies only that in my judgement a brilliant and imaginative young historian who regales us precisely by his unwillingness or incapacity to think and say the obvious, often delighting us with his originality in so doing, at times also stumbles and falls flat on his face, as so undeviatingly uncommon a thinker must inevitably do. While it seems fair, in appraising the book's flaws, to ask in tribute to the author's intrepidity, what's a heaven for?, it seems equally fair to observe that the book's many weaknesses detract significantly from its achievement and under-

mine some of its most important arguments.

The two dozen or so varieties of problems with the book range from the slight to the serious. To conclude, as Wilentz does, that working people's religious diversity indicated that "they shared common ideals about the place of religion in a secular republic," (18) is to make an unwarranted leap into the realm of belief from data that are not only mundane but inappropriate. To say that "the history of class formation... is comprehensible only if it is understood in [the] broad ideological context" congenial to the author's thinking (14) is not only arguable but also arrogant, if unwittingly so. To speak of New York city "tax lists" for the 1830s and 1840s or for earlier years when there are no lists, only uncollated assessors' reports that the author has only partially examined, is misleading. To use these data selectively, as Wilentz has done in confining his examination to only one or two wards, puts in question all of his conclusions about which group owned how much property, since the evidence on the wards that went unconsulted might well have indicated that Wilentz's subjects owned real property there.¹ Wilentz more than once alludes to a source in the text or footnote that it appears he has not read, or certainly has not read carefully. What else could explain his ignoring of Thomas Skidmore's attack on Robert Dale Owen's birth control ideas in *Skidmore's Moral Physiology Exposed and Refuted?* (Speaking of Owen, it is surprising that research as heroic as Wilentz's could evi-

¹ In tracing the value and ownership of every lot and building in New York city and the assessed value of the personal property owned by every individual in the city for the years 1828 and 1845, I found that substantial amounts of real property were owned by obscure individuals in wards outside of the wards in which they lived. See Edward Pessen, "The Wealthiest New Yorkers of the Jacksonian Era: A New List," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, 54 (1970), 145-72.

dently overlook a treatise so germane to his discussion as Owen's *Wealth and Misery*, published in several contemporary journals as well as in pamphlet form.) For Wilentz to assert that the trade unionists, unlike Skidmore, "never questioned private property per se," (242) makes one wonder whether he looked at the evidence to the contrary in *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, for all his generous evaluation of that book.

Wilentz's flair for synthesis at times leads him to impose, unconvincingly, an ideological coherence on recalcitrant matters, as he does in his informed, imaginative, complex but confusing, and ultimately unconvincing essay on "Artisan Republicanism" in Chapter 2.

Wilentz discerns diverse republicanism, a "Bowery republic," "republican capitalism," "republican defense of capitalist growth and wage labor," a "small producer's republic," a "republic of the streets and taverns," fighting Mike Walsh's "anti-capitalist variant on artisan republicanism," and the devil knows how many other varieties of the ideology. (245, 256, 270, 284-5, 319, 334) For all Wilentz's obvious attachment to the idea of the republic of virtue and its alleged hold on the hearts and heads of working people, his argument is neither impressive nor persuasive, taking at face value, as it does, what at times appears to be nothing more than politic rhetoric. Wilentz's overall argument is seriously weakened by his unconvincing exposition of an idea so central to that argument. I find it hard to imagine any influential contemporary witless enough to quarrel with the sentiment that "the true aim of republican government should ever be the peace and happiness of its whole people" — a set of clichés that Wilentz soberly assesses as "yet another reworking of artisan republican ideals." (331)

Wilentz has a penchant for interpreting highflown rhetoric as the true belief of whoever utters it. It may indeed be. Yet it is hardly cynical to understand that then

again it may not. Evidently buying Maurice Neufeld's lightly documented proposition, Wilentz reports that Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun held to the labour theory of value. In making much of the radical language in the preamble to the window-shade painters union in 1850, Wilentz seems unmindful that the preamble to the AFL constitution in the era of the less than revolutionary William Green also spoke menacingly of labour's unremitting class conflict with capital.

Chants Democratic tries to make too much of too little and it floats large generalizations on the basis of wisps of data that do not sustain them. We are told what striking workers were *really* concerned about when they were ostensibly striking for higher wages, an insight into their thinking that rests on nothing better than a phrase taken from a statement made by "one group of unionists." (231) A single speech by one atypical union leader and one or more demonstrations of an undisclosed and undocumented sort ostensibly prove that in the late 1830s, "the social and ideological barriers that had long separated the skilled from the unskilled began to fall." (25) The opportunistic Ely Moore's public reference to working people's "united strength" is cited as proof that unionists were now proclaiming their identity as a class apart. And in common with several other "new labour historians," Wilentz romanticizes unlovely individuals such as the anti-Semitic racist Mike Walsh, and movements such as the vigilante-style street gangs of the 1830s, so long as they had a connection, no matter how tenuous, with labour. (328ff., 262)

It is understatement to say that many of the book's interpretations of the evidence are puzzling. That one of the two major parties won a sweeping electoral victory in 1832 ostensibly shows they were able to persuade many "artisan radicals that they were the true embodiment of the workingmen's interests." The anti-

English Astor Place riot was only on the face of it "an actor's quarrel;" actually it was class war between rich and poor — although a nebulous form of class conflict, to be sure. Great significance is read into the fact that the Industrial Congress of 1850 was permitted to meet in the new city hall. (Does this mean that an earlier invitation by the Congress of the United States to Robert Owen, with President John Quincy Adams in attendance, betokened an important recognition of utopian socialism?) It is not certain that others will agree with Wilentz that it is "not completely amiss" to find important similarities between the failure of the Industrial Congress and the failures of the revolutions of 1848. Nor are they likely to read the great significance that Wilentz does into the fact that working people at mid-nineteenth century sought reading rooms and public baths from municipal authorities. Wilentz fails to discern that underlying gaudy labour rhetoric bemoaning "slavery" and "degradation" was nothing more than a call for higher wages. Scholars familiar with the physical attacks on blacks and their white supporters in the riots of 1834 are likely to wonder about Wilentz's assurance that the rioters "followed the rules of classic 'pre-industrial mobs' by... attacking property but not persons." What appear to have been vicious racial attacks become, in Wilentz's inspired reading, simply the people "protecting their neighborhoods" from "external threats, while they vindicated the American workingmen's honour from the insults and abuse of English aristocrats and meddling, evangelical, entrepreneurial (!) reformers." (214, 359, 376, 386-7, 245, 264-6)

Wilentz is also fond of making inappropriate comparisons. How, one wonders, did "the unraveling of the one-party factionalism of the Era of Good Feelings and the rise of the Jacksonian Democrats anticipate the collapse of the old mechanics' interest?" (145) It is fine to compare the ideology of New York city unionist

with that of their Old World counterparts, but why, one wonders, does the author fail to compare the beliefs of the New Yorkers with those of their fellow unionists in other American cities? A reader unfamiliar with the literature would not know from *Chants Democratic* that many of the developments that overtook working people in New York were not unique to that city.

Not the least of the book's weaknesses is a style of writing that too often is unclear and strains for precious effect. There has got to be a better way of saying whatever it is that Wilentz means to say when he writes that "such moral revisions [as Lionel Trilling wrote about] were basic to the history of the city, ... as New Yorkers came to redefine the meaning of America in the light of new exigencies of life and labor." (vii) That the clash between journeyworker unionists and masters, "tempered by political and cultural developments outside the unions, ultimately defined the meaning of class conflict in Jacksonian New York" (257) may perhaps be true, but one is not altogether certain what it means. Edward Thompson and his admirers will no doubt understand Wilentz's observation that on one occasion several Jeffersonians "mobilized the political nation out-of-doors to accompany" them but I am not sure more benighted readers will do so. (66) Nor is it altogether clear what Wilentz means in writing that men like Ely Moore, "simply by being active in the union... helped provide a context in which sharper conflicts could develop." (239)

In sum, then, *Chants Democratic* is an ambitious, learned, original, at times perverse, precious, argumentative, less than fully convincing piece of work by a highly intelligent scholar of great promise that, for all its flaws, will take its place as one of the most important studies of labour yet written in the English language.

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