DEPENDENCY VS WORKING CLASS HISTORY: A False Contradiction

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Eugene Sofer, in his review, makes an appeal for labor scholars of Latin America to overcome the methodological and empirical biases of "traditional" labor history. He urges instead that they employ the conceptual and methodological innovations of "practitioners of 'working class history.'" Because Sofer mentions two of our works, we would like to make some observations about his review and about the problems of writing such working class histories in the specific Latin American context.

Let us begin by stressing that we agree with most of the points made in Sofer's opening three paragraphs. A clear need exists to study working class history as he defines it there, a point we have argued in writing and at conferences. Indeed, like Sofer, we have suggested that techniques developed for U.S. and European labor and working class studies can be utilized profitably in the Latin American field. We have emphasized that detailed studies of unions, working class culture, differences among workers in terms of their location within the productive structure, and factors of race, sex, and geography are vital pieces of the puzzle as scholars seek to understand labor and working class history in Latin America (Erickson, Peppe, and Spalding 1974). Nevertheless, even though some such studies are now appearing, too few are available at this time to write the kind of history that we would like or that Sofer calls for.

Sofer's basic critique, however, appears premised upon a single-cause interpretation of working class history. He implies that, as dependency analysts, we fail to view workers as "conscious historical actors who contribute to, and help define, change rather than merely absorb and respond to it" (p. 168). He claims, moreover, that "to understand fully the complex nature and evolution of working class activity and consciousness, [scholars] must begin at the level of specific productive and social relations and move from this most basic level toward a theory of working class development rooted in the broadest possible range of workers' cultural, social, and political expressions and organizational forms" (p. 175). In effect, he argues that only one starting point exists for researching working class history. Were this simply a starting point for him, we would be quibbling only about the order of research priorities. But in practice he does not go beyond this starting point, and he implies that research on two

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essential, related topics suggested by dependency analysis is "misplaced" and of little theoretical or empirical significance: we refer to the impact upon the labor movement and the working class of the specific pattern of integration of national economies into the world capitalist system, and the specific structure and nature of national elites.

Few would argue against the need for the kind of history that E. P. Thompson and others have written about workers in nondependent capitalist societies. In all probability, strong traces of autonomous Latin American working class culture persist in some form, but largely against the onslaughts of dominant values at home *and from abroad*. The use of techniques applied in advanced capitalist societies is valuable precisely because capitalism is in fundamental ways a unitary system. As such it produces similar phenomena wherever capitalist relations of production spread, although these phenomena vary over time and according to the specific conditions found in each particular society. The fact remains that Latin America is a dependent area and from this flows our emphasis upon the macro-system. Thus, we reject Sofer's insistence that the international variable should be relegated to a position of minor importance within Latin American labor or working class history.

For Sofer, a conceptual framework that "emphasizes the international dimension, significantly underestimates the ability of Latin American workers to participate actively in shaping their own destinies" (pp. 170–71). Nowhere in his one-sentence dismissal of Erickson and Peppe's (1976) article on the international dimension does Sofer refer to the *evidence* documenting the ways in which U.S. policymakers, working with members of the Chilean bourgeoisie, influenced workers' lives and organizations during the postwar era. The destruction of the Allende government and the repression visited upon most of Chile's workers since 1973 offer only the most striking examples.

Seeking to deny the validity of a dependency perspective, Sofer uses Peter Winn's (1976) excellent research to show that the working class was divided and unable to give unified backing to Allende. Here we see clearly the poverty of Sofer's single-cause approach and his inability to understand the dependency perspective, for he claims that Winn's important data prove that ". . . the term [dependency] loses its analytical viability: it simultaneously means everything and nothing" (p. 172). A scholar, of the dependency school or any other, should have tried to piece the entire picture together by taking these data about the structure, actions, and values of Chilean workers and joining them to data on the structure, actions, and values of domestic and foreign supporters *as well as* adversaries of the workers and of the Popular Unity government. To paraphrase Marx (and E. P. Thompson and others), workers have indeed attempted to make their own history, but not under conditions of their own choosing. Unfortunately, their courageous efforts have all too often been brutally repressed. To examine the conditions and forces that so frequently turned them into history's victims is essential both to understand working class history and, hopefully, to help turn history in their favor.

The case of Chile hardly "provides a counterpoint to the 'global' approach" (p. 171), Angell's highly competent (and highly traditional) study notwithstand-

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ing. For all its merits, the book greatly underestimates the degree to which relations between local ruling elites and the United States shaped González Videla's and Frei's policies toward the working class. Of course, each of these presidents had his own political reasons for anti-working-class (and ultimately antidemocratic) policies. But to ignore the important role of their dependence upon U.S. economic support, and the specific development policies bound up therein, is again to divorce working class history from some of the most important forces that have conditioned working class life. Workers' defiant resistance to such policies provided both cause and pretext for destroying liberal democracy itself (Erickson and Peppe 1976, pp. 27, 30–56; Peppe 1975).

To be sure, one must confront tricky methodological problems to trace the long chain of conditioning and causation from "metropolitan" decision-making centers to local rulers and then to the workplace. Both U.S. officials and their ruling class allies in Latin America have had good reasons to obfuscate their relationship. Nevertheless, archival materials and economic development plans often provide an explanation for what workers have had to face both within and beyond the factory gates.

In addition to our basic methodological differences, we disagree with Sofer on many specific points, a few of which follow. He systematically ignores all data that contradict his main arguments, while picking out selected sentences that support his contentions. He faults Spalding's *Organized Labor in Latin America* for a failure to consider specifically local and national conditions, leading to his charge of "globalism," a concept he invents but fails to define. Yet a careful reading would reveal that the book recognizes the importance of local conditions, while arguing that "international capitalism limits the range of possibilities open to underdeveloped areas" (p. xiii). Spalding clearly states that "the argument that outside factors played a crucial role in local history does not deny the importance of domestic events" and that "significant national differences also exist" between labor movements (p. xiv). The book examines how differences among fractions within the *national* ruling elites shaped their attitudes and policies toward workers (for example, pp. xiii, 38, 94, 151–56; also Erickson, Peppe, and Spalding 1974); moreover, its structure emphasizes national histories. *Organized Labor* does hypothesize that the years to the 1920s can be viewed best through a transnational lens, but subsequent chapters and subsections discuss Mexico (chap. 3), Bolivia and Cuba (chap. 4), and Argentina and Brazil (chap. 5), underscoring differences as well as commonalities.

Sofer consistently criticizes others for not writing his kind of working class history or not answering the particular questions he would ask. Spalding's introduction acknowledges that his book touches only briefly on questions of tactics, internal union organization, and working class culture. He states that he focuses on "labor as an actor upon the national scene and on interactions between the working class and the national and international ruling classes" (p. xii). The first chapters discuss differences between immigrants and native-born workers; they do so moreover in far greater detail than Angell, whom Sofer praises on this same point. Sofer also faults Walter (1977) for not examining sufficiently relationships between Peronism and Socialism, even though Walter's

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analysis stops in 1930; clearly such a discussion lies outside the scope of the book.

In seeking to discredit the thesis that the Cuban case between World War I and the Depression follows patterns found elsewhere in Latin America, Sofer fails to grapple with the evidence. Instead, he summarily dismisses more than forty pages of documented research. If he thinks that the thesis is inaccurate, he should (here and throughout the review) produce arguments that deal directly with the evidence and the conclusions drawn from it. In this vein, Sofer claims that *Organized Labor* makes "assertions" that "common patterns in the evolution of labor emerge at roughly the same time throughout the continent" (p. 170). These "assertions," however, are based upon copious documentation that Sofer simply dismisses. We welcome his counter-arguments based on historical data.

Sofer emphasizes the need for examining class struggle on the local level in order to understand the dialectic of labor and working class history. We surely do not disagree. The daily lives of individual workers and their collective responses to capitalist oppression are what ultimately determines the historical process on the individual, local, national, and continental levels. For that very reason *Organized Labor* concludes its introduction with these words: "[Workers] lived that past, and they live this present. It is these anonymous human beings who collectively created the historical events that follow, and it is they who will create the ones to come" (p. xv)—a view that hardly fits Sofer's characterization of our use of dependency theory.

Concerning Sofer's statement that Spalding "accuses the majority of Argentine workers of what amounts to 'false consciousness'" (p. 169), we can only direct him to the concluding section on Argentina (pp. 196–200). It agrees with his contention that Peronism undoubtedly stimulated the formation of a new class consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s and specifically notes (p. 197) the real basis for populism's appeal.

Sofer takes us to task for overplaying the AFL-CIO's successes in Latin America. A reading of Spalding's chapter 6 and/or Erickson and Peppe (1976, pp. 30–36, 41) should have revealed just the opposite. *Organized Labor* clearly states, "Despite some successes, particularly in countries where the labor movement had not developed before World War II, *significant failures* have marked U.S. labor's efforts" (pp. 252–53, emphasis added). It is precisely this ineffectiveness of U.S. policy on the level of the working class in Chile that led U.S. policymakers to shift their activities to a different level and support the limitation and, ultimately, the destruction of democracy there.

Sofer's treatment of the *Latin American Perspectives* issue, "Imperialism and the Working Class" (1976), echoes the tone and lack of care shown elsewhere. He bases his summary assessment of the issue on a discussion of three of eleven articles, one of which (Winn 1976) he praises for focusing on his preferred level of analysis, and two of which (Erickson and Peppe 1976, Spalding 1976) he criticizes for "globalism." Yet he completely passes over other articles that contribute directly to the type of working class history he advocates, such as an interview with a Dow Chemical worker in Chile (pp. 154–57) or Arismendi Díaz Santana's study, "The Role of Haitian Braceros in Dominican Sugar Production" (pp. 120–32).

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The fundamental problem in Sofer's piece is a contradiction between the broad definition of working class history he advocates *in theory* and the truncated definition he employs in practice. While a reader of his last paragraph might conclude that he would be open to considering the dependency dimension at some remote stage of research, his treatment of this dimension at every level demonstrates that he would have the working class historian reduce it to insignificance from the outset. His systematic failure to deal with evidence to the contrary in the works reviewed shows that he has not confronted the inadequacy of his operational definition. Sofer's own kind of working class research will undoubtedly help labor scholars piece together the puzzle of working class history. Unfortunately, his narrow focus on one important level of analysis, to the exclusion of two equally important ones—the national elites and the international dimension—will not allow him to make such a synthesis.

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