

## In Search of an American Working Class: National Fictions in the Making of Western Labor History

In his recent provocative essay "Transnationalizing American Labor History," Dutch historian Marcel van der Linden accurately claims that most labor history in the United States "is still characterized by a distinct methodological nationalism, which pre-structures their writings with an often rather strict separation of studies of the United States from those of other countries."<sup>1</sup> Yet van der Linden is not the first historian to sound the need for a comparative approach to U.S. labor history. Indeed, calls for comparative studies are almost as old as the discipline of U.S. labor history itself, with many such efforts coming from the chief architects of a methodologically nationalist U.S. labor history.<sup>2</sup> Although van der Linden suggests some fine ways of rethinking the national boundaries that have isolated U.S. labor history, he does not grapple with the paradoxical reasons of why the field has remained so resolutely national in its methodology.

To understand that paradox, one must reconsider the comparative dimension of Werner Sombart's classic question, "Why is there no Socialism in the United States?" That question, which provided unity and coherence to U.S. labor history for nearly a century, clearly sug-

- 1 Marcel van der Linden, "Transnationalizing American Labor History," *Journal of American History* 86 (December 1999), 1081.
- 2 Not all comparative labor history in the United States has been nationalist, but a brief review of some key figures exemplifies the tendency. Comparative contrasts to Europe and England, for example, frame the introduction and conclusion of Selig Perlman's and Philip Taft's *History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932* Vol. 4, (New York, 1935), 3-4, 621-22. But the authors make them to elucidate the peculiar national identity of "American labor." Melvyn Dubofsky critiqued Taft and Perlman's Turnerian exceptionalism in 1966, calling for "comparative studies placing American labor history in the broader context of world-wide economic history." But he too narrated a story of the homegrown, American origins of the Industrial Workers of the World. Herbert Gutman followed suit in 1976, criticizing the old U.S. labor history for its "imperial" boundaries and "self imposed limitations" which left it "far behind the more imaginative and innovative British and Continental European work in the field." Apart from the accents of his foreign-born protagonists, however, Gutman's was ultimately a national epic, or as he put it, a story about "the behavior of diverse groups of American working men and women" struggling against the Puritan work ethic. See Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1976), 9, 11, 67; Sean Wilentz followed in Gutman's footsteps in 1984 when he directly critiqued American exceptionalism, calling instead for "a truly comprehensive comparative history of American labor, one that is as open to analogies between events and movements in this country and those abroad as it is to the differences." Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920," *International Labor and Working Class History* 26 (Fall 1984): 5. Yet, like his predecessors, Wilentz fell into familiar nationalist terrain in his book, *Chants Democratic: New York and the Making of an American Working Class* (New York, 1985), which focused entirely on highly skilled and native-born wage workers in New York and their interpretation of a peculiar American ideology – republicanism. In each example, comparative labor history served a common purpose: elucidating the origins and peculiar national character of an American working class.

gested a comparative framework for analyzing U.S. and European political development. Indeed, those comparative implications appealed to van der Linden, who described Sombart's work positively in his article as a kind of proto-transnationalist. Yet van der Linden also ignored the great irony of Sombart's work and legacy: his comparative question did not create a comparative American labor historiography, but a highly nationalist one seeking to explain the origins and character of American exceptionalism.<sup>3</sup>

Van der Linden's plan for "transnationalizing American labor history" thus raises two important questions about the relationship between American exceptionalism and a transnational American labor history. How did a comparative starting point for U.S. labor history produce a nationalist methodology and narrative of American workers in the past? And what, more generally, has the relationship been between comparative and nationalist labor historiographies in the United States? In seeking answers to these questions, I will not survey the entire field of U.S. and comparative labor history, but rather focus on what has been seen as an exceptional portion of an exceptional whole: the labor movement in the U.S. West between 1890 and 1920, a period of tremendous industrial violence and politicization among western workers. Until recently, western labor historians across the political spectrum viewed the region as the birthplace of an authentic and exceptionally American language of class.<sup>4</sup> While portrayed as distinct from eastern workers, western workers have also paradoxically been understood as typical, metonymic for both the nation and a national working class. Western labor historiography thus provides an ideal context for examining the historic relationship between comparative and national labor history in the United States and for unlocking the riddle of why calls for comparative labor history have so frequently invigorated American exceptionalism.

- 3 Werner Sombart, *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?*, trans. Patricia M. Hocking and C.T. Husbands (1906; London, 1976). For a fine critique of that question, see Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism," 2-5; and Eric Foner, "Why is There No Socialism in America?," *History Workshop Journal* 17 (Spring 1984), 57-80.
- 4 The central debate in western labor history has not focused on whether western workers were American or national, but on the content of that American identity, whether conservative or radical. Among the many books and articles engaging in this debate, see Vernon Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict: Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry up to 1930* (Ithaca, 1950); Melvyn Dubofsky, "The Origins of Western Working Class Radicalism, 1890-1905," *Labor History* 7 (Spring 1966), 131-54; Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (New York, 1969); Richard H. Peterson, "Conflict and Consensus: Labor Relations in Western Mining," *Journal of the West* 12 (January 1973), 1-17; Richard E. Lingenfelter, *The Hardrock Miners: A History of the Mining Labor Movement in the American West, 1863-1893* (Berkeley, 1974); James C. Foster, "Quantification and the Western Federation," *Historical Methods Newsletter* 10 (Fall 1977), 141-148; Ronald C. Brown, *Hard-Rock Miners: The Intermountain West, 1860-1920* (College Station, 1979); Mark Wyman, *Hard Rock Epic: Western Miners and the Industrial Revolution, 1860-1910* (Berkeley, 1979); David M. Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana, 1989); Gunther Peck, "Padrones and Protest: 'Old' Radicals and 'New' Immigrants in Bingham, Utah, 1907-1912," *Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (May 1993), 157-178; David Brundage, *The Making of Western Labor Radicalism: Denver's Organized Workers, 1878-1905* (Urbana, 1994); Elizabeth Jameson, *All that Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek* (Urbana, 1998); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge, 2000).

The reasons western labor history has been conceived as an exceptional region within an exceptional nation reflect a convergence of historical and historiographical factors. The West, by which I mean for the purposes of this essay the trans-Mississippi United States, indeed possessed a remarkable pattern of industrial violence between 1890 and 1920.<sup>5</sup> A partial chronicle of the region's industrial conflicts during these decades reads like the greatest hits of the nation's industrial violence during the period: massive strikes settled by dynamite in Coeur d'Alenes, Idaho in 1892 and 1899 and in Cripple Creek, Colorado in 1894 and 1904, the birth of the militant Western Federation of Miners in 1893 and the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905, the bomb-assassination of Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg and the trial of union leaders Big Bill Haywood, Charles Moyer, and George Pettibone in 1908, strikes and pitched battles in Lead, South Dakota and Bingham, Utah in 1910 and 1912, more bomb blasts and strikes in Butte, Montana, in 1914, the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, the Bisbee Deportation of 1917, and the Seattle General strike of 1919. This industrial violence seems to confirm Eric Foner's claim that although American workers may not have voted Socialist in large numbers between 1890 and 1920, they were more likely to go out on strike, to lose both wages and lives in strike actions, and to destroy company property than their counterparts in Britain, France, and Germany.<sup>6</sup> The American West was a region where dynamite was not just a rhetorical tool, but a pervasive aspect of industrial relations.

The roots of exceptionalism within western labor history run much deeper than its celebrated heritage of industrial conflict and violence. Two strands of American exceptionalism have shaped the evolution of Western labor historiography, supported by two distinct teleologies. The more familiar narrative is Turnerian. The frontier made Western workers uniquely American and individualistic which is why there has been no Socialism in the United States. The endpoint of Turner's frontier was civilization, a moment in which workers became modern and American as rugged individuals. The other less popular but no less pervasive teleology is Marxist. Western workers were exceptionally radical and American because of the brutal economic circumstances in the region's industrial centers. Class conflict in the West produced a true working-class ideology in the creation of the Industrial Workers of the World, a fulfillment of Marxist teleology rather than Turnerian individualism. In both scenarios, western labor history gained importance from its exceptional and essentially national charac-

5 Canadian labor historians have likewise seen the West as an exceptional region, though I will not review their work in this essay. See Jeremy Mouat, „The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia's Hard Rock Miners, 1895-1903, *Canadian Historical Review* 71 (September 1990), 317-45; Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland's Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver, 1995); A. Ross McCormack, "The Western Working-Class Experience," in W.J.C. Cherwinski and G.S. Kealey (eds.), *Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History* (St. Johns, 1985): 115-126; A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto, 1977); David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal, 1974). Despite the parallels between Canadian and U.S. labor history in the West, only one book compares western labor history on both sides of the border: Carlos Schwantes *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885-1917* (Seattle, 1979).

6 Foner, "Why is There No Socialism in America?," 58.

ter, from the ways that western workers embodied an indigenous and authentically American language of class, whether conservative or radical.

Although wage workers do not appear in Turner's writings, his ideas shaped Werner Sombart's assumptions about American exceptionalism. For Turner, as for Sombart, the frontier was a place anathema to class consciousness. It was on the frontier, Turner argued, that Americans escaped the shackles of the European social order with its attendant class conflicts and ideologies. The frontier was not so much a place without class as a moment in time before its genesis. Turner did not argue class tensions had never existed in the United States in 1893. Rather his narrative served as a kind of response to the class conflicts then sweeping the nation, solidifying a nationalist paradigm in which the West, the frontier, and the national culture stood in opposition to the existence of class conflict. At the moment of the nation's inception – on the frontier – there existed no class hierarchies, only egalitarian sympathies among frontiersmen. Even as Turner's narrative erased class from the nation's essential past, it also expressed an ideology of class conflict. The language of the frontier could be used to pathologize striking railroad workers as "savages," as Richard Slotkin has ably demonstrated, or it could ignore class conflicts like the great Homestead strike of 1892 altogether in its narrative of the formation of an exceptional American character, thus exemplifying managerial and middle-class assumptions about America's national identity.<sup>7</sup>

And yet Turner's vision of a classless frontier was immensely influential to labor historians in the United States and abroad. John R. Commons, founder of U.S. labor history and one of Turner's colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, disagreed with Turner's rosy assessment of U.S. democratic institutions, but he validated Turner's assessment of the West as a place which vitiated class conflict and consciousness. The West had acted as a "safety valve," Commons argued, draining away the best and most militant union men from the East. These arguments received fuller expression by Commons's students Selig Perlman and Philip Taft who argued that the "class war" in the industrial West did not produce a "class ideology" largely because of the frontier. "The extremes of violence" in the West's bloody strikes, "proceeded from no theory of revolution but from general characteristics of the frontier." Perlman and Taft thus spent little time on western labor radicals in their history of the U.S. labor movement between 1896 and 1932, for doing so complicated their main task – writing a national labor history that legitimated skill-based trade unionism under the leadership of the American Federation of Labor. Western workers, like their American counterparts in the East, were not class conscious but job conscious, a result, implicitly, of a frontier that fomented class war but not class consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

7 Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920); Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York, 1985), 477-498. On Turner's ideas and his historical context, see Richard White and Patricia Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture: An Exhibition at the Newberry Library, August 26, 1994-January 7, 1995* (Berkeley, 1994); John Mack Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" and Other Essays* (New York, 1994).

8 John R. Commons, "Introduction to Volumes III and IV" in *History of Labor in the United States*, vol. 3

Turner's exceptionalist understanding of western workers was also quite useful to Vernon Jensen, author of *Heritage of Conflict: Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry up to 1930*, a book that has remained a standard history of the Western Federation of Miners for a half century. In surveying the broad pattern of industrial violence among western miners between 1890 and 1930, Jensen argued that the West's "heritage of conflict" was created by environmental factors. "The rough-and-ready frontier-like conditions, so pervasive in distant and isolated areas," Jensen wrote, "were highly formative." Western miners "made up a distinctive labor force different from that found in industrial centers in the East," according to Jensen, because of the frontier, which imbued these men with "a very strong notion of freedom and independence." Here were the origins of the western labor movement, origins that were both conservative and militant, exceptionally Western and American.<sup>9</sup>

Although Jensen's environmentalist approach to labor relations borrowed many of Turner's ideas, he did not disregard the existence of the Industrial Workers of the World or other labor radicals in the West. Clearly not all western workers described themselves as conservatives, Jensen realized, however conservative he claimed the origins of their militancy to be. But like Taft and Perlman, Jensen avoided discussing radicals or other western workers as members of a working class. Once again, western workers were not class conscious but job conscious. In this regard, Jensen's argument neatly fit the mood of many Cold War liberals in 1950, who believed the labor movement's recent purging of its "radical" members had strengthened rather than weakened both workers and the nation. Despite their violent past, western workers, like the frontier that had shaped them, embodied everything that was exceptional and distinctly American about the nation's labor movement at the height of the Cold War in 1950.<sup>10</sup>

Historian Melvyn Dubofsky examined the actions and ideologies of western workers at a strikingly different moment in the evolution of American nationalism, the late 1960s. With new left radicalism growing in strength on university campuses across the nation, Dubofsky sharply rejected the Turnerian foundations of western labor history. In his pathbreaking article "The Origins of Western Working Class Radicalism, 1890-1905," published in 1966, he contradicted Jensen, Perlman and Taft by arguing the "class war" in the western mining fields had indeed produced a "class ideology" that was both radical and Marxist. In the mining West, the "working class's emerging radicalism was hardly the response of pioneer individualists to frontier conditions," Dubofsky wrote, but rather a logical reaction to conditions "in a citadel of American industrialism and financial capitalism." The fullest expression of that radical potential was the IWW, whose history Dubofsky richly chronicled in 1969 in *We Shall Be All*.<sup>11</sup> With the internationalism of Wobbly rhetoric in his ears, Dubofsky also called,

(New York, 1935), xiii; Selig Perlman and Philip Taft, *History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932*, vol. 4 (New York, 1935): 169, 215.

9 Jensen, *Heritage of Conflict*, 1, 4, 9.

10 Ibid., 1-9, 463-66. Perlman and Taft, *History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932*, 169, 178, 189.

11 Dubofsky, "The Origins of Western Working Class Radicalism," 139, 140; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, passim.

like van der Linden thirty years later, for a comparative and transnational approach to U.S. labor history. „Today we need fewer vague generalizations about the uniqueness or significance of the American frontier and more... comparative studies placing American labor history in the broader context of world-wide economic history, where all workers, regardless of nationality, tasted the fruits, both bitter and sweet, of the capitalist order.“<sup>12</sup>

But like Turner, Dubofsky portrayed western workers in exceptionally national terms. The Wobblies may not have been molded by an American frontier, but they were uniquely American, whatever their national origin. “The men who created the IWW,” Dubofsky wrote, “were by and large native Americans, or the most Americanized immigrants, committed to interring capitalism in America.” The violence in western mining fields, like the violence in American streets during the antiwar protests between 1968 and 1972, represented a home-grown revolution, according to Dubofsky, led by native-born revolutionaries. In his revised preface to the new 1973 edition of *We Shall Be All*, Dubofsky underscored these national claims. “The IWW was a movement in the American mainstream, never an alien aberration... The IWW had its roots firmly planted in the United States and its ideas and values corresponded to the realities of American working-class life.” Dubofsky’s western workers were quintessentially American, 1960s style, not only because they were native-born, but because of their radicalism, their capacity for direct action, and their defense of the rights of free speech.<sup>13</sup>

The power and eloquence of Dubofsky’s working-class Americanism, a kind of reprieve of popular front American nationalism during the 1930s, is one reason *We Shall Be All* remains the most popular history of the Wobblies yet printed, despite more than two decades of withering critiques by fellow western labor historians.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, until very recently most of those criticisms focused not on Dubofsky’s nationalism, but on his arguments about their radical political identity and its particular origins in the West. The conservative revision of western labor history began in 1973, when Richard Peterson argued that too much emphasis had been placed on violence and conflict and not enough on patterns of consensus between employers and their workers. James C. Foster expanded that critique in 1977, arguing that he “could find little of the disruptions that marked the pages of Jensen’s *Heritage of Conflict* in his quantitative survey of six hundred locals of the Western Federation of Miners. Although Jensen and Dubofsky characterized western industrial violence in diametrically opposite fashions, revisionists nonetheless tended to lump them together for their shared attention to violence and conflict. Whether because violence and radicalism seemed synonymous in the

12 Dubofsky, “The Origins of Western Working Class Radicalism,” 154.

13 Ibid., 153; Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, vi.

14 On working-class nationalism during the Great Depression, see Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge, 1989), and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York, 1996). Not all western labor historians disagreed with Dubofsky’s arguments in *We Shall Be All*. Richard Lingenfelter, for example, argued that “it was the ‘taming of the frontier,’ not frontier lawlessness, that spurred the violence – that heritage of conflict.” Lingenfelter, *The Hardrock Miners*, 227.

wake of the late 1960s or because conflict had indeed been over-emphasized in the field, these historians defined their revisionism in opposition to the topic of violence in western labor history.<sup>15</sup>

These ideas reached fullest elaboration in the work of Mark Wyman, who asserted in 1979 "that previous studies have emphasized the spectacular and violent at the expense of historical understanding." Wyman instead focused on the role of technology in western labor history and downplayed the importance of ideology and radicalism to western workers. The IWW, he claimed, was simply "too radical and visionary to be accepted by the bulk of the hard rock miners." Moreover, violent strikes "were not typical of labor-management relations in most mining camps over several decades." The main impetus for the western labor movement was mutual aid and protection rather than working-class emancipation. To illustrate that claim, Wyman examined the Western Federation of Miners' pragmatic political attempts to improve working conditions with worker-safety legislation and eight hour work laws. Radicalism, when it did emerge, resulted from the failure of these pragmatic efforts. "Radicalism," wrote Wyman, "...stemmed most immediately from a mounting sense of desperation among workmen who felt they were suddenly losing their capacity to protect themselves." Most western workers, Wyman believed, never felt such desperation.<sup>16</sup>

Although Wyman lumped Jensen and Dubofsky together, his analysis of western workers' culture closely paralleled Jensen's evocation of a Turnerian frontier. "Dreams of wealth" remained powerful among miners, Wyman claimed, even after wage earning replaced prospecting as most miners' livelihood. "Through it all, the miners' desire to win a piece of the western *El Dorado* for themselves would continue to color labor relations in hard-rock mining." The same culture of frontier independence that Jensen had suggested made western workers both American and non-radical also figured prominently in Wyman's revision, turning western miners into homegrown American heroes. "Their story was an epic – a hard rock epic," Wyman concluded, "created...by the men who drilled and blasted, mucked and trammed, on the dual frontiers of the American West and the industrial revolution." Here were working-class Americans sharply different from Dubofsky's free speech radicals. But like Dubofsky, Wyman made western miners metonymic of both the nation and its working class, with hard rock men associated not just with metal ores but with exceptional western and American virtues as well.<sup>17</sup>

By using the frontier to analyze two topics simultaneously – the West and the industrial revolution – Wyman sought to liberate the frontier from its Turnerian foundations, to make it compatible with class analysis rather than oxymoronic to it. Unfortunately, Wyman spent little time assessing the analytical and teleological pitfalls of using the frontier to describe indus-

15 Peterson, "Conflict and Consensus," 17; Foster, "Quantification and the WFM," 147. For a broader reassessment of labor's politics in the U.S. southwest, see James C. Foster, *American Labor in the Southwest: The First One Hundred Years* (Tuscon Press, 1982).

16 Wyman, *Hard Rock Epic*, ix, 150, 226, 227.

17 *Ibid.*, 259.

trial development and thus raised more questions than he answered. In his epilogue, entitled "End of the Pioneer Era," Wyman equated that era with the prospector. Yet his narrative focused almost entirely on the world that wage earners created and their role "in transforming the Western frontier to protect its human inhabitants." While Wyman asserted the existence of a "dual frontier," he left unresolved what the precise relationship between them had been. Did the industrial frontier come to an end in 1910, when his book closes, or in 1860, when his book begins and prospectors became wage earners? If "civilization" marked the endpoint of Turner's western frontier, what was the narrative conclusion to the industrial frontier – a civilized industrial order? That hardly seemed to be the case in the industrial West of 1910, just four years before the infamous Ludlow Massacre.<sup>18</sup>

Wyman's creative, if unsuccessful, attempt to meld Turnerian and Marxist paradigms did not discourage other western labor historians from trying, however. The boldest effort came from Carlos Schwantes who set forth the utility of a "wageworkers' frontier" for analyzing western labor history in 1987. He defined it as "a predominantly male community of manual labor dependent upon others for wages in extractive industries of the sparsely settled Rocky Mountain and Pacific regions of the United States and Canada." Schwantes' definition seemed to remove western labor history from its familiar national conceits. This wageworkers' frontier was unique, but not exceptional, and could be effectively compared to similar circumstances in the eastern United States or in colonial economic circumstances outside U.S. national boundaries. Schwantes also stepped beyond the narrow boundaries of western mining history to consider broader regional patterns across industries and economic categories in the West. Moreover, his periodization of the wageworkers' frontier – roughly 1850 to 1940 – seemed to avoid some of the teleological burdens of Turner's frontier, which ended in 1890 just as the western labor movement really took off. For Schwantes, the wageworkers' frontier was as much an ideology of national abundance as a particular moment in time, an expectation that waxed and waned between 1850 and 1940 and coexisted uneasily with the experience of wagework in "urban-industrial islands."<sup>19</sup> By extending the wageworkers' frontier to both sides of the U.S.-Canadian border, Schwantes seemed to be fulfilling Dubofsky's call for comparative studies of American labor history. Moreover, his evidence that no region of the United States had more foreign-born workers than the West boded well for future attempts to place the field in its proper transnational context.

But Schwantes, like Dubofsky, fell into familiar nationalist terrain when he located the political features of the wageworkers' frontier entirely within indigenous factors. Western workers' radicalism and conservatism both originated in frontier ideology, according to Schwantes. "Thwarted dreams . . . have a way of creating bitterness," he suggested, leading directly to the formation of the Wobblies, who "no less than wageworkers in the 1860s and 1870s sought to

18 Wyman, *Hard Rock Epic*, 259.

19 Carlos Schwantes, "The Concept of the Wageworkers' Frontier: A Framework for Future Research," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18 (January 1987), 41.



reconcile dependency with the success mythology of the classic West. “Conservative workers, by contrast, ”kept searching for“ and either found or ”never quite realized“ their ”dream of success.“ Schwantes suggested that these different responses to frontier ideology reflected distinct local, domestic arrangements in the West. Conservatives tended to be ”home guards,“ men who ”put down roots, raised families, and, if unionized, after the 1880s accepted to some degree the conservative outlook of the American Federation of Labor.“ Radicals, by contrast, were drawn from ”the mobile, industry-rather-than-craft oriented bindlestiffs“ who ”nurtured a tradition of all inclusive unionism and a spirit of militance.“<sup>20</sup> These social and ideological features of the wageworkers’ frontier not only helped make western workers western, they also made them more American. Indeed, like many western labor historians before him, Schwantes summed up the significance of western workers in resolutely national terms. ”Viewed in the context of the wageworkers’ frontier,“ Schwantes asserted, ”the labor history of the American West no longer appears to be a mere sideshow to pivotal developments taking place in the industrial centers of the East.“<sup>21</sup>

While Schwantes’ more expansive national boundaries broadened some of the conceptual terrain of western labor history, his framework continued to celebrate a masculine subject as the principal protagonist of western labor history. Like his predecessors, the actors on Schwantes’ frontier were exclusively male, raising questions of why the West’s many female wage earners between 1850 and 1940 – whether prostitutes, sugar beet workers, or cannery workers to name just a few – were not included. Schwantes’ analysis suggests one reason women have remained invisible within much of western labor history. At best, they appear as civilizing agents in the wageworkers’ frontier, making their husbands conservative and preoccupied with domestic needs, or by their absence allowing men to become radical. In neither case, did Schwantes consider women political agents who might contradict or transform the male-defined and nationally distinct radicalism or conservatism of their husbands, sons, fathers, lovers, or clients.

If Schwantes’ framework for future research highlighted the masculine and nationalist nature of the field, it also created new problems of timing and narrative. Schwantes claimed the wageworkers’ frontier ended around 1940, ”when one-time frontier communities achieved a measure of economic and social maturity and when a new generation of workers accepted the fact that they were likely to spend their lives working for wages.“ But in many western boom towns, then as well as now, ”economic maturity“ – meaning a diversified economy – has never arrived. Moreover, a great majority of Americans today, indeed many members of the labor movement, view themselves as middle class rather than working class, suggesting the continued persistence of a wageworkers’ frontier. Yet Schwantes deemed the wageworkers’ frontier a transitional, not-yet-modern phenomenon, or as he put it ”a zone of extremely rapid transition from wilderness to industrial, post-frontier society.“ If industrial society is ”post-frontier,“ what precisely was the nature of wagework on the frontier – primitive and

20 Ibid., 44, 49, 53.

21 Ibid., 55.

premodern? In spite of his insightful observation that "the terms frontier and wagework seem to describe mutually exclusive conditions," Schwantes did not succeed in wresting the frontier from its Turnerian teleology of modernity and primitivism.<sup>22</sup>

Western labor historians nonetheless soon pushed beyond the revamped national boundaries suggested by Schwantes. Even as the Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989, two new books fundamentally challenged the assumption that the U.S. West had berthed an indigenous and authentically American working class. In the first, *Red November Black November*, Salvatore Salerno critiqued the work of Dubofsky, not for claiming western workers were radical, but for giving Wobbly radicalism western origins. Dubofsky's work "fails to come to terms with the contribution of immigrant labor activists as well as the impact of ideas derived from European sources," wrote Salerno. Instead of rejecting the western-ness of Wobbly radicalism, however, Salerno called for "a synthesis that examines the dialectic between indigenous and foreign (European) influences on the IWW." Unfortunately, his monograph consisted primarily of a repetitious polemic against Dubofsky's nationalism rather than a demonstration of how the dialectic between indigenous and foreign-born influences shaped the growth and decline of the IWW.<sup>23</sup>

Far more persuasive – and truly transnational – was the work of David Emmons, whose book *The Butte Irish* explored the influences of Irish workers on the rise and fall of the Butte Miners' Union, perhaps the most powerful mining local in the western labor movement. In many respects, *The Butte Irish* fulfilled Salerno's exhortations as Emmons expertly analyzed how the success of the Butte Miners' Union was rooted in a dialectic of American and foreign-born influences that transformed both "Butte, America" and the Irish diaspora.<sup>24</sup> Emmons was hardly the first historian to explore the transnational context of immigrant workers' experience in the U.S. West. Helen Papanikolas essentially created the field of immigration history in Utah in the late 1960s, while Yuji Ichioka, Sucheng Chan, Vicki Ruiz, Mario Garcia and others explored the connections between immigration and labor history in the West well before 1989.<sup>25</sup> But none of these historians so forcefully critiqued the notion

22 Ibid., 40, 41, 53.

23 Salvatore Salerno, *Red November Black November: Culture and Community in the Industrial Workers of the World* (Albany, N.Y., 1989) 1, 3; A more successful examination of the interaction between American and foreign-born workers within the IWW in the West can be found in Philip Mellinger, *Race and Labor in Western Copper: The Fight for Equality, 1896-1918* (Tucson, 1995).

24 Emmons, *The Butte Irish*, 61.

25 Of many fine studies in western immigration history before 1989, see Helen Papanikolas, "Toil and Rage in a New Land: The Greek Immigrants in Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 38(Spring 1970), 100-204; Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* (Lincoln, Neb. 1982); Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco* (Palo Alto, Ca., 1982); Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos and American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Mario Garcia, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven, 1979); Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque, 1987); Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910* (Berkeley, 1986); Yuji Ichioka, *The Issei: The World of First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924* (New York, 1988). While the

that the West's labor history was exceptional. Emmons argued that Butte, though located in the heart of the mining West, was in fact "eastern in its industrialization, its Catholicism, its immigrant population, its politics." Moreover, Emmons located the origins of the Butte Miners' Union not in any American tradition of frontier vigilantism or in its disappearance, but rather in the strength of the Irish enclave and Irish nationalism in Butte.<sup>26</sup>

But while Emmons cast the story of Butte's labor history outside the confines of an exceptional western region, he nonetheless reinvigorated the seminal debate in western labor history by arguing that the Butte Miners' Union had been fundamentally conservative throughout its long history. Emmons located that inclination not in Turnerian virtues, but in the politics and culture of Butte's Irish enclave, which consisted principally of home-owning, married Irish families with deep ties to church and ethnic organizations. In essence, the complex relationship between class and ethnic identity in Butte, with its distinct combination of working-class and entrepreneurial Irishmen, made both the enclave and the Butte Miners' Union conservative, willing to protect their privileged control over who became a member of this "stable" community, but unwilling to help transient workers or itinerant Irishmen. As Emmons put it, the Irish response to years of "evictions, emigrations, mine closures, and enforced idleness" was "neither flight nor fight, neither transiency nor labor militancy, but a firmer resolve to do whatever necessary to prevent a recurrence of events that had put them on the road."<sup>27</sup>

By arguing the western working class was not radical and American but conservative and Irish, Emmons seemed to represent the fullest debunking yet of the Marxist exceptionalism that framed Dubofsky's arguments. By being conservatives, Irish miners did not acquire middle-class culture, Emmons claimed, but rather continued to exemplify a working-class outlook. Yet Emmons' retained an exceptionalist vision of what defined workers' politics and of what true labor radicals allegedly looked like: footloose Wobblies, without any domestic attachments, hopping from one railcar to the next while agitating for strikes. These true radicals were not only Marxists, allegedly unmoved by appeals to racial or ethnic identity, but also true internationalists, untied to any local community or to families. Indeed, their transience was an expression of their commitment to radicalism. Emmons was not the first to conflate the two as the Wobblies themselves actively promulgated the myth that being footloose made them more radical and American. But by arguing Irish "homeguards" were con-

two Papanikolas and Cinel looked beyond the nation's and the region's boundaries, they also helped create a nationalist narrative, of immigrants changing citizenship and becoming Americans, a tendency summarized by the final chapter title of Helen Papanikolas' pathbreaking monograph, "My country 'tis of Thee." Garcia, Ruiz, Camarillo, Chan, and Ichioka, by contrast, did not participate in this nationalist narrative, cognizant perhaps of the historical context of Mexico's conquest by the United States and the uncertain and long-delayed citizenship status of Asian Americans in the West. On the continuing "tyranny of the national" in immigration historiography, however, see Donna Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History," *Journal of American History* 86 (December 1999), 1116.

26 Emmons, *The Butte Irish*, 62, 114.

27 *Ibid.*, 189.

servative because of their sedentary lifestyle, Emmons joined a distinguished cast of historians and historical actors who measured the politics of western workers by Marxist teleologies and Wobbly rhetoric.

By contrast, Elizabeth Jameson began her 1998 study of Colorado's working class with a dramatically different premise: that homeguards could indeed become more radical than "bindlestiffs," precisely because homeownership and marriage made them more likely to fight corporate power. Jameson argued that married miners in Cripple Creek were not only more likely to join, organize, and lead their local union, they were also more willing to take risks than single miners – to vote Socialist and to go on strike. Rather than argue that Cripple Creek's married workers were therefore true radicals, however, Jameson recast the debate: "To argue whether western labor was reformist or radical is to engage in a false dichotomy; it was both." Jameson explained that apparent contradiction by examining workers' diverse political choices as expressions of competing emphases: one ideological, the other tactical. As Jameson stated, "Populists, Democrats, Silver Republicans, fusionists, and Socialists all worked to construct politics along 'class-conscious lines.'"<sup>28</sup>

By suggesting working-class consciousness produced a variety of political faces in Cripple Creek, Jameson expanded the boundaries of working-class history in the West to include a host of mainstream political actors. Moreover, like Sean Wilentz, who argued against exceptionalist approaches to U.S. labor history, Jameson recognized that conflating radicalism with class consciousness had created a distorted picture of western labor history, one in which western workers who failed to achieve transcendent radical credentials were "conservative."<sup>29</sup> Jameson further enriched and complicated her critique of Marxist exceptionalism by making gender and racial identity central to her analysis. Cripple Creek's militant working class – led almost exclusively by white, male miners – was riddled with "fissures" of gender and racial exclusion, potentially weakening the working class' ability to fight the growing power of its well-organized employers. At the same time, Jameson placed women at the center of her violent story, demonstrating their varied political roles in Cripple Creek's large and diverse working class.<sup>30</sup> In so doing, Jameson began to explore the variety of radicalisms that flourished briefly within the western working class at the beginning of the twentieth century.

But while Jameson avoided the traps of Marxist exceptionalism, she did not place her case study outside of regional and national boundaries as Emmons so effectively did in *The Butte Irish*. Ethnicity for Jameson, as for many social historians in the United States, was a local construct, one that denoted a place of origin and the ethnic community built at an American destination, but not an ongoing relationship between the two. Rather than discuss the "Irishness" of her many Irish miners and how it changed as Emmons did in Butte, Jameson instead focused on miners' racial identity, exploring how an ideology of whiteness assimilated a diverse group of first and second generation immigrants from the British isles and western Europe. To be sure,

28 Jameson, *All that Glitters*, 194, 196.

29 Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism," 4.

30 Jameson, *All that Glitters*, 134-39.

ethnicity was always racialized in the United States, but for Jameson the focus upon the assimilating impact of U.S. racial discourse kept her analysis of western workers' racial and ethnic identity firmly within national boundaries.<sup>31</sup> Like Emmons, Jameson was also content to focus on the persistent residents of Cripple Creek, largely ignoring the culture and contributions of the "bindlestiffs" who passed through town and across regional and national boundaries. Jameson thus missed an opportunity to consider how the dialectic between indigenous and transnational factors shaped the growth and decline of working-class militancy in Colorado. Jameson did not delineate an exceptionally radical or American group of miners, but her narrative presented a strikingly familiar picture of working-class militancy in the West, fragmented by racial and gender identity to be sure, but largely, even exclusively, home-grown.

The respective strengths of *The Butte Irish* and *All that Glitters* nonetheless suggest a future for western labor history not defined by nationalist paradigms and the reductive Marxist and Turnerian teleologies that have defined them. I build on their respective strengths in my own work, *Reinventing Free Labor*, which compares the struggles of Greek, Italian, Japanese, and Mexican immigrants to free themselves from their padrones, or immigrant bosses, in western railroads, mines, and corporate agriculture. Like Emmons, I examine the lives of these migrants outside the confines of regional and national boundaries, focusing on the transnational economic, cultural, and political contexts that defined their oppressions and opportunities for freedom. Moreover, I view the West not as a province within a single national entity, but as a region stretching between three nations, from northern Mexico through the trans-Mississippi West to northern and western Canada. By following the footsteps of transient workers across numerous national and historiographical boundaries, I have been able to explore the "dialectic between indigenous and foreign," as Salerno put it, that shaped and transformed several national identities and cultures simultaneously.<sup>32</sup>

Like Jameson, my book also examines the complexities of working-class politics in the West without embracing the notion that there existed one true form of radicalism and class consciousness among western wage earners. Racial exclusion greatly complicated the boundaries and meaning of class and radicalism in the North American West, as all Japanese, most Mexi-

31 Jameson, *All that Glitters*, 140-42. Much of the historiography of whiteness has similarly stayed within national boundaries, perhaps because of the salience of American republican ideology in the evolution of whiteness among men. Just what whiteness meant to foreign nationals before emigrating or to nationalist ideologies outside of the United States remain relatively unexplored topics. On studies of whiteness within a primarily national context, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991); Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Volume One: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (London, 1994); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York, 1995); and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990); On studies that consider the trans-national context of white racial identity, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, 1997); and Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

32 Salerno, *Red November Black November*, 3; for the transnational context of racial identity see Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor*, ch.5.

cans, and many Greeks and Italians were excluded by even "radical" unions such as the Western Federation of Miners. Radicalism did flourish in the West, but as often among non-white workers who challenged the convergence of racialism and Socialism in the western labor movement. My study further complicates the exceptionalist picture of western labor radicalism – conservative "homeguards" and radical transients – by examining the diverse political meanings of labor mobility for workers, padrones, and their employers. Transience was not synonymous with radicalism, but also fueled padrone authority and fragmented working-class solidarities. Central to the varied politics of labor mobility, I argue, were competing ideas and practices of manhood among single and married men, whose propensity for fight and flight was closely tied to the location and forms of masculine power in North America.<sup>33</sup>

My intentions throughout *Reinventing Free Labor*, then, have been directed against nationalist understandings of western labor history and the teleological pitfalls of Turnerian and Marxist exceptionalism. Yet, there is some doubt about how successful my efforts have been. Though I eschew exceptionalism, I have, like my predecessors, benefitted from its persistence and been drawn to its narrative power. Critiquing the oft-criticized ideas of Frederick Jackson Turner, no matter how originally done, is a bit like swatting at sticky flypaper with your hands. One might knock it off its ceiling perch, but winds up with flypaper all over. That flypaper grows only stickier when I use the word, frontier, as an analytical tool to describe a zone of acute labor scarcity that typified extractive economies in colonial and neocolonial contexts. My definition seems unteleological and unmarred by nationalist agendas, and yet, like Dubofsky, I have enjoyed the narrative thunder that comes from revising – or perhaps I should say dynamiting – conservative national conceits about the meaning of American national identity. Melvyn Dubofsky might have been proud had I not simultaneously critiqued, of all things, his nationalist claims about the native-born character of western labor history.<sup>34</sup>

The temptations of exceptionalism and academic patricide within western labor history are indeed real and enduring. Although the attractions in both – a sense of power, freedom, and certitude – are illusory, dissipating as soon as one looks beyond the nearest historiographical and national horizon, they nonetheless persist despite, or perhaps because of, the heavy spadework done to extirpate them. In western labor history, the enduring appeal of exceptionalism is exemplified by the modest success of the late J. Anthony Lukas' *Big Trouble*, a compelling account of the first "trial of the century," the prosecution of Western Federation of Miners' leaders Haywood, Moyer, and Pettibone, for the alleged murder of Idaho governor Frank Steunenberg. A Pulitzer prize winning journalist, Lukas sought to reveal and

33 For the politics of workers' transnational labor mobility and its connection to gender relations and gender ideology see Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor*, ch.4.

34 See my criticism of Dubofsky's ethnocentric claims and general argument in Gunther Peck, "Padrones and Protest: 'Old' Radicals and 'New' Immigrants in Bingham, 1907-1912," *Western Historical Quarterly* 24 (May 1993), 157-59; and Peck, "Manly Gambles: The Politics of Risk on the Comstock Lode, 1860-1880," *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1993), 702.

explain the depth of class conflict in America in unabashedly national terms, a tremendous challenge given that, as Lukas noted, ninety-three percent of U.S. citizens currently view themselves as middle class. Yet Lukas' response to the power of that middle-class ideology, itself a byproduct of American nationalist conceits, was to locate the origins of western workers' militancy within the violent culture of the frontier, noting that Haywood worked briefly as a cowboy. Though familiar with the work of both Jameson and Emmons, Lukas found the ideas of Cold War warrior Vernon Jensen most compelling. A tradition of frontier vigilantism seemed the best vehicle for narrating the genesis of American class conflict and for boiling down its historical complexities. Whether or not Lukas succeeded in creating a grand national narrative about the meaning of class, his work exemplified the power of exceptional starting points in the making of western and American labor history.<sup>35</sup>

The enduring prominence of both Turnerian and Marxist teleologies in western labor history may also explain why many labor historians in the U.S. west have made little if any reference to these debates in their work. Vicki Ruiz's pathbreaking study, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, for example, explores the successful struggles of Mexican-American women with unionization, racial and gender exclusion, and radical politics without a single reference to western labor historiography. Similarly, Dana Frank's superb analysis of the Seattle general strike of 1919 – a more conspicuous landmark in the history of western labor radicalism – makes gender relations and racial politics central to her narrative of the labor movement's rise and fall in Seattle, but likewise never mentions the West or western history. These omissions speak less of any failures by Ruiz and Frank, than of the toll that nationalist preoccupations within western labor history have taken on the field. Whether by conscious design or unconscious motive, the search for indigenous and/or American languages of class have kept English-speaking militant men at the center of the story and excluded a host of actors and topics: the voices of new immigrants and non-white workers, male and female; the relationship between paid and unpaid labor in working-class households; the politics of working-class consumption; and the relationship between production and reproduction within the western working class.<sup>36</sup>

How western labor history will respond to these omissions and to the challenge of envisioning a transnational U.S. history remains to be seen. Turner's frontier will likely continue to present itself as both an obstacle and a kind of opportunity for western labor historians seeking to find the comparative origins of a national working class. So, too, will notions of true radicalism and Marxist exceptionalism present themselves as options to historians, despite the end of the Cold War. Indeed, many Americans across the political spectrum continue to

35 J. Anthony Lukas, *Big Trouble: A Murder in a Small Western Town sets off a Struggle for the Soul of America* (New York, 1997), 13.

36 Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*; Dana Frank, *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929* (New York, 1994). Chris Friday's fine study of salmon workers in the United States and Canada likewise makes only passing mention of the West. See Chris Friday, *Organizing Asian American Labor: The Pacific Coast Canned-Salmon Industry, 1870-1942* (Philadelphia, 1994).

embrace some form of American exceptionalism. They do so, I suspect, not simply because many are nostalgic for the seeming moral and political clarity of the Cold War – and the frontier which helped sanction fighting it. Rather exceptionalism endures precisely because it has long served as a way for Americans, and academics who write about them, to compare an essentialized national experience with other nations and peoples. Comparative labor history and nationalistic labor history have thus been historically quite compatible, even mutually constitutive, explaining how U.S. and western labor history remain confined within a "methodological nationalism" even as they have continually refashioned the meaning of the nation to fit the changing historical dilemmas of the American people.<sup>37</sup>

If western and U.S. labor history are to escape their nationalistic confines, they must do much more than simply embrace comparative topics as suggested by Marcel van der Linden. They must also reject the exceptionalist frameworks that have long defined historical research in these fields. Turnerian and Marxist teleologies, while conceptually antagonistic, have intertwined, defining and redefining a western labor history that, even when comparative, remains firmly national in its focus and periodization. The goal of a truly transnational western labor history should not be to focus solely on a few "true" transnational radicals or to transcend nationalism by ignoring the nation state altogether or any features of a distinctly western or American working class. Rather western labor historians must attempt to view the region's and the nation's distinctive political and cultural history from the outside looking in, or as historian Mauricio Tenorio put it, to possess a sense of "alienness" in writing the history of regional and national topics.<sup>38</sup> Western labor historians might consider reorienting their narratives away from the trans-Mississippi West to the trans-Rio Grande North or the eastern Pacific rim, for example. Or, put another way, they need to make relative the historic project of nation-building and the national conceits, right and left, Turnerian and Marxist, that have informed the creation of both western and American labor history.

As a place to start and to conclude, it is in order to return to the early years of the Cold War in the United States, when notions of Turnerian and Marxist exceptionalism had only begun to create western labor historiography. In Grant County, New Mexico, in 1953, a struggle of both local and transnational proportions shaped up involving a group of Mexican-American miners on strike against the Delaware Zinc Company, a story captured in the remarkable movie, "Salt of the Earth."<sup>39</sup> Both the movie and the strike dramatized topics that western labor historians have only begun to research at the end of the Cold War. The strike hinged not

37 Richard White makes a similar critique in his essay "The Nationalization of Nature," *Journal of American History*, 86 (December 1999), 981.

38 Mauricio Tenorio, "History, Transnationalism, and the United States," unpublished paper, author's possession. For an exemplification of Tenorio's ideas, see his essay "Stereophonic Scientific Modernisms: Social Science between Mexico and the United States, 1880-1930s," *Journal of American History* 86 (December 1999), 1156-1187.

39 For the screenplay of "Salt of the Earth" and a brief commentary on the strike and the film's historical significance, see Michael Wilson and Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt, *Salt of the Earth* (New York, 1953, repr. 1978).



on the “American-ness” of the Mexican-American men in the union, but on their relationship with their wives, who took to the picket lines when the men were legally barred from picketing and the latter, in turn, had to learn how to perform housework. Framing that struggle between working-class men and women and the politics of paid and unpaid labor, was the campaign for racial and political justice for all Mexican-Americans. Though already union members, Mexican-American miners made much less than their white union brothers. Obviously, in the western mining industry the histories of racialism, radicalism, and citizenship, both Mexican and American, were and continue to be closely intertwined. Here, in one local community’s story, reside questions and topics that could indeed transnationalize western labor history, helping it investigate systematically how non-citizens redefined citizenship among working-class men and women, how racial and gender politics transformed the history and definitions of labor radicalism and conservatism, how a transnational working class of men and women, on the move and anchored in one place, became militants in the bitter-sweet soils of the U.S. West and “Al Norte” simultaneously.