

Historians, Ideology and Southern Plain Folk as Mill Workers: *A Review Essay*

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones and Christopher B. Daly. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987.

Newby, I. A. *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880-1915*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989.

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On 17 May 1989, a western Kentucky newspaper, the *Princeton Leader*, published a letter from twenty-seven people signing themselves "LeRoi Warehouse Against the Union." The letter warned readers against attempts by the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union to organize employees of a local clothing manufacturer. Condemning the union as the "Big Fat Rat," the writers claimed that "The 'Fat Rat' is a little more than upset because so many people at Princeton LeRoi are content to live their life with peace and harmony with each other." The letter branded the union "rat" as not merely an outsider, but as a northern outsider. "The home of the 'Big Fat Rat,'" the letter declared, "is either Missouri, Indiana, Illinois or Pennsylvania." The writers closed by pleading with readers, "for the sake of our home town, Princeton, Ky.," to reject union organization.¹

A single letter is vulnerable to over interpretation, but its authors make their case against unionization by depicting union activity as a threat to community solidarity. It is an interesting choice of argument. It often seems that southerners value the peace and harmony of their hometowns more than the advantages of unionization, while northerners prize union-won benefits more than community.

This characteristic of the southern ethos presents a formidable barrier for the historian of southern labor. A scholar unable to shed the present bias for organization may fail to grasp the world of the southern worker.

Historians, after all, function within organizations. They define themselves by the universities where they work and the professional organizations they join. But few Progressive-era southern mill workers attached themselves to any organization beyond their families or communities.² As the *Leader* letter demonstrates, even now some, perhaps many, southern workers see union organizations as alien.

Historians have explored the world of southern workers and their unions in two recent books: *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones and Christopher B. Daly, and *Plain Folk in the New South: Social Change and Cultural Persistence, 1880-1915*, by Idus A. Newby. Both examine southern cotton-mill workers during the Progressive era. Both books rely on oral history.³ On some questions the two books reach similar conclusions, but their understanding of the southern mill workers' mindset is profoundly different. The coauthors of *Like a Family* argue that mill workers formed a cohesive group, resistant to mill discipline. They view mill hands as modern workers, eager to unionize if practicable and every bit as resistant to oppression as the authors believe they would have been in the same circumstances. *Plain Folk* argues that mill workers inhabited a traditional folk culture resistant to the modern state.

The authors of both books attribute many of the same characteristics to southern agricultural laborers coming to the mills. They lacked self-discipline, cared little for appearances, moved around a lot and rejected conventional morality. Newby calls these attributes the "traditional ways of the powerless. They . . . flouted economic and social values their employers honored" (46). But agricultural communities were intensely cohesive. They bound themselves together through a variety of rural institutions and practices. Local churches cemented kin and friends together. Because friends and kin hurried to help the sick with their chores, sickness also drew neighborhoods together. Not only work and sickness, but music bound the plain people together. Musically-inclined families attracted friends and kind to neighborhood parties with their banjos and fiddles.

But, if Newby and the authors of *Like a Family* agree on the culture plain folk brought to the mills, they disagree as to what happened to that

culture in the new environment. Hall and her coauthors believe agricultural culture evolved into a workers' class consciousness in the mill environment. The feelings of cohesiveness they had developed in an agricultural setting helped mill workers feel a kinship with their neighbors. For example, Hall et al. write that the music plain folk enjoyed after picking cotton later translated itself into stirring union songs during strikes. Newby, however, describes laborers as resisting the disciplines mill managers required, and finds they also refused to subordinate themselves to union organizers. Industrialization left these agricultural workers essentially unchanged. They remained resistant to organization.

It is not yet clear how the scholarly community will resolve these competing pictures of reality but the reaction to *Like a Family* has been positive. The Organization of American Historians awarded the authors its Albert J. Beveridge award, citing their success in integrating oral history and critical analysis. The committee awarding the prize also noted the authors' literary style and their contribution to history (Tune 12). Critics have also hailed the work. Writing in the *Journal of American History*, Orville Vernon Burton called *Like a Family* a "rare compelling book, a delight for the academic and the public, with much to say to both." The reviewer in the *Journal of Southern History* heaped similar praise on the book. John G. Selby worried that his review could not do justice to the "power and richness" of the workers' reminiscences. He urged readers to experience it firsthand.

Scholarly reaction to *Plain Folk in the New South* has begun to appear. Writing in the *Journal of American History* James A. Hodges has hailed the work as an important book. However, reviewer Burton thought *Like a Family* highlighted the need for additional work on mill culture. But while he advocated more detailed work, focusing on individual mill towns and specific strikes, *Plain Folk* offers the same broad overview as *Like a Family*. It may be Newby's misfortune to have produced a book covering the same topic as a book historians have so recently acclaimed and feted.

Hall et al. state the thesis of *Like a Family* most directly when they write: "Mill village culture provided comfort and reassurance in an often hostile world." Most importantly, "it could . . . sustain resistance to management authority" (140). Community life, they argue, could even

substitute for a real family. The "family" of workers absorbed orphans and unmarried individuals unattached to any kinship network (145).

According to the authors of *Like a Family*, mill workers needed a family-like resistance to outside pressures to fight mill managers. Mill bosses allegedly tried to impose robot-like discipline on workers through a system crafted by engineer Frederick W. Taylor. Taylor advocated detailed regulation of employees' time and a reward system. He wanted to impose work patterns on the laborers, not tolerate habits generated by the workers themselves. It was partly to derail such plans, the authors argue, that mill workers unionized.

There were other reasons workers embraced unionization. World War I initiated a deluge of patriotic propaganda that reminded many mill workers they lived in a democracy, too (Hall 186, 193). Moreover, workers invested Franklin Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act with more power than the president intended. One unintended benefit of the law for historians was the outpouring of mail it sparked from mill workers complaining about their bosses (Hall 294).⁴ One worker explained that she had never joined a union only because there had never been a union to join. With the passage of the NIRA and federal protection of union activity, the worker "proudly" joined a newly organized local (Hall 306-07). Workers, the authors claim, "cheered" when their bosses agreed to abide by new child-labor regulations (Hall 316). They reneged later.

Yet there are contradictions to the family metaphor within *Like a Family*. Hall and her coauthors describe mill workers as habitually mobile, a curious attribute for people "like a family" (249, 264). They describe Depression-era freight trains loaded with mill workers hobnobbing from town to town, but they never explain how family-like connections could develop with neighbors shifting so frequently. Moreover, mill towns, the authors admit, were dens of illicit sex, violence and gambling. One interviewee described mill-worker parties as typically drunken affairs with revelers trading wives and husbands (262-63).⁵ Such behavior undoubtedly characterizes some families, but it contradicts the warm picture the authors paint elsewhere in their book. Perhaps the authors' trope of family is not the same as that of their subjects.

The authors of *Like a Family* argue that Taylorism achieved wide acceptance among southern mill managers. The theme of Taylorism is close to the crux of the authors' explanation of worker resistance to the mill environment. They define and describe Taylorism in a chapter entitled "Hard Rules." Conceding that "few mills adopted such practices across the board" (204), they press ahead to claim that the design of mill buildings, power plants, villages, even the organization of the entire manufacturing process, became subject to the scientific approach. In North Carolina engineers did make time studies at Gastonia's Loray Mill, but how many other mills actually adopted Taylor-style methods? How far into the manufacturing process did Taylorism really intrude? There is no evidence in *Like A Family* that the authors know or tried to find out. Their evidence is anecdotal (204-12). Taylorism seems so alien to southern values that one can reasonably imagine that many mill owners resisted such a system.

Worker resistance to Taylorism resonates well with historians. Implicitly, the authors reject a positivism similar to that hated by mill workers. For historians trained in the traditional methodology, the use of statistics by quantitative historians represents a cold mechanistic horror for which Taylorism can serve as a metaphor.⁶ And, in fact, no scientific positivism intrudes on *Like a Family*. The authors reject statistics and social science methods in favor of impressionistic history. Furthermore, one can surmise that the family metaphor is especially appealing to members of the family of historians. Products of secure, comfortable families themselves, historians naturally embrace the metaphor. Would that be true if historians typically came from broken, violent families?

Although his book appeared two years after *Like A Family*, Newby notes the earlier work only to say it appeared too late for inclusion in his own work. Yet Newby himself implicitly offers a framework for comparing the two books. Near the end of *Plain Folk in the New South* he makes an interesting comparison between slaves and mill workers. Conceding vast differences between mill folk and slaves, Newby nonetheless finds parallels between slave resistance to authority and the same resistance by mill hands. According to Newby, mill workers and slaves resisted their masters in ways "rooted in traditional rather than modern

ways" (521). Like slave conspiracies and uprisings, labor activism occurred only rarely. The spectacular nature of such events can attract the unsuspecting historian's attention away from the real story which is that resistance came in an infinity of unspectacular ways including frequent absences from work, movement from mill to mill and an adamant refusal to honor the values of the work ethic.

The historiography of slavery polarizes around paternalism and separatism. Eugene Genovese makes the case for paternalism most persuasively, emphasizing the interaction between slaves and their owners. White culture helped shape slave society. The chief proponent of separatism has been John W. Blassingame. He believes little exchange occurred between masters and their slaves. Slaves defined their own world—he traces extensive African influences—and built their own independent community independent of white influence.

This same dichotomy exists in *Like a Family* and *Plain Folk*. Newby is the Eugene Genovese of mill working. Hall and her coauthors represent the Blassingame position. In *Like a Family* resistance centers on strikes and union organization. Like Blassingame, Hall and her colleagues describe relations between worker and boss as a war. Like slaves, mill workers found their best bulwark against oppression to be their own community. In contrast, Newby emphasizes the paternalism of mill owners.⁷

Perhaps the best illustration of the differences between *Like and Family* and *Plain Folk* is how they handle the child labor issue. While Hall et al. see this as an example of oppression of workers by their bosses, Newby presents a more subtle interpretation. Mill managers hired workers not as individuals, but as families. Just as those quoted by Hall, Newby's interviewees also described mill towns as "a big family" (138, 203, 510). But Newby's interpretation of this characterization varies from that of the authors of *Like a Family*. According to Newby, the occupants of mill towns really were families. Anywhere a worker looked, he saw a relative. Some of these relatives were children, but they were not there because the mill bosses compelled their presence. Both they and their parents generally wanted them to work. According to *Plain Folk*, the metaphor of *Like a Family* was reality. Mill managers cooperated in this family system. They were allied with it, not hostile to it.

Newby never mentions Frederick Taylor. He does, however, relate a telling incident. One southern mill sent a local boy North to learn proper mill management. The manager returned fired with the example of northern efficiency and determined to impose what he learned in Lowell, Massachusetts, on Georgia workers. One worker promptly resisted and the northern-trained manager fired him. The employee appealed to the superintendent who ordered the fired man reinstated. When the manager refused, he was himself fired (203), ending the brief experiment in northern-style management.⁸ The enemies of the worker-created family system, according to Newby, consisted of Progressive bureaucrats and union organizers. Mill parents found themselves in a war, not so much with their bosses as with the modern state. "Folk saw reformers in a way reformers never saw themselves—as arrogant agents of oppressive elites, a bevy of outsiders as contemptuous of mill folks as their nostrums were threatening or harmful" (514). In one incident a South Carolina bureaucrat (both books describe South Carolina as a trendsetter in reform legislation) grilled the parent of one apparently underage youngster. Getting no satisfaction, he pressed his way into the child's home and examined the family Bible with a magnifying glass. The inspector determined that the parents had erased the child's original birth date and inserted a new, false date atop the original. The bureaucrat drily noted that the authorities issued a warrant for the mother's arrest and fined her ten dollars (513).

Newby suggests that a vast gulf divided unionists from southern mill hands. The union men had little understanding of the workers. Besides being particularly bitter racists, they shared popular prejudice against the "lint heads" (478). When the head of the Georgia Federation of Labor testified about the "bad; awfully bad" conditions in cotton mills before the Industrial Commission of 1900, he admitted "I have never been inside a cotton mill . . ." (525). Another union man claimed—contrary to the evidence of both *Like a Family* and *Plain Folk*—that "I have never found any [workers] that were satisfied with their lot" (526).

Newby speculates on the type of union that might have functioned successfully in the South. Organizers would have modeled it along fraternal lines, patterned after churches, and dedicated themselves to cooperation rather than confrontation. Such an organization might have tapped management's paternalism and used it to the workers' advantage,

much as Genovese claims slaves manipulated their masters' paternalism (557).

Despite *Like a Family's* many contributions to our knowledge of southern mill work, the imposition of the authors' ideology on the mill workers is a serious shortcoming. They find, for example, mill workers reacting to World War I propaganda much as Gordon Wood found Americans reacting to Revolutionary War propaganda. Talk of democracy led to real democracy. Did they find this reaction because it existed, or because reading *The Creation of the American Republic* led them to expect to find such a reaction to such propaganda? Did the alleged reaction actually happen or is it a manifestation of the authors' own Vietnam-era distaste for perceived hypocrisy?

Newby and Hall et al. found a culture alien to their own. Historians, after all, normally engage in knife fights only figuratively, rarely ride from job to job on the tops of freight trains or indulge in open spouse swapping—all activities mill workers pursued. But the authors of *Like a Family* chose to overlook the quarrelsome, violent aspects of mill life to emphasize a more communal image. This choice (to great acclaim in the scholarly community) may reveal more about us than about our ancestors.

The chief virtue of *Plain Folk* is the author's determination to rescue from the past a genuine understanding of a people who had little in common with their historians. *Plain Folk* deserves praise for seeking to understand the culture of the people at the center of the story.

NOTES

¹LeRoi manufactures socks and tights as well as infants' wear. *The Leader* reported on 31 May that LeRoi workers in Princeton and nearby Cadiz, voting on 25 May, rejected unionization 279 to 94.

²Some scholars have argued that history should be studied as a product of the historian's prejudices and experiences (White; Wise).

³Newby utilizes interviews conducted by the WPA, the Chapel Hill Historical Society and the Southern Oral History Project. The authors of *Like a Family* use some of these same interviews—some mill workers are quoted in both books—but chiefly rely on their own interviews.

⁴Newby uses state sources for letters written by mill workers—casting doubt on the claim in *Like a Family* that New Deal legislation generated unprecedented letter

writing by plain folk who had never picked up a pencil before.

⁵Newby also found mill towns to be vice-ridden (245, 312, 313, 331). He emphasizes that workers chose to live in the mill towns (257).

⁶Interestingly, social science advocates sometimes defend themselves by arguing that quantification is not really science and that even with statistics positivism is not possible. This is intended to deflect criticism that social science is overly mechanical (McCloskey; Lieberson; Tufte).

⁷Hall dismisses paternalism with a quote from a worker. Some people did feel that the mill owner "was their benefactor." "They were what you call "loyal workers,"" Sam Finley recalled. "They thought the company'd think more of them. In the long run they didn't" (348).

⁸The author's source is an unpublished autobiography by the northern-trained manager. He complained in his memoir that the mill was in a "damned mountain town" where "Everybody was kin to everybody else. . . . Thus firing people was unknow[n]."

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History papers come in all shapes and sizes. Some papers are narrative (organized like a story according to chronology, or the sequence of events), and some are analytical (organized like an essay according to the topic's internal logic). Some papers are concerned with history (not just what happened, of course, but why and how it happened), and some are interested in historiography (i.e., how other historians have written history, specifically the peculiarities of different works, scholars, or schools of thought). Some papers emphasize social or cultural history, others political or military history. Ideology is a term referring to comprehensive sets or expressions of the ideas of individuals, groups or societies. A · B · C · D · E · F · G · H · I · J · K · L · M · N · O · P · Q · R · S · T · U · V · W · X · Y · Z · See also · External links. The moment the idea is admitted into society, that property is not as sacred as the law of God, and that there is not a force of law and public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence. If "Thou shall not covet," and "Thou shall not steal," are not