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The Origins of Right to Work: Anti-labor Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Chicago, By Cedric de Leon, Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2015, 184 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7958-8

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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des ressources humaines dans les administrations publiques. Les auteurs n'ont pas réinventé la roue ni les théories, mais on peut dire qu'ils ont le mérite de nous faire voir les choses autrement, notamment par rapport à la nouvelle gestion publique.

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The Origins of Right to Work: Anti-labor Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Chicago

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One might assume there is a more or less straight line running from the “fathers” of liberal capitalism (John Locke’s focus on individual rights, and Adam Smith’s analysis the role self-interest plays in market based prosperity), to neo-liberal anti-unionism, its employment of right to work rhetoric and its promotion of right to work legislation. But free-market liberalism is not all of one piece.

Cedric de Leon’s short book *The Origins of Right to Work: Anti-labor Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Chicago* demonstrates how American ideological narratives changed from anti-bellum perspectives shaped around the idea of “wage dependency” to post bellum “free contract” perspectives that have become a staple of the liberal and neo-liberal orientations and anti-union politics. He also focuses on the role political parties played in shaping these perspectives: a role he claims is more often than not overlooked in previous scholarship.

Buttressed by the role played by slavery and its abolition, ethnic prejudice and Free Soil movement perspectives, de Leon has written an interesting, readable and informative book I would recommend to anyone interested in American labor history, ideology, or the role of political parties in forming narratives and coalitions that seek to promote their electability but frustrate efforts to produce effective working class organization.

The theme of “wage dependency” in its various manifestations provides a subtle reading of the ideology of private property as it developed in the United States. De Leon quotes Orestes Brownson who, in 1840, wrote: “Wages is a cunning device of the devil, for the benefit of tender consciences, which retain all the advantages of the slave system, without the expense, trouble and odium of being slave holders.” That the Democratic Party would endorse the analysis of this partisan and labor supporter might surprise many of us who are less familiar with this history. Agriculture, not manufacturing, dominates the anti-bellum American economy. The idealized free citizen is neither the plantation slave or the wage-dependent proletariat tied to her factory, but rather the independent “free-holder”. The movement to keep the west free of plantations and slavery sought to maintain “Free Soil” to which laborers could escape from “wage slavery”, and thus the importance of keeping southern agricultural slavery from expanding into the west, is an example of the many issues that de Leon illuminates in this informative book.

De Leon’s book is centered on the American experience and leaves me longing for a comparative analysis of the ideological development of other Commonwealth nations. Has the “right to work” argument not surfaced in the land of Locke and Smith? Was there no ideological cross-fertilization? These are not questions de Leon set out to address, but they are questions provoked by this interesting book nonetheless.

One might be advised to skip chapter one which contains the obligatory literature search we academics insist upon. It is not that it is badly written; it is not. But the story de Leon tells, which begins in chapter two, is a good one, and is not enhanced by the pretensions we social scientists put on “new discoveries” and empirical methodology. The story has much to teach us.

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