

*A Worker's Economist: John R. Commons and his Legacy from Progressivism to the War on Poverty*, By John Dennis Chasse (2017) London and New York: Routledge, 317 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4128-6539-5

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top of unsustainable debt, and insist on a restructuring of Greek debt that imposed losses on private creditors. Despite the fact that, “Troika bailout packages were based on unrealistic projections and unwarranted stringency,” the IMF went along with it, damaging its credibility in the process. Blustein believes that in dealing with Greece, the IMF should have participated as a super-senior partner to the other Troika members, imposing its terms on the other creditors.

Like Grabel, Blustein is encouraged by internal reforms at the IMF, arguing that, “a strong and effective Fund is more critical than ever before.” However, the optimistic view of an accommodating IMF is difficult to square with several of the Fund’s current country programs, where regulated labour markets and collective bargaining institutions continue to be seen as impediments to economic growth and financial stabilization.

The strictures of global capitalism are uncompromising as ever for the conduct of fiscal policy and the evolution of social protection systems and collective bargaining regimes. Mobile capital still disciplines national economies, and union density and collective bargaining coverage are under pressure across the advanced industrialized world. Despite limited rhetorical shifts, international financial institutions continue to prioritize flexible labour markets. Most recently, the World Bank’s *2019 World Development Report* on the changing nature of work offered an unreconstructed defense of deregulated labour markets and minimal social protections.

While both books look for signs of cracks in the system, and are generally optimistic about the prospects for incremental change, the epochal global financial crisis highlighted the remarkable resilience of neoliberal precepts. New possibilities for trade unions and collective bargaining are unlikely to come from the international financial institutions. Rather, they are likely to arise from new movements and upheav-

als themselves that challenge austerity, IMF conditionality, and the rules of the global system.

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**A Worker’s Economist: John R. Commons and his Legacy from Progressivism to the War on Poverty**

By John Dennis Chasse (2017) London and New York: Routledge, 317 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-4128-6539-5.

This is an important book, actually a very important book. It deals with the thought and actions of John R. Commons—a significant figure in United States and, indeed, global labour history and labour regulation/policy debates. If asked to nominate pivotal intellectual figures in writing and theorizing on the labour movement at the end of the 19th and early 20th century three figures stand out—at least as far as those from English-speaking countries are concerned—Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and John R. Commons. All three were activists epitomising public intellectuals. The Webb’s made the first systematic attempt, not just to record the growth of trade unionism but also analyse their objectives and methods, developing concepts like the common-rule, collective-bargaining and legal enactment that are still used. Together with colleagues, many drawn from his circle of students, Commons produced the multi-volume history of organized labour in the United States. This alone would have been a significant achievement. However, Commons was so much more than this, including being a pivotal figure in building the academic/policy field of industrial relations and key-activist in labour/social welfare debates during the crucial struggle to civilize capitalism between 1880 and 1945.

The title of the book, *A Worker’s Economist*, provides an indication of the

book's and Commons' greater significance. Commons was an economist who didn't just offer a worker-orientated lens on economic and social policy. That was at least as hard as it would be today in a world dominated by neoliberal economists who deny the deeply ideological nature of what they profess, and conveniently ignore the effects of jobs and wages when you flood labour markets and promote policies like privatization/competitive tendering and monetary management that slash pre-existing restraints on the powers of the rich built up over generations for very good reasons. Commons suffered for his views, shifting from job to job, and denied tenure in leading universities that conservative economists of far more limited ability could secure. As Chasse shows, the so-called Wisconsin School identified with him owes more to Commons and several key supporters (such as Richard Ely) than a university's commitment to independent scholarship.

Commons was a deep and prescient thinker on economics and how it could be used to better serve humanity and address the awful costs of the so-called 'Gilded Age.' Chasse revisits both Commons' better known works like his American shoemakers' article (tracing historical changes in what would be now called the labour process and efforts to regulate the market) to others dealing with the distribution of wealth and the legal foundations of capitalism. His ideas were important and the result of both ongoing reflection and what would be now termed as 'engagement.' His intellectual correspondence included figures like John Maynard Keynes. Commons used ideas (shaped by the network as well as his own thought) and the activist network he built amongst his students and others within the labour movement and sympathetic administrators, politicians and even some businessmen to propel reforms over a period that stretched from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the FDR Roosevelt period and carried on after

his death (1945) to the 'war on poverty' in the 1960s.

Chasse has clearly read all Commons work and reflected on it to provide a history of economic thought. His book is especially welcome because it comes at a time when it is critical to re-engage with big-picture issues. When we should be re-visiting critical periods in the past both to draw lessons and better understand the challenges we face—not least rising global inequality—and to develop strategies that will actually address them. Chasse's book is the result of a career of careful scholarship, just the sort of thing the neoliberal era of neatly designed fast-food research targeted at A\* journals have no time for. Too many academics will miss the book either because they don't think history matters or confine their literature searches to articles which are more easily downloadable but cannot hope to address the breadth of vision, thought and sustained scholarship that this book abounds in.

The book traces the various strands of Commons' thought and writings as well as his efforts to shift policies—too much to even begin to summarize here. It is not simply a paean. Chasse deals with Commons less emblematic book on race and immigration, at least the race element. I think Commons' concern with labour market flooding remains valid although it has become unfashionable in circles where opposition to immigration is labelled as hostility to immigrants (the two can overlap but aren't interchangeable). Chasse also records the people, especially women and particularly his wife (Ella) and daughter who supported Commons' activities—at no small cost to their own wellbeing. Indeed Chasse does a masterful job of weaving the personal into the picture of Commons the intellectual activist, including Commons' family roots and the personal tragedies he experienced including losing daughters and his son's long-term disappearance due to what would now be called war-induced

PTSD. The book is an intellectual assessment rather than a biography, but the information the reader wants and needs is there.

Amongst Commons' greatest gifts were as a postgraduate teacher, mentor to aspiring intellects for a greater cause, and builder of research and policy networks. Chasse gives careful due to the productivity/influence of this greater group, distinguishing what Commons actually wrote and what others around him wrote. Much of the wider social movements then convulsing within America are woven in, thereby creating a more comprehensible picture and identifying the informal networks that actually affect change but are too seldom analyzed.

Quite apart from the policymaker and union links identified, the book answered questions I had about individuals. Along with Florence Kelley, John B. Andrews was a U.S. figure whom I greatly admired. I read the book that he wrote with Commons but Chasse explains the book's origins/revisions and the genesis of the organisation in which Andrews was central (along with Irene Osgoode, another Commons' student who John married)—the American Association for Labor Legislation. Commons and Andrews refer to Australia, which, as a major social policy laboratory at the time, was an important comparator in terms of issues like legislating minimum wages, and the intellectual and policy breadth of this slim book impressed me as a PhD student. Chasse also answers other questions I had regarding Robert Hoxie, his connection to Commons and—as I learned—his tragic early death. There are numerous other connections like Selig Perlman and his son Mark. One I especially liked was Canadian labour relations specialist Bryce Stewart, a unionist-scholar who wrote a PhD thesis that as a small subtheme explained more about the history of miner's push for workers inspectors in Canada from the 1870s than anyone has written in the 90 years

since its publication. Commons' student-circle was not boys-only and included a number of singularly impressive women like Irene Osgoode and Helen Sumner, extremely smart and committed to the labour cause, who did important work.

There is much more one could say but hopefully enough to indicate this book demands attention. Bar a tiny repetition or two (probably to assist the reader), it is also an absolute pleasure to read.

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**Woman Enough: How a Boy became a Woman and Changed the World of Sport**

By Kirsten Worley and Johanna Schneller  
(2019) Toronto: Random House Canada,  
260 pages. ISBN: 978-0-7352-7300-9.

Kirsten Worley is an XY female. She was assigned as a male at birth and then transitioned, which included extensive surgical procedures, to a female. During her period as a male, she was an accomplished long distance runner; water skier, being a member of the Canadian national team; and a cyclist where her attempt to represent Canada at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games was thwarted when she experienced a devastating fall/crash. Following her transition as an XY female Kirsten Worley sought permission to compete as a cyclist under the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) 2003 *Stockholm Consensus on Sex Reassignment in Sports' Guidelines*. Under these rules the applicant had to demonstrate that surgical anatomical changes have been completed, legal recognition of their transition has been confirmed by appropriate official authorities, and hormonal therapy has been administered in a verifiable manner to minimize gender-related advantages in sport competitions.<sup>1</sup>

Worley made her application for a cycling license to Canada's National Sports