

Exploring Alienation from the Natural World in Capitalist Labor Relations

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Chad Montrie, *Making a Living: Work and Environment in the United States*, University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

One of the most interesting intersections among historical fields in recent years is that of labor and environmental history. For over a century, labor historians have been at the forefront in critically analyzing the capitalist and industrial transformation of society and its social, political, cultural, and obviously economic effects. In recent decades, environmental historians—whose primary concentration is the reciprocal relationships between human society and the natural environment and how and why those relationships change over time—also focus on industrialization and capitalism’s impact on the natural environment, particularly in terms of the consequences of the manipulation of nature. On a variety of occasions, historians in these respective fields have delved into the other’s territory in their work. A good example of this is Richard White’s *The Organic Machine*, in which part of his history of the human adaptation and human transformation of the Columbia River is told through the experience of labor.

Bringing these two fields together as environmental labor history has been the work of a small but growing group of innovative and insightful scholars. Most of their work to date has been in the form of thought-provoking journal articles such as Gunter Peck’s “The Nature of Labor: Fault Lines and Common Ground in Environmental and Labor History” and monographs such as Lawrence Lipin’s *Workers and the Wild: Conservation, Consumerism, and Labor in Oregon, 1910-1930*. Chad Montrie has entered this new area of scholarship with his own monograph, *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia*. However, with his second book, *Making a Living: Work and Environment in the United States*, Montrie has taken the first steps toward a synthesis of environmental labor history. *Making a Living* does not reach the level of synthesis of Ted Steinberg in *Down to Earth: Nature’s Role in American History* or Jacqueline Jones in *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor*, but it does present, in the form of case studies, the beginning of such a necessary work for environmental labor history.

Montrie places his work within the historiography of labor and environmental history and demonstrates how they intersect in some key recent studies. He argues that environmental historians are farther along in the merging of these two fields than labor historians. In fact he boldly states that “Labor history is incomplete without environmental history” and that its inclusion would “alter” in significant ways the way we understand the working class. [p. 6.] Furthermore, I would argue that environmental history is incomplete without labor history. For instance, William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis*, a marvelous study of Chicago, the prairie, and the West—one I use regularly in my Illinois history course—almost completely neglects labor.

In constructing *Making a Living*, Montrie turns to historical materialism, especially Marx’s concept of alienation, as an organizing principle of his study. Workers’ alienation from the natural environment as well as their labor is the glue that holds Montrie’s book together. He makes a convincing argument that as industrialization becomes more intense, over time workers’ alienation from nature becomes even more estranged. The commodification of both labor and nature develop in tandem. He problematizes this process by including gender, ethnicity, race, and rural and urban

landscapes in his analysis, which makes for a more nuanced history than a traditionally, constrained Marxist approach. Although he has not written a grand narrative, his use of case studies to illuminate these processes and workers' reactions to industrialization provides a solid foundation for future scholarship.

Each chapter in *Making a Living* explores some well-traveled ground by historians, but Montrie's analysis is unique as he investigates an estrangement from nature that is concomitant with an alienation from labor. The efforts by workers to stay connected to nature or to reconnect is born out in his cases studies as well. His first historical inquiry investigates the farm to factory experience of the Lowell Mill girls and women and the transformation of their utilitarian view of nature into a more spiritual one, which is amplified after passing through the experience of industrial labor. With African American slaves in the second chapter, Montrie argues that the process of estrangement from the natural environment and their labor could have been slowed due to slavery itself and to the sharecropping system that most freed people in the South transitioned into following the Civil War. However, I can't help but wonder if this is more of a product of cultural values that rural slaves and freed people maintained through the legacy of an African heritage modified in a Euro-American context. Another of Montrie's 19th century case studies involves white pioneer women, working in conjunction with men, to "domesticate" the Great Plains. Yet, is this another example of cultural values already embedded in the consciousness of these historical agents, in that there was never a question that nature would be "tamed." It is understandable that getting at these cultural values is very difficult to do given the limits of sources available to Montrie and other such scholars.

The other three case studies furthering Montrie's thesis are 20th century examples. In the case of inhabitants of southern West Virginia, people moved from farm to mine to factory with an accompanying alienation from the environment and their work. He argues that their resistance to the transition seems to be attributed to their connection to the land as a source of food. This translated into an incomplete shift as miners held on to the land as a form of subsistence. With the advent of strip mining and the job becoming all, alienation becomes inevitable.

The estrangement theme continues in chapter five with autoworkers. In an effort to find a reconnection to nature, autoworkers join sporting clubs and other organizations that celebrate a connection to the environment. Montrie does note the irony that the labor of these workers is a major cause of pollution and estrangement from nature due to the automobile itself. Nevertheless, the United Auto Workers (UAW) leadership proved instrumental in developing labor environmentalism. Montrie explains how the UAW was in the lead in pressuring governmental agencies to deal with air pollution and other environmental concerns as well as in building a connection between workers and nature. The fact that this all falls apart due to the leadership changes seems to be an unsatisfying conclusion. What happened to the rank and file? Were they never that supportive of these reconnections? If so, why?

The final case study involves the origins of the environmental justice movement as it grew out of farmworkers exposure to pesticides as they labored in factories in the fields. Again there seems to be an inherent problem in that the leadership is instrumental in making the connections between the environment and labor. The workers themselves appear dependent, and when the leadership focus changes, so too does the rank and file's.

Although I have a few questions regarding Montrie's historical analysis, overall this is an interesting and thought-provoking study. He twists alienation theory in an innovative manner and

reinterprets some well-studied social history. In fact, some of his case studies should be further investigated into complete, stand-alone monographs. As someone who teaches environmental and labor history, I think his work helps to bridge these two fields into something new and useful that would be of interest to students, environmental and labor advocates, and to scholars. *Making a Living* acts as a call for more work in the burgeoning field of environmental labor history.