

Daniel J. Clark, Disruption in Detroit: Autoworkers and the Elusive Postwar Boom

Jeremy Milloy

Volume 84, Fall 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066554ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ltt.2019.0049>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Milloy, J. (2019). Review of [Daniel J. Clark, Disruption in Detroit: Autoworkers and the Elusive Postwar Boom]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 84, 354–356.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ltt.2019.0049>

were dispossessed to the advantage of her family and those whom she supported. While attention to gender, race, and class as categories of analysis are common today, they are not often applied in biographies. Strong-Boag's additional use of privilege as a category of analysis is also noteworthy.

By placing Jamieson in the context of the world around her, the reader gets a strong sense of the social and political events that impacted her life. The one downside to what I would call a "contextual biography" is that much of the book reads more like a history of feminist politics in British Columbia during the early 20th century than a biography of one woman. The book is often not about Jamieson, and the impact of her personal experiences on her strong social democratic views are not highlighted as strongly as they could be. Jamieson occasionally takes a back seat in her own biography to more prominent friends, like Agnes Macphail, and the causes (birth control, equal pay, international peace) and politics (CCF, universal suffrage, education) she supported. However, there is also strength in this contextual approach.

Ultimately, this book pulls double duty as a history of women and politics in BC and a history of women on the left. The Vancouver focus of this book also makes it a particularly local history that occasionally reaches out to the Prairies by highlighting the emotional and political importance of connections and friendships between women. By the end of the biography, the reader gets the sense that this is how the modest and compassionate Laura Marshall Jamieson would have wanted a book about her to be.

KESIA KVILL

University of Guelph

Daniel J. Clark, *Disruption in Detroit: Autoworkers and the Elusive Postwar Boom* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2018)

THAT UNIONIZED INDUSTRIAL workers, especially autoworkers, enjoyed steady work at good wages after the Second World War has become a truism of North American history, the starting point for innumerable monographs, articles, and studies. What Daniel J. Clark's provocative new book proposes is that – maybe they didn't?

Few groups of workers have been as analyzed, eulogized, and scrutinized as the American autoworker. The recent closure of the iconic Lordstown plant, where in the earlier 1970s young, blue-collar workers protested GM speedups in what some observers hoped was a marriage of counterculture attitudes and shopfloor militancy, brought yet another round of commentaries in the *New York Times* and beyond. But Clark argues that historians have largely failed to tell their story accurately, telling, in his eyes, a story about a blue-collar aristocracy, largely white and male, advancing economically, interested in bowling, hunting, and fishing, and concerned with keeping women and racialized workers in their place. Historians have argued, incorrectly, in Clark's view, that these workers had an appetite for a radical vision but were instead shuffled towards consumerism and away from militancy by the Reutherite leadership of the UAW. Whether this is an accurate summary of the historiographical depiction of postwar autoworkers and the extent to which autoworkers were interested in radical action and shopfloor control are open, important questions. However, Clark's assertion that "no research focuses in any sustained way on autoworkers themselves," is misleading and inaccurate. It ignores important work, some of which Meyer cites,

that does so, including monographs by Stephen Meyer and Pamela Sugiman, as well as the edited collections *Autowork* and *End of the Line*.

While Clark seems to disagree with much of the historiography, he sets out to contest just one specific aspect of it – that Detroit autoworkers enjoyed stable, prosperous work between the war's end and 1960. In doing so, Clark's work makes a crucial contribution that all historians of autoworkers, postwar labour, and postwar capitalism will have to reckon with. *Disrupting Detroit* argues that, for most autoworkers, working life was defined by precarity, frequent layoffs and shut-downs, and taking ancillary jobs or leaving town just to make a living. The very title "autoworker" was, for many, more aspirational than accurate, as they cut hair, drove cabs, picked berries, washed trailers, and lined up to shovel snow in the Detroit streets to keep body and soul together during the frequent disruptions of auto employment.

Clark developed this picture of the insecurity of postwar autowork by conducting extensive oral history work with retirees in the Detroit area. He focused on rank-and-file workers whose voices are often obscured in favour of the leaders and activists who tend to be more comfortable speaking and easier to find. What he heard was so divergent from what he had expected to hear that he then tested his interview results against the newspaper record. Taken together, these sources provide compelling evidence that historians and other scholars have missed much while discussing autowork and autoworkers during this period.

The structure of the book is simple. Clark chronologically narrates the ups and downs of the Detroit auto industry between 1945-1960. Sometimes the industry is booming, and attracting migrants, lured to Detroit by the dream of big paycheques and plenty of overtime. More

often, times were tough. Autoworkers, especially lower-seniority workers, were laid-off as plants were idled or running at lower capacity because of overproduction, materials shortages, and strikes – either in Detroit or somewhere down the supply chain. Automakers used speed-ups to compete. In turn, this prompted labour strife, which interrupted production and employment. The increasing enshrinement of grievance procedures, rather than older, more informal and worker-focused methods of conflict resolution, seemed on paper to reduce class conflict, but in actuality often led to wild-cat strikes. The economic statistics produced during good times and often relied upon by historians were often aggregated in such a way that they hid the true experience of most autoworkers. Economists or local business groups would multiply a strong hourly wage by a 40-hour week to produce reports of a handsome average wage, but these were simply abstractions for most workers, who weren't getting fulltime work, or often, any work.

Bad times weren't just brief downturns, they were disastrous. In 1952, the region staggered under the weight of 10% of the nation's total unemployment. During these times, local leaders warned migrants to stay out of Detroit. Clark skilfully details the economic and psychological toll this took on workers and their families, and some of the many strategies they used to close the gap between what their work in the auto industry provided and survival. He shows how women, Black workers, older workers, and workers with disabilities were disproportionately affected by these cycles, due to structural inequalities and stigma, rather than the actual value of their labour power. Even those higher in the factory food chain didn't have it as good as later observers, and contemporaries, often assumed. Clark provides a poignant example of this with the story of Jim Wolfe. Celebrated in

1955 as Ford's 10,000 retiree, the 65-year old Wolfe, with 30 years in at Ford, told the assembled reporters that he retired because he was "ashamed of my house," and that he hoped to get work at his son's concrete business to supplement his inadequate pension and Social Security income.

Obviously, this is not what we are used to learning about postwar autoworkers. While many scholars have pointed out the extremely limited nature of the Fordist bargain and the categories of workers who rarely shared in its prosperity, Clark has extended that revisionist contribution. No longer can scholars complacently assume that even white working-class male autoworkers experienced nothing but good times, rising incomes, and improved status in these years. *Disrupting Detroit* breaks ground for exciting new research questions and debates in this crucial period of working-class history. Clark himself argues that criticism of the UAW for not taking greater shop-floor control, for example, is premised on the belief that the UAW was able to achieve its goals in this period. Rather Clark, somewhat convincingly, argues the UAW failed to secure its top priority, the stabilization of jobs and pay through a guaranteed annual wage. An obvious question raised by the book is how representative were Detroit's autoworkers of the broader working class? Thomas Sgrue has already demonstrated how deindustrialization affected the city beginning in the 1940s. What were the situations of autoworkers where the plants moved to, be they in Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, or California? What about other groups of workers? How much of the oft-cited resentment and backlash of white working-class men stoked by in Nixon's "Silent Majority," ideology stemmed from the gap between the ideology of prosperity and the struggles of their lived experience? While Clark's work is limited in

geographical scope, it should prompt historians of the United States, Canada, and beyond to rethink and re-examine postwar working-class lives.

JEREMY MILLOY

Mount Allison University

Mel van Elteren, *Managerial Control of American Workers: Methods and Technology from the 1880s to Today* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company 2017)

THE TWENTY-FIRST century workplace is driven by technological change that accelerates at a continually increasing rate. A desire to replace workers through automation while closely controlling and monitoring those who are still on the job is a key modern management objective. Frederick Winslow Taylor, former apprentice and stopwatch denizen, is with workers more than he was at the turn of the twentieth century. A bit of Taylorism is integrated into every GPS monitor on vehicles driven by workers and the countless algorithms used to monitor organizational efficiency. Mel van Elteren describes the historical development of management and technology with the bulk of his analysis on the period since the end of World War II. He has provided readers with a revealing, yet often alarming analysis.

Van Elteren's narrative is often an overview of existing literature on workplace change, and the work that he includes covers a wide swath from Harry Braverman to Peter Drucker. He consequently does not limit himself to just focusing on automation and work rationalization as he proceeds through fourteen chapters of analysis. This book brings new insights to the existing literature on automation and managerial control. For instance, for all of the many books and articles that have talked about the studies done at Western