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Two Views of the Knights of Labor Centennial Symposium, Chicago, May 1979

The Knights of Labor and the Making of the American Working Class

W.M. Dick

IF THERE was a whipping boy for scholars attending the Chicago symposium it was surely Gerald N. Grob, author of the 1961 *Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement, 1865-1900*. Grob's argument is that for most of the nineteenth century, American labour was trapped by a Jeffersonian ideology that deluded workers into believing that they could escape industrial wage earner status and regain the spirit of individual entrepreneurship by means of a host of "reform" schemes like agrarianism, greenbackism, and producers' cooperatives. The Knights of Labor was but the last manifestation of this recurrent delusion. According to Grob, only the leaders of the new American Federation of Labor saw that the true path lay in the direction of collective bargaining. After a hard struggle with the backward looking Knights, they set American labour firmly on that course.

If Grob was explicitly excoriated, members of the symposium also levelled a good deal of implicit criticism at Gabriel Kolko for the very unflattering portrait of the late nineteenth-century working class contained in his recent *Main Currents in Modern American History*. His defenceless, polyglot workers were going nowhere at all. Instead they were constantly buffetted by forces beyond their control, and these forces included most labour leaders.

In place of Grob's individualism and Kolko's negativism, the fresh crop of historians offer something new. Clearly forsaking the institutional approach, they search behind the façade of the official Knights and find an authentic working-class culture. It is a culture forged out of the hard experiences of ordinary people in the Gilded Era, native and immigrant, black and white, alike. The strikes and organizations of the period are but a manifestation of this culture.

Clearly the inspiration for such an approach is E.P. Thompson, author of *The Making of the English Working Class*, and his American interpreters, Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery, two of the leaders of the symposium, and, I believe, the mentors of several of those who contributed papers. In general their argument would run something like this. By the mid-1880s, a time of unemployment and cutbacks in wages, the depredations of a rising industrial capitalism had become alarmingly felt by communities of workers the length and breadth of the land. It was felt, not just in economic terms, but in

social and cultural terms as well. Producers long accustomed to the old republican ideal of America as a place of fair play and of opportunity for a decent life for those willing to work — an ideal made all the more potent, as David Montgomery has shown, by the recent sacrifices of the Civil War — now found their lives totally disrupted. They responded to the new conditions in different ways. True, they used the experiences and the community institutions of the past — churches, unions, social clubs of all kinds — but far from being the "backward looking" response that Grob claimed, the working classes used these older experiences and transformed them into a new set of ideas and institutions which transcended the community level and presented America with a truly surprising degree of class unity and organization. Thus, contrasting with Robert Wiebe's thesis of corporate leaders providing the vanguard of a new kind of national order in the 1890s, the new labour historians show that working classes had preceded them with a much nobler vision of moral order a decade before.

The upsurge of the Knights of Labor in 1885-86 was of course the most concrete expression of this unity and solidarity. Hitherto the Knights had been a craft organization which spread in the course of the 1870s and early 1880s into most industrial communities in North America, but in the mid-1880s it was taken over by masses of workers in a spontaneous outburst of class indignation. Even if the Knights were defunct by the early 1890s, the class feeling behind it erupted again and again during the next generation, until new forms of collective bargaining and welfare capitalism — products of middle class progressivism — developed in its place.

The foregoing statement was not necessarily subscribed to by all who contributed papers in the symposium, but it was where open discussions seemed to lead, and it was certainly the view that the leaders of the conference, Gutman, Montgomery and Jonathon Garlock, expressed in their summing up. The point was most cogently put by Herbert Gutman, when he dubbed the years from 1885 to 1920 as "the new middle period of U.S. History." This was a period when workers continuously challenged the new industrial order of capitalism and posited a moral economy of their own. The period closed when the capitalist order triumphed as the result of a strategy of tentative acceptance of AFL craft unions and the total suppression of everything else.

This interesting thesis accords well with Gutman's published works about working-class communities in the Gilded Era, and with Montgomery's studies of the evolution of class feeling in the post Civil War period and of the "transformation of the workers' consciousness" in the early twentieth century. Let us now see how some of the contributions of other scholars help in augmenting it.

Few papers gave much attention to the economic and technological development of American industry in the period. An exception, however, was Dennis M. Zambala's study of "Glassworkers in the Knights of Labor: Technology, Labor and the Roots of Modernism," which clearly showed the relevance of the ideology of the Knights to workers whose skills were quickly

being undermined. Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer gave information about the development of street railways as an explanation of the upheavals of workers in Toronto, in an excerpt from their forthcoming book about the Knights of Labor in Ontario. In general, however, there is still much to be learned about economic development and its relationship to labour organization.

Some of the most impressive papers were those that examined the way the Knights of Labor evolved from community organizations, which it then superceded. For instance, Peter Rachleff's "Black Richmond and the Knights of Labor" explores the large number of societies of the freemason type that Blacks in Richmond organized before turning to the Knights. Lois C. McLean and John W. Bennet also show connections between Irish organizations and the Knights. Julie Blodgett, meanwhile, traces the origins of the original Knights of Labor in Philadelphia, showing how typical it was of all the labour organizations of the day. There is nothing to be found in her work of the "forward looking trade unions backward looking Knights" dichotomy that is the basis of the Grob thesis.

Equally important are the accounts of the great upheaval after 1885, when the rank and file transformed the Knights from an ordinary labour organization into a great instrument of moral protest against the capitalist order. What is refreshing about these studies is how they show developments at a local level not explored before. Paul Frisch, for instance, demonstrates how labour solidarity in organization and politics in Butte, Montana, lasted right through until the 1890s when it merged with the populist movement. James Lazerow meanwhile explores the evolution of the Knights in Boston.

Local studies also reveal a new attitude towards some racial minorities and towards working women. Steve Brier, for instance, traces the growth of interracial cooperation in the southern West Virginia coalfields, while Nancy Dye studies women and the Knights among the Louisville woolen mill operatives. Sue Levine, in a more general study, found that women were increasingly acknowledged to be fellow workers, though she also detects the persistence of "chivalric attitudes."

The moral outrage against the capitalist order, which the Knights represented, is well illustrated by the way they took over the prohibition movement from middle class reformers and made it an expression of working-class ideals. Drunkenness was thus reckoned to be a product of the capitalist order which they fought, rather than of working-class culture. This point made by David Brundage makes a local study of the transformation of prohibition in Denver. In the same way, Clare A. Horner argues that the interest in producers' co-operatives that characterized the Knights, must be seen as part of the discrimination of workers to provide an alternative economic base to the capitalist one. Thus, it is in the subjects of prohibition and cooperation that a change in interpretation is most interesting. These beliefs are now seen to be held by industrial workers, not as Grob and others have argued as a hangover of middle class reformism, but as part of the new moral industrial order that the working class hoped to

build. As was argued in the summing up of the symposium, even the choice of "Knights" — the order of chivalry — as the name of the organization, was deliberately chosen as an antidote to the greed and irresponsibility of the new ruling class.

Finally, there are a number of articles that take up the question of the Knights and politics. Again local studies are important. Stephen J. Ross gives a good idea of the labour and politics in Cincinatti, and Paul Buhle writes on the Knights and socialists in Rhode Island. Alan Dawley focusses attention on relations between Knights and anarchists in Chicago. Majory Murphy, on the other hand, makes an interesting study of Michael and Margaret Haley, two labour reformers whose work at one time was involved with the Knights. These studies are varied in theme and it is difficult to generalize about them. Nevertheless, one point emerges. In spite of much discussion about political questions, what is of importance is the common sense of working-class purpose that all organizations show. One is never given the impression of a "pure and simple" trade union psyche struggling to be free of "utopian schemers."

All this is a long way from Grob's description of Knights trying to recapture the world of the artisan entrepreneur. It is also a marked contrast to Kolko's picture of the working class as cultureless victims. Nevertheless, as with all revisionist theses, there is a danger of going to the opposite extreme. Questions inevitably arise, therefore, both about particular articles and about the overall summation. Do these individual studies really demonstrate a vibrant class culture based on community experience? Was there really a "new middle period" in which the American working class showed itself potentially capable of remoulding industrial America, until it was ruthlessly crushed and moulded in turn by the triumphant capitalists? Putting the question in another way, are we observing in all these events the "making of an American working class," analagous to that observed by E.P. Thompson in the England of the 1830s? The answer to that question hinges, as it does in Thompson's work, on the conception of working-class communities transforming themselves into a class culture. Unfortunately, the concept of "community" in America, and of "working-class community" in particular, remains a very nebulous one. Some papers may present interesting evidence for its existence but it remains elusive. Community experience may have been the prelude to Black participation in the Knights of Labor, and in several places it may have led to interracial co-operation. But one is also struck by the spectacle of anti-Chinese sentiment in other places as the glue that held the "community" together. As Carlos Schwantes put it in his study of the Knights in the Pacific Northwest, "not until they plunged into politics did they learn just how tenuous were the bonds of working class unity based on little more than a common opposition to Chinese labour." Kealey and Palmer seem to give this anti-Chinese bigotry the stamp of approval since it was genuinely working-class bigotry, but one is also tempted to reflect on how often the principal manifestation of American "community" feeling is merely the organized attack on the outsider. Was there really much

else? It would be rash indeed to answer this question in a dogmatic negative, but I did find some significance in the paper presented to Jonathon Garlock, one of the organizers of the symposium and an advocate of community history as a unit of study. Garlock clearly tries to grapple with the idea of working-class culture in the same way that Thompson does. Thus he argues that the Knights of Labor courts, operating at a local level, acted as a kind of counter-culture to the official courts of the bourgeoisie. The results of this daring thesis, however, were very unconvincing. Concern for financial probity in labour organizations does not constitute a counterculture.

Likewise, in the political papers, though they reveal evidence of a class culture one is struck by precisely the kind of bickering among different political groups that the Commons school described long ago. In Thompson's England, working-class organizations seemed to complement each other; in America they become deadly rivals. Buhle struggles to show how reasonable the socialists were in their attitude towards the Knights, but is his ultimate picture of socialist isolation really different from Philip Taft's? Similarly, when Marjory Murphy shows us how the Haleys reflected on the absence of class consciousness, after a lifetime in the labour movement, we are painfully reminded of the writings of the old school on the subject.

Going beyond the specifics of the Knights, the idea of the "middle period" of 1885-1920 when working classes still disputed the new order, is an exciting idea and provides the focus for a fresh look at the old events. Yet, although many of the strikes of the period were an expression of class solidarity and resistance to the capitalist order, many were about union recognition and collective bargaining, and it is difficult to see what alternative moral order lay behind them. Apart from the question of labour struggles, one can also detect many ways in which working-class Americans were absorbed within the larger national culture during this period, through education, sports, entertainment, and, of course, progressive politics.

These remarks are not intended to deny the validity of the ideas projected in the symposium. The upheaval of the mid-1880s and other manifestations of class consciousness were real enough. No one reading the best papers on working-class culture can continue to look at the period in the former way. But they only tell part of the story of the working class in the Gilded Era; the whole is much more complex. The American working class of the 1880s may have had resemblances to the English working class in the 1830s, but the differences were also profound. During the later period all "modernizing" states witnessed the partial integration of lower classes into national life. Partly this was a result of working-class demand, partly of ruling class strategy, but in all the countries the result was a certain tension between the forces of class conflict and of national integration, rather than the total predominance of one.

Thus by drawing attention to America's class conflict and altering the balance away from traditional consensus interpretations the overall effect of these papers is to illustrate the essential fluidity of American society at the turn

of the twentieth century. The future of the working class in American political life would depend less upon either its "class consciousness" or "middle class psyche" than on the political forms in which it operated and on the strategies of its leaders.

The Knights in Chicago

Nolan Reilly

IN MAY 1979 over 80 people interested in American and Canadian working-class history gathered at Chicago's Newberry Library to participate in the Knights of Labor Centennial Symposium. Most of the people attending the three day conference had university or community college affiliations but members of the Illinois State Historical Society and several trade unionists also joined in the workshops. Approximately half of these participants contributed papers to the symposium on a variety of economic, social, and cultural themes. In fact, few aspects of the Knights of Labor escaped at least a cursory glance from the researchers. Many of these projects explored the Order's history in community studies that ranged geographically from Richmond, Virginia to Butte, Montana. Other articles focussed on specific aspects of the Knights' development such as its response to the changing work process and the Order's relationship to other social movements of the period.

Conference papers of special interest to Canadian historians were those studies of the Knights' activities in Ontario contributed by Russell Hann (Toronto), Gregory Kealey (Dalhousie University), and Bryan Palmer (McGill University). In "Brainworkers in the Knights of Labor in Toronto," Hann continued his inquiry into the relationship of the intellectual to the emergence of the Order. He argued convincingly that Phillips Thompson and the other journalists and publicists in Toronto's Victor Hugo Assembly advanced the interests of the Knights in several important ways. Their newspapers and other propaganda activities infused the Knights with an organizational vitality that it otherwise would not have possessed. Hugo Assembly members also defended the labour movement against the attacks of classical political economists and brought their familiarity with the theories of socialism to the Order.

Gregory Kealey, "'Braver deeds in store:' The Knights of Labor in Toronto," and Bryan Palmer, "Hamilton and the Home Club," were taken from a larger work which the authors are preparing for publication, *"Dreaming of What Might Be:" The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900*. After completing their respective local studies, Kealey and Palmer have attempted to present a broader assessment of the Knights' relationship to the emergence of the Canadian labour movement. The Order, they propose, was a unique "combination of chivalry and class struggle," or a blend of "tradition and innovation," that was an "amalgam very well suited to the transitional stage of capitalist development in Ontario" in the late nineteenth century. In central

Canada the Knights spearheaded the social movement that confronted the new industrial capitalist society in all its various forms. At the work place, in the cultural and intellectual sphere, and in local and national politics, the Knights left their mark on the emerging labour and socialist movements.

The conference convenors tried to circulate all the papers in advance of the symposium. Assuming that everyone would arrive in Chicago with these materials read and digested, they dispensed with the traditional reading of papers at the beginning of each session. This procedure created a number of difficulties: first, tardy contributors, duplication problems, and late mailings meant that many of the participants did not receive the articles until shortly before the date of the conference. Second, since the papers were neither read nor introduced in the workshops, discussions often lacked a sharp focus. Some contributors complained that this format worked against a thorough critique of individual articles.

These problems aside, the workshops led by Conference organizer Jon Garlock, Herbert Gutman, and David Montgomery were quite successful. The sessions were organized around a variety of topics that touched on most aspects of the Knights' development. These workshop titles included: "The Knights, Producers and U.S. Economic Development," "Country Knights and City Knights," "Knights and Politics and Social Reform," "Knights and Workers' Culture," and "Knights and the Labor Movement." On the conference's final day, a plenary session led by the workshop leaders discussed historical interpretations of the Knights and explored the Order's importance to Canadian and American labour history. Because it would be impossible to recount the discussion and debates of each of the sessions, this report will simply highlight some of the more interesting controversies that arose in several of the workshops.

Discussion of the Knights' relationship to American economic development quickly focussed on the significance of the industrialization of crafts that marked production in the late nineteenth century. Some participants argued that the Knights' rise to prominence in North America corresponded with the transition from early forms of capitalist development to a mature industrial capitalist society. Although most commentators agreed that this relationship existed, it was the Ontario studies that most clearly demonstrated this association. In other workshops questions on the Order's institutional development and other related issues inevitably raised references to politics, social reform, and workers' culture. Not surprisingly, these topics sparked the liveliest symposium debates.

The "Politics and Social Reform" workshop studied the Order's relationship to reform movements, especially its alliances with farmers, populists, socialists, temperance, and women's rights groups. Another important theme was the Knights' role in municipal and national elections. Some suggested that the movement's relatively successful electoral activities in the 1880s forced the traditional parties in North America to adopt accommodationist programmes. It was also observed that the history of the Knights in Canada and the United

States diverged significantly in the realm of labour politics. The Knights generated considerable interest in independent political action in both countries. But in Canada, unlike in the United States, the wedding of the labour movement to independent labour politics that occurred in these years became a permanent feature of working-class life.

"The Knights and Workers' Culture" workshop raised many of the conceptual and analytical problems identified with the growing literature on the emergence and persistence of oppositional cultures in society. Themes in this session included: the Order's relationship to producers' values and aspirations, the fraternal and social role of the local assembly, the impact of the organization's publications on popular culture, and the importance of ritual within the Knights. Debates on these subjects focussed on the degree to which the Knights' resistance to industrial capitalism was organized through cultural means.

In the plenary session David Montgomery again addressed this problem. He speculated that the Knights' dramatic appearance on the stage of North American history was more than simply an important episode in trade-union history. The Order was a "movement culture" that emerged from, and then altered dramatically, American popular culture. Women's participation in the Knights, for example, ended their exclusion from the male dominated workers' culture of earlier times. Finally, Montgomery stressed the need to learn more about the Knights' decline, especially how the employers and the state defeated them locally and nationally. In his closing address to the conference, Herbert Gutman emphasized the importance of ethnicity in the formation of the American working class. Observing that ethnic tensions riddled late nineteenth-century American society, Gutman argued that the Knights of Labor successfully overcame many of these divisions. But in the 1890s with the collapse of the Knights and the rise of craft unionism, ethnicity re-emerged as an important source of conflict in the labour movement.

Gutman and Montgomery's musings on the Order's relationship to North American labour history generated some of the symposium's more interesting discussion. Most of the participants, but certainly not all, emphasized the need for historians to broaden their horizons beyond the Order's institutional development. The Knights, they concluded, should be investigated as a social movement responding to the maturation of industrial capitalist societies in Canada and the United States. After pursuing these questions for several hours, the plenary session shifted focus and undertook an assessment of the conference. Everyone agreed readily that the symposium was a great success and urged that other working-class topics be scrutinized in a similar manner.