

Relations industrielles Industrial Relations



Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States by Clete DANIEL, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001, 327 pp., ISBN 0-8014-3853-5.

Jonathan Eaton

Volume 57, numéro 1, hiver 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/006724ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/006724ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Eaton, J. (2002). Compte rendu de [*Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States* by Clete DANIEL, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001, 327 pp., ISBN 0-8014-3853-5.] *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 57(1), 211–213.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/006724ar>

Tous droits réservés © Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval, 2002

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

é
rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

partie d'une aristocratie ouvrière et ensuite de devenir un homme d'affaires prospère dont le train de vie lui permet d'avoir une bonne à la maison et un chauffeur privé. Malgré les multiples chapeaux qu'il porte comme syndicaliste, comme patron et à certains moments comme haut-fonctionnaire, il ne module pas ses principes et son discours en fonction du forum auquel il s'adresse. Fidèle à l'idéologie du syndicalisme de métier, il privilégiera d'abord cette forme d'organisation mais il se rendra progressivement compte, à la lumière de l'expansion de la production de masse, que le mouvement syndical doit mettre sur pied des structures et des modes de regroupement adaptés aux besoins des travailleurs œuvrant sur des chaînes de production. Toutefois, particulièrement suite à la grève générale de la One Big Union à Winnipeg en 1919, il abhorre la tendance des syndicats industriels à

privilégier le recours à la grève générale plutôt qu'à l'arbitrage.

Ce volume passionnant, présentant un personnage aussi complexe, polyvalent et influent, comble un besoin criant d'une historiographie qui a toujours eu tendance à privilégier les syndicats catholiques et canadiens. Les syndicats nord-américains ont pendant plus de cinquante ans regroupé la majorité des travailleurs québécois et l'œuvre de Leroux illustre éloquentement combien, à travers par exemple la contribution d'un leader syndical comme Gustave Francq, le syndicalisme nord-américain de métier a contribué à sa façon et dans des conditions historiques spécifiques, à la promotion des intérêts des travailleurs et à la réforme du cadre institutionnel et juridique des relations du travail.

MICHEL GRANT

Université du Québec à Montréal

Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States

by Clete DANIEL, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001, 327 pp., ISBN 0-8014-3853-5.

Following the historic, depression-era organizing successes by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the auto and steel industries, one key manufacturing industry remained to be conquered: textiles. The epic struggle, and ultimate failure, of the CIO and its affiliate, the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), to achieve a breakthrough in the textile industry are documented and assessed in Clete Daniel's ambitious book *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States*. Daniel describes his work as "an attempt to explain why an undertaking that [the CIO leadership] expected to yield one of industrial unionism's greatest triumphs produced, instead, perhaps its greatest disappointment." He sets out to examine both the social, economic, political and legal barriers that the TWUA

faced and the pivotal role of the union's own internal politics: "the singular challenges of leadership in an organization whose internal political culture was increasingly vulnerable to the destructive pressures of apparently irreversible decline and the concomitant ravages of seemingly unavoidable dissention." The fate of the TWUA, Daniel suggests, presaged the crisis that all American manufacturing unions would face at the end of the century, as "the specter of postindustrialism" loomed.

Daniel's story begins, not with the birth of the TWUA, but with the earliest organizing efforts by workers in North America's oldest manufacturing industry. In cataloguing the long list of failures by organized labour—from the first craft unions to the Industrial Workers of the World—to gain a foothold in textile manufacturing, he clearly establishes the

barriers of poverty, disunity and fragmentation, the "culture of misfortune," that beset unionization in this sector. The defining features of the industry made it naturally resistant to organization: "Characterized by intense competition among a large number of producers, none sufficiently influential in product or labor markets to constitute an industry-wide force for rational operation, textiles exhibited the tell-tale signs of chronic incoherence; low profit margins, excess capacity, irregular production, inadequate capitalization, and a widening technological divide that fostered wildly uneven productivity rates." Again and again textile workers demonstrated a desire to organize—dramatically displayed in the 1934 strike by hundreds of thousands of workers in southern textile mills—but these sporadic outbreaks of labour action never led to durable unions.

The opportunity to reverse this history of failure arose in 1937 when the CIO, fresh from its victories in the auto and steel industries, set its sites on the textile industry, then the employer of 1,250,000 American workers. The effort was significantly funded with over \$2 million from the CIO affiliates and led by Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) president Sidney Hillman, "one of the country's most astute and resourceful labor leaders." With an army of 600 organizers, Hillman, through the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC) set out to transform the industry. And he just about did it.

The initial successes of the TWOC fell short of the gains won by the CIO in auto and steel. But the potential of the TWOC, which evolved into the TWUA, became evident during the industrial expansion and tight labour market experienced during World War II. By 1944, the TWUA was entrenched in almost every subsector of the textile industry and could claim a membership of 400,000 workers in 600 locals. It was the

third largest affiliate in the CIO. For a brief shining moment, it must have seemed that the promise of textile unionism would be fulfilled.

But it did not happen. After the war, the weaknesses of the TWUA immediately became evident. The accelerated shift of textile jobs from the union's northern bastions to the hostile environment in the southern states, the new anti-labour political and legal context reflected in the Taft-Hartley Act, and the union's "still evident inability to conquer the South" all contributed to a rapid decline in the TWUA's fortunes. A seemingly unending course of fratricidal political infighting destroyed what little hope the union had. By the mid-1970s, with barely 100,000 members left, no money, and in the midst of an enormous and costly battle to unionize textile giant J.P. Stevens, the TWUA was forced to merge with the larger ACWA in order to survive.

Daniel relates this story with insight and sensitivity. He demonstrates his grasp of the historic dynamics of the American textile industry and the formidable obstacles that workers faced (and continue to face) in attempting to gain a collective voice. Primary sources, from obscure trade journal articles and internal union correspondence to first-person interviews, are used frequently and effectively. Much of the book, even the cover image of CIO leader John L. Lewis addressing textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1937, is immediate and engaging.

However, in the second half of the book Daniel seems to lose the broader perspective and the text becomes almost exclusively focused on the internal politics of the TWUA. The bitter and draining clashes within the union leadership—epitomized by the hugely self-destructive battle between TWUA founding president Emil Rieve and vice-president George Baldanzi—no doubt sapped much of the union's strength and

potential. It is even interesting reading, in a voyeuristic sort of way. But the focus on union infighting ultimately means that larger issues facing labour are not adequately addressed. For example, the book has remarkably little to say about the globalization of the textile industry and the shift to offshore production, a trend that was already well underway in the period that Daniel describes. Similarly, the idea that the TWUA was the first “post-industrial” union is never really explored. The enormous impact of new technology on textile manufacturing and the consequent displacement of workers in the industry is also left out. A more minor frustra-

tion is the presence of loose ends in the narrative, parts of the story left unresolved. We are told for example that the able and charismatic Baldanzi ultimately became president of the rival United Textile Workers, a surprising turn of events, but we learn nothing about his fate thereafter.

In spite of these shortcomings, *Culture of Misfortune* provides an interesting and controversial contribution to an important chapter in North America’s labour history.

JONATHAN EATON

Union of Needletrades, Industrial and
Textile Employees (UNITE)