

An Irish Working Class: Explorations in Political Economy and Hegemony, 1800–1950. *By Marilyn Silverman*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002. x +566 pp. Maps, tables, index. Cloth, \$85.00. ISBN 0-802-03531-0.

Reviewed by David M. Emmons

This is a tedious and pretentious book. It is possible that I am of this mind because, like most historians, I have not accommodated myself to either the jargon or the methodologies of social scientists. Silverman, however, insists that in this political anthropology she is informing our understanding of historical issues and processes and doing a far better job of it than the historians whom she has consulted. There are, to be sure, scant few of those, and the exclusion from the list of Kerby Miller and Emmet Larkin alone raises questions regarding the thoroughness of her research and the seriousness of her purpose. I learned far too little from this book about the history of Irish laborers and far more than I ever wanted to know about the relentless reductionism of political anthropologists with ideological axes to grind.

Silverman purports to be telling the macro story of Irish labor between 1800 and 1950, using Thomastown in Country Kilkenny as the micro example. She does not pretend that Thomastown is typical or representative; she does not care if it is either. Nor do I think she should care. Detailed, “thick” descriptions of local societies and cultures can be tremendously revealing. My problem is with her a priori assumptions and her deductive use of them. Silverman is a devoted follower of Antonio Gramsci and his Marxist improvements on the “vulgar” Marxism of Marx, whatever real meaning that characterization might have. She is particularly taken by Gramsci’s notions of hegemony, consent, and “common sense,” meaning ideas held commonly. They provide her with both hermeneutics and methodology, and she is determined not to let historical facts get in the way of theoretical truths. She assumes as true that which she is supposed to be proving, hammering her round Gramscian pegs into the square holes of Irish history.

Histories are expected to assist in truth finding; this book announces what truths are to be found. Those truths are that laborers were cruelly exploited by a system of market capitalism that guaranteed and perpetuated great asymmetries of power. Silverman, like all anthropologists, I assume, distinguishes between the emic—“the local, native, or indigenous view or model”—and the etic—“the anthropological or outsiders’ model.” I will allow that historical observers can know more about “reality” than the historical characters who were living it, but I think most historians would agree that the distinction should never be as complete as Silverman makes it and that the “emic” should always be the dominant model. In the new vernacular, when in doubt,

“privilege the emic!” Listen more, talk less. Allowing the people of Thomastown to tell the story of what their lives were like is better than an outside observer telling them what their lives were like. It could be that, after listening carefully, Silverman could report that the laborers of Thomastown were the victims of the hegemonic dominance of a powerful combination of interests: merchants, landowners, and the Catholic hierarchy, to name the most prominent. However, she decided this to be the situation in advance of her research, not as a consequence of it. She listens, but only selectively. She lets the laborers of Thomastown describe their lives, but only if their descriptions match her own. In this sense, she has colonized Thomastown as surely as the British did.

At times this tendency is merely tiresome, if tendentious. She manages to make complicated the simplest of historical developments and processes—class formation, for example—and to do so in the bizarre language and neologisms of social science. I have mentioned “emic” and “etic,” but the book is also filled with references to something “cum” something else (“Law as Complex and Coercive cum Educative,” for example); to *metissage*; and subaltern, to agency, discourse/discursive; and to approaches that “privilege” one reified abstraction over another. In this political ethnography, everything is reduced to the single Gramscian standard: The masters gained and held hegemonic control over those who toiled. The Irish workers of Thomastown were the beaten products of a corrupt and corrupting system. Although that system changed over time, as did the identities of the masters, class stratification and exploitation did not.

When she comes to the role of the Catholic Church in all this, her account moves from the tiresome to border on the intolerant. Her condemnation of the Church is scathing. It is the most monstrous of the hegemonic forces because it alone denies having a social class interest. She accuses the Church and its clergy of active involvement in the exploitation of Thomastown’s workers. Priests are hypocrites and without charity. They despise the poor and collude in their debasement. All this may be true, but more than the gossip of admitted enemies of the Church is necessary to prove it. Similarly, merely repeating the well-documented hostility of the Church to communism is not enough to make the Church the enemy of Ireland’s laborers, unless she can also show that the Communists were the laborers’ friends, a very tough sell indeed. The point is, she is sold on the notion, and it leads her to some gross distortions. She is going to have to read *Rerum Novarum* (which she misdates by more than a decade and then hopelessly mischaracterizes). Her statement that Patrick Pearse was a “socialist” is risible; certainly it would have confused Pearse, who referred to himself as a “Catholic nationalist.” Silverman states

toward the end of the book that “memories, if cross-checked, can flesh out the historical documents” (p. 497). That is good advice. I wish she had taken it.

The jacket cover describes this book as offering a comparative history of European labor. It does not. There is no discussion of working classes anywhere else, even anywhere else in Ireland. It purports to contribute to our understanding of nation formation, yet Declan Kiberd’s magisterial *Inventing Ireland* does not appear in the bibliography. It is supposed to be a contribution to postcolonial studies, yet Silverman seems almost uninterested in the fact that the colonial powers were triumphant Protestants, the colonized despised Catholics and that the same denominational divide marked class relations in Thomastown and elsewhere in Ireland. Even Gramsci would have blushed at that evasion. This is a large book. It will take up a good deal of space on the library shelf. I would advise historians to leave it there.

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