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Despite Marx’s possibly best-known rallying cry, the workers of the world have not, unfortunately, united. Notwithstanding many such attempts, among them the First International, International Trade Secretariats, World Company Councils, cross border organizing campaigns involving the Wobblies and Mexican anarchists in the early 1900s, the Guatemala Coca-Cola workers’ movement in the 1970s and 1980s, antisweatshop campaigns involving Central American unions and workers and U.S. unions, workers, students, and other social justice activists in the mid- and late 1990s, workers remain hopelessly divided in terms of nation, race, gender, sexuality, geography, economic sector, and so on. In the early 1990s, however, labor transnationalism (involving Mexican, Canadian, and U.S. unions) resurfaced, thanks, ironically, in part to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Taking a non–economically deterministic perspective in NAFTA and the Politics of Labor Transnationalism, Tamara Kay contends that while most analysts might have assumed that globalization and economic integration might automatically generate closer ties between, say, U.S. unions and unions in developing countries (particularly Central America and Mexico), this did not happen. Starting in the mid-1960s with the creation of the Border Industrialization Program (BIP, which led to the establishment of the first maquiladora factories at the U.S.-Mexico border), and accelerating in the early 1980s with the abandonment of Mexico’s import-substitution model, foreign investment, particularly from the United States, poured into the country. This development, however, did not facilitate the emergence of labor transnationalism. On a broad diplomatic level, the leading U.S. labor federation, the AFL-CIO, maintained ties with the leading Mexican labor federation, the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), but neither challenged globalization; indeed, some U.S. unions exacerbated off-shore production, signing liquidated-damages agreements with garment companies that enabled them to move overseas in exchange for monetary payments that largely enriched union officials (Dana Frank, Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism [Beacon Press, 1999]). Moreover, other U.S. unions either blamed foreign workers for taking their jobs in the 1970s and 1980s, or they targeted immigrants for stealing their jobs or wrecking the U.S. economy. Consequently, the AFL-CIO, which had a terrible track record internationally for its role in participating with the CIA in coups that led to the downfall of democratic, progressive governments in Latin America and Asia, pressured the U.S. government to limit imports of such goods as textiles and...
autos and embraced employer sanctions in an effort to protect U.S. (mostly white) workers from foreign competitors (read: Latino labor). The Cold War, moreover, prevented the AFL-CIO from establishing ties with “progressive” or “leftist” unions such as the Mexican Authentic Workers Front (FAT).

Thus, while economic integration had been proceeding for nearly 30 years, little substantive labor internationalism existed between U.S., Canadian, and Mexican unions before negotiations around NAFTA emerged in the early 1990s, first under George H. W. Bush and later under Bill Clinton. This is not to say that U.S. and Mexican labor groups did not cooperate before NAFTA, because they did—there are numerous examples (to cite just one study among many, see Zaragosa Vargas, Labor Rights Are Civil Rights [Princeton University Press, 2004]) that document cross border organizing campaigns, some of which involved Mexican labor organizers collaborating with Mexican American workers in the United States. While perhaps beyond the scope of this book, Kay strangely ignores this rich and complicated history, giving one the impression that labor internationalism emerged, virtually from nowhere, in the early 1990s, when in fact, it had been going for nearly a century.

If not economics, then what accounts for the reemergence (not “emergence” as Kay contends) or expanded nature of labor transnationalism in the early 1990s? Kay skillfully argues that NAFTA created two transnational “fields” (negotiation and legal fields) that unintentionally prompted U.S., Mexican, and Canadian unions to collaborate first, to defeat NAFTA; second, to include side agreements that protected workers’ rights (especially to organize and collectively bargain); and third, to file complaints through the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC, the body that emerged from the side agreements). Kay asserts, provocatively perhaps, that despite the NAALC’s “weak redress effects” (p. 163), it also served to minimize violence against Mexican labor activists and strengthened ties between some U.S., Canadian, and Mexican labor unions that first developed during the NAFTA negotiation process. In other words, NAFTA created a “transnational political opportunity structure” for unions to begin to work together, but this does not explain why some effectively did so while others did not (p. 16). In two revealing chapters, Kay found that progressive unions were more likely to seize the opportunities that NAFTA and the NAALC provided, whereas more conservative unions failed to do so or were largely indifferent, ineffective, or relied on outdated or offensive racial tropes (such as when the Teamsters embraced questionable tactics regarding Mexican truckers who, they claimed, had unsafe brakes, threatening the American public, and who might ship drugs into the United States).

Kay concludes her excellent, well-researched, and theoretically engaging volume with the sober reminder that while NAALC has not brought about victories, transnational alliances in a very “conservative post-9/11 political climate” (p. 277) have endured. This accomplishment is indeed worthy,
but it belies the inconvenient truth that tremendous exploitation continues as do deeply flawed free trade agreements such as the one between Colombia and the United States. Something, therefore, needs to be done, but what? Left unstated here—somewhat surprisingly—is the AFL-CIO’s long-standing relationship with the Democratic Party. If Clinton and Obama prefer trade policies, as well as broader economic policies, that favor corporate interests over working and middle-class interests, then isn’t it time to explore a creating a third party? Kay (p. 154) notes that Canadian, Mexican, and U.S. union submissions to NAALC declined under the Bush administration, believing they were essentially a “waste of time” (my words, not hers) since the president stocked the commission and the Department of Labor with probusiness appointees. Couldn’t the same thing be said of working with the Democratic Party, particularly those politicians who embrace a “kinder and gentler” form of the neoliberal “shock doctrine” (Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* [Metropolitan/Holt, 2007])? What would happen if unions, especially progressive ones in all three countries, moved from strategic organizing campaigns targeting specific companies (as the United Electrical Workers, United Steelworkers in Canada, and FAT have done) to challenging the very logic of the system that has negatively affected them? Could labor transnationalism be sustained based on such a project? Like most good books, Kay’s raises troubling questions such as these, which are invaluable for scholars and activists alike.


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Curricular innovations focusing on “subaltern” groups have garnered much attention among sociologists in recent years. In *Student Activism and Curricular Change in Higher Education*, Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur advances this research agenda by analyzing the establishment of women’s, Asian American, and queer studies programs at six pseudonymous colleges and universities in the United States. Arthur develops an “organizational mediation model” (p. 10), a modification of the social movement literature’s political mediation approach, to explain why campus-based collective action campaigns for curricular change succeed or fail.

Arthur contends that key elements of a college or university’s opportunity structure—the openness of administrators to curricular innovations and the flexibility of institutional arrangements—intersect with the nature of its institutional mission—academic or vocational, secular or religious—