

SIMEON, DILIP. *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism. Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur 1928–1939*. Manohar, New Delhi 1995. xix, 398 pp. Ill. Rs. 450.00.

Drawing on his experience as a political activist, Dilip Simeon has provided a book on the travails of working-class struggle which answers the sterile neo-Kantianism of new social movement (NSM) theory. In the 1980s, lapsed European Marxists began to declare that “class” as a social identity was dead and that the only viable axes for political organization were the newly efflorescent social identities: consciousness and interest around the categories of gender, race, consumption, ecology, etc. The first false assumption of NSM theory was that these identities were more natural than “class”. A theory which began in the service of denaturalizing the notion of “identity” simply reified certain exclusive identities at the expense of more inclusive ones (in terms of their potential for political mobilization). For over a decade, the writ of Laclau, Mouffe and Melucci has run roughshod over the category “class”: Simeon, drawing from the heart of the critique, but staying away from its narrow political implications, has produced a book which is able simultaneously to articulate the dynamism of class politics with the politics of ethnicity. Far from being an antinomic question, Simeon demonstrates the dialectical manner in which workers’ movements organize *through* the established social identities of the people. Ethnicity, for instance, does not detract “from the integrity of collective endeavours”, Simeon argues, but “[ethnicities] were used as a field within which a collective will was forged”. In the case of the strikes which he investigates, Simeon finds that the organizers “demonstrated a sensitivity to these dimensions of the workers’ lives, when they called upon religious and regional leaders to mobilise specific ethnic groups among the workers” (p. 332). The travails of mobilization provide the best indications of the way in which workers’ movements negotiate the myriad social identities which constitute them and which they reproduce in turn.

*The Politics of Labour* is a detailed study of a series of strikes in the 1920s and 1930s in late colonial India. Simeon provides an important analysis of the structure of the iron and steel and the coal-mining industries located in southern Bihar and the place of these crucial industries within the framework of the colonial state. Building on this, Simeon discusses the problems for the emergent workers’ movement, which had to be built in the context of nothing more than the formal subsumption of labor by capital, in the context of what Simeon calls “helotage” (p. 170). At the center of the struggle to build a movement were some important personalities who inserted themselves between the managers and the workers as the representatives of the latter. The workers sought out people such as Maneck Homi and Abdul Bari since they were “literate in the language and legality of colonial society” (p. 73). This “patriarchal radicalism” (p. 324) was ambivalent: the leaders formulated the workers’ demands to challenge the management’s authority at the same time as they asserted their personal authority over the workers. In a balanced assessment, Simeon brings to life the vibrant personalities of these mediators who struggled with the best intentions to overcome the limitations of Indian liberalism. The orthodoxy on the “advanced” mentality of trade unionists has been challenged by Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose 1989 *Rethinking Working-Class History* painted a picture of the union leader as

a philanthropic liberal whose will overran the consciousness of the workers (the *babu-coolie* relationship). Simeon does not tread this ground, for he makes it distinctly clear that the union leaders (like Homi and Bari) were at particular instances led by the initiatives of the workers; thus, the *babu-coolie* (a non-contractual relationship whose analogue might be *master-slave*) does not grasp the essence of the relationship between the workers and the union leaders: eager to be followed, the union leaders structured themselves into processes which bear the traits of democracy. For example, the trade union leaders were invited by the workers who found themselves unequipped to combat the combination of the colonial state and industrial capital. Further, Abdul Bari used the vocabulary and rhetoric of the workers during his most effective speeches. The trade union leaders had to struggle to ensure their legitimacy as leaders, as illustrated by the tussles between Subhas Bose and Maneck Homi. Without a doubt, Chakrabarty is correct in pointing out that the union leaders in colonial India did not operate through the contractual and voluntary modes which are central to democratic organizations; nevertheless, as Simeon shows here (and as Janaki Nair's recent statements in *Social Scientist* indicate), the workers' struggle in the colonies demonstrates an attempt to produce democratic processes given the sorts of socio-cultural materials at hand. In addition, Simeon offers us vignettes of important leftists such as the martyred Communist Shahid Hazara Singh whose "accidental death" on 2 July 1939 will only now enter our collective memory. These figures stand apart from those leaders who reveled in the lineaments of the *babu-coolie* relationship. In some measure these activists would have accepted Mao's 1938 definition of a Communist: "Every Communist working in the mass movements should be a friend of the masses and not a boss over them, an indefatigable teacher and not a bureaucratic politician" (*Selected Works*, volume II, p. 198).

Simeon makes much of the mode of presentation of his book. A brief introduction leads us into a very detailed narrative which ends in a long theoretical chapter. History has only now extricated itself from its descent into discourse and Simeon's thick description and challenging analysis will be refreshing to those who enjoy archive material. However, Simeon might have erected unnecessarily high walls between "facts" and "theory", especially in the way his conclusion returns to themes which run through the book but which are only discussed in the conclusion. "A historical narrative is both the precondition for as well as a mode of performing, an exercise in comprehension", Simeon argues (p. 3). Certainly, the sequence of struggle itself operates as some kind of explanation for the trials of labor politics. Nevertheless, "close attention to micrological developments" are often best attended *besides* the sort of careful theoretical analysis which Simeon sets aside for the conclusion. What is rewarding about Simeon's book is that he attends to the difficulties of presentation at a time when we hear little methodological discussion about history writing after the dilemmas raised by philosophers and linguists. If the workers of Bihar taught the "several managements some lessons in democratic labour practices" (p. 80), Dilip Simeon has taught us some lessons in skillful labor-history writing.

Vijay Prashad