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Gunther Peck's Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930

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Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880–1930*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xiii + 293. \$55.00, cloth (ISBN 0-521-64160-8); \$20.00, paper (ISBN 0-521-77819-0).

Between 1880 and 1930 more than 25 million people immigrated to the United States. Large numbers of immigrants came from Italy, Russia, the Baltic States, and Austro-Hungary. More than two million Italian immigrants came in the decade between 1901 and 1910 alone. Smaller numbers of immigrants came from Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Japan. This massive wave of immigration occurred during a period when the American economy was being transformed into the global giant it first became in the early twentieth century. In 1880 there were 90,000 miles of railroad track in the United States. Just twenty years later that figure had more than doubled to 190,000 miles and by 1920 had grown again to 250,000 miles. The nation's steel output amounted to 3.7 million tons in 1870. By 1913 steel output had grown more than eightfold to 31 million tons. Between 1870 and 1900 manufacturing output in the United States increased fivefold. By 1900 the country was producing 35 percent of the world's goods, more than Germany and Britain combined. Immigration and explosive industrial growth were integrally related. Immigrants came in such large numbers because there were jobs. American businesses welcomed them, on the whole, because they needed a ready supply of cheap labor.

Gunther Peck's *Reinvention of Free Labor* is a study of one of the institutions that connected immigration to economic growth, the padrone system, as it operated in the American and Canadian West during these decades. Padrone is an inex-

act term that was used in a number of different ways at the time, but Peck employs it to refer to labor brokers, themselves immigrants, who supplied western railroads, western extractive industries, and western industrialized agriculture with the labor of their countrymen. Peck's book focuses on the careers of three of the most powerful padrones of the period: Antonio Cordasco, an Italian based in Montreal, who—among other things—supplied the Canadian Pacific Railway with Italian laborers for track laying; Leon Skliris, a Greek based in Utah, who supplied Greek laborers principally for mining operations in the American West; and Roman Gonzalez, a Mexican, who supplied Mexican workers for agricultural and other work in the American West and Midwest.

What distinguished padrones from ordinary labor agents was not only that they dealt exclusively in immigrant workers from their own country of origin, but also that they cultivated an intricate, binding relationship with their men. They not only found immigrants jobs but also provided them with a range of other services that cemented their dependence on the padrone. Padrones helped immigrants send remittances back home, provided assistance to immigrants who ran afoul of the law, and frequently advanced transportation expenses. In general, they helped immigrants negotiate the foreign folkways of American/Canadian culture. Immigrants not only paid padrones job fees, but a variety of other fees as well. Not infrequently padrones arranged to have these fees deducted directly from workers' pay.

Peck begins by showing that the padrone system emerged from a very particular set of economic and political/legal conditions. The rapid growth of the modern American and Canadian economies required the extraction of massive amounts of raw material and the construction of a vast transportation infrastructure. The Western railroads and extractive industries that were an integral part of the development of the modern industrial economy required huge numbers of unskilled laborers, but were located away from large cities and faced a perennial labor shortage. Local workers generally owned their own land or could easily acquire land and were, therefore, both unreliable and unpliant, retaining as they did the option of simply going back to the farm.

In order to secure an adequate, reliable labor force, consequently, large firms were forced to look beyond local labor markets and to import workers from outside the region. These were the conditions that created the labor demand that led to thousands of unskilled immigrants being transported to the West to toil on the railroads and in the mines of the region. Peck is not the first to note that it is precisely the combination of abundant land and scarce labor that often leads to the adoption of forms of coercive labor. See, for example, Evsey Domar, "The Causes of Slavery or Serfdom: A Hypothesis," *The Journal of Economic History* 30 (1970): 18. But applying this insight to the American and Canadian West contributes to repainting the conventional picture of that region. This is not a West of homesteaders, cowboys, and unlimited freedom, but a West that includes large numbers of unskilled immigrant laborers working in gangs to lay track and dig copper ore under conditions of geographical isolation that left them vulnerable to the exercise of extreme power by their employers and padrones.

Abundant land and scarce labor, however, do not in themselves explain why the railroad and mine companies came to rely so heavily on immigrant labor agents

to supply their needs. For this, Peck shows, we also have to take into account the legal framework that was responsible for creating the special conditions that gave the padrone a pivotal role in labor recruitment, at least for a time. In 1874, under its power to enforce the Thirteenth Amendment, Congress enacted the padrone statute. It punished the act of “bring[ing] into the United States . . . any person inveigled or forcibly kidnapped in any other country, with intent to hold such person . . . in confinement or to any involuntary service . . .” (Act of June 23, 1874, ch. 464. 18 Stat. 251). Eight years later, in 1882, Congress enacted new immigration legislation that stiffened requirements for entering the country. Most Chinese immigrants were excluded from coming into the country altogether. Other immigrants were required to demonstrate that they could provide for themselves once they had entered the country. In 1885, Congress followed up by prohibiting the importation of contract laborers. The Foran Act barred immigrants from entering the country if they were already under contract to work.

As Peck shows, the combination of the 1882 immigration provisions and the Foran Act created a kind of Catch-22 for prospective immigrants. They had to demonstrate that they were capable of supporting themselves, but had to deny that they had work already lined up. For immigrants, this legal framework created a real need for the padrone. Padrones provided “show” money, advice as to precisely what and what not to say to immigration officials, and an American address. For the business firms that were eager to recruit unskilled immigrants, the padrone not only provided an entrée into the immigrant community, he also gave the firm cover. The law had now hedged around the process of hiring unskilled immigrants with a series of potential legal pitfalls. Large respectable firms could distance themselves from the whole unsavory process by contracting with the padrone to do the dirty work. Indeed, it was the padrone who became the popular scapegoat for the entire system, the oily, Fagin-like foreigner, seducing and selling his own countrymen.

These were the circumstances that gave life to the padrone, and for a relatively brief period during the first decade of the twentieth century, gave Antonio Cordasco, Leon Skliris, and Roman Gonzalez enormous power over large numbers of their countrymen. Peck concludes his study by describing how the power of these men came to unravel. Numerous factors contributed to their decline. Cordasco lost his position as the exclusive hiring agent for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Skliris lost control over hiring for extractive industries in a large area of the inter-mountain West. The states became more involved in establishing labor exchanges. Beginning in the 1920s many fewer immigrants began to be allowed into the country. But above all, Peck shows, it was the workers themselves who acted to undermine the power of padrones. In certain cases, they undertook collective action that led to the formation of unions, in others they successfully utilized the legal system to sue padrones for contract breach or fraud, and in still others they used their feet, withdrawing their labor and moving on and out from under the padrone’s power. By the 1930s the old style padrone was vanishing, a phenomenon of the first period of totally modern American industrialization that took place between 1880 and 1930.

Peck’s book tells an important story about the role of immigrant labor in the West in the creation of the modern American economy and is based on an impressive amount of research. There are more than a dozen statistical tables presenting an

enormous amount of information on a number of aspects of the operation of the padrone system. But in certain respects, surprisingly, the book fails to provide enough detail. There is, for example, little systematic description of the precise terms under which immigrants served. The book includes as one of its illustrations a sample contract that Cordasco had his men sign, but it is in Italian. What did the typical contract call for? Was a term of service required? What was the typical length? Did padrones typically advance transportation expenses? What mechanisms did they rely on to ensure that expenses were recovered? How often did they fail to recover expenses? What fees, in addition to job fees, did padrones typically charge men? Did padrones insist that these fees be paid in advance? If not how did they ensure that fees would be recovered? If fees and expenses were not paid in advance but deducted from pay, how did padrones ensure that men stayed long enough to pay off the debt? What recourse did padrones have if men jumped their contracts? How often did men jump their contracts? What were the terms of work on the track laying gangs and in the mines? How many hours per day? How many days per week? How many were injured? Killed? What happened to the injured? How typical was it for men to be forced to pay padrones for their meals and lodging? How typical was it for men to depart with savings at the end of the season? How much? How typical was it for the men to be stripped of their earnings through one artifice or another of the padrone? And so on.

The omission of this kind of detail about the material circumstances of the men's relationship to their padrones and employers does not seem to have been the result of an oversight. It appears to have been a function of Peck's wider methodological orientation. He focuses much greater attention on the cultural and ideological than on the material dimensions of these relationships. Chapter 4, for example, is entitled "Manhood Mobilized" and discusses the padrones' ultimately unsuccessful attempts to augment their power by exploiting immigrants' preconceptions about manhood. Something is gained but something is lost with this approach. What is gained is an understanding of a number of dimensions of the relationships between padrones and men and among the men themselves that have not been previously explored. What is lost, it seems to me, is a lived sense of the oppressive conditions under which the men served. Nevertheless, what this highly imaginative and innovative book adds to our understanding of the padrone system in the West more than compensates for what it omits, and makes it a study that will be of great value to historians for many years to come.

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