Mawdsley, S. E. (2021). Nate Holdren, Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era. *Continuity and Change*, 36(2), 259-261.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416021000175>

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Book Review

Nate Holdren, *Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era* for *Continuity and Change*.

Dr Stephen Mawdsley
Author Accepted Version

Nate Holdren, *Injury Impoverished: Workplace Accidents, Capitalism, and Law in the Progressive Era*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 292 pp. £47.99 hardback.

Injury Impoverished offers a welcome contribution to the fields of American Progressive Era family and social history. Nate Holdren, an assistant professor in law, politics, and society, uses his book to shed light on the human costs of unchecked industrial capitalism, and how legal frameworks were used to perpetuate and exacerbate injustices faced by working-class people. He threads his assessment of evolving frameworks by using an interdisciplinary approach informed by ethics and philosophy, as well as by the history of emotions, and social and labour history. Although interdisciplinary in its scope, Holdren's approach is primarily informed by legal history, which works well to examine the complexities of America's reform efforts in relation to industrial labour.

Drawing on historical case records, newspapers, and magazines, as well as an impressive range of archival materials, Holdren argues that during the Progressive Era, industrial employees faced two forms of injustice: they were often dehumanized as mechanisms of productivity, and their injuries were narrowly commodified through the use of a table of predetermined monetary values. As he shows, compensation rates were set in stark terms without consideration of the personal or emotional costs. Holdren believes that within this system, compensation laws exemplified a prevailing tendency to treat working-class people as objects. "I question and criticize the tyranny of the table and the system of employee injury law in which it is embedded," he states (6). Although changes to the legal system brought about important shifts in how compensation was determined and awarded, it introduced new problems. Holdren shows that Progressives, in spite of their best of intentions, often harboured their own class biases and assumptions about progress, which ultimately shaped the systems they reformed.

The book is divided into two parts and each part is comprised of three chapters. The first part examines the commodification of injury and its effects on workers and their families. Holdren reveals that some reformers, such as William Hard and Crystal Eastman, sought to improve legal processes for workers by advocating new policies. Such “reformers believed that the problem of injury required a response that treated working-class people as aggregates and created aggregate security,” he explains (66). Such initiatives, he reasons, represented the first step towards reform, since they reduced the performative element of the trial and assured a more systematic approach to settling injury claims. However, reform efforts also led to a quest for efficiencies that simplified the personal realities of injured people. Holdren reasons that the process of simplifying the complex for reasons of convenience or economics (known as abstraction) demonstrated a deliberate effort by employers and their allies to dehumanize the injured as a matter of process. To show the human cost of these measures, Holdren traces the experiences of industrial workers in the aftermath of the Cherry Mine disaster in 1909. The detailed accounts of injured miners and their deaths, combined with descriptions of the consequences for their families, exemplifies Holdren’s focus on systematized injustices. This is perhaps the most sobering chapter of the book, as he lists the names of all miners who died in the mine. “I encourage readers to attempt to read every single name,” he explains, “perhaps out loud” (129). Indeed, the account of miner Samuel Howard is especially powerful, as his experiences of physical suffering and emotional trauma recorded in his diary clearly do not “fit into the table” (127) of monetary values.

In the second part of the book, Holdren considers how injustices were manifested in evolving legal systems and shaped by Progressive philosophy. The author examines the impact of reformed compensation laws and how they created new challenges. In particular, he traces how courts negotiated outcomes for disabled employees who had experienced

additional injuries while at work, and he scrutinizes the approaches taken by employers to pay for compensation and protect themselves from employees deemed too costly to insure. Within this system, he charts the rise of industrial medicine and its purpose of helping employers reduce their risks. The case study of the Pullman Corporation and its managers' concerns about the costs of employee injuries effectively highlights a growing culture of employer risk aversion in response to changing legal norms. For injured working-class people, the result of these changes was either a return to the "old normal of subordinated inclusion" or a new normal of "financially driven economic exclusion" (172). Holdren captures the unintended consequences of Progressive legal reform, as well as the glaring power discrepancy between employers and employees under industrial capitalism.

Injury Impoverished is well researched, sensitively written, and convincing. The argument is strongly articulated and integrated throughout the chapters. Holdren's analysis of class and interclass relations is especially persuasive and supported by the sources. Although the author acknowledges the import of race and gender, his primary focus remains on white working-class men and their families. For this reason, the book provides a starting point for scholars embarking on new comparative studies at the intersection of race, class, and gender.

Historians of society and the family will find *Injury Impoverished* valuable, as it reveals the wider impact of workplace injury on a community, and how legal frameworks have a direct and lasting impact on a society. This provides an important and much-needed focus on the experiences of disabled individuals. The book also restores the lived human experience often missing from many economic or legal investigations of workplace injury by encouraging the reader to consider the individual, their perspectives, and their relationships (117). The author successfully traces the multitude of losses associated with an injury, including not only the affected body parts, but also the feelings and thoughts of survivors, as well the consequences of their injury on family, finances, and future.

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