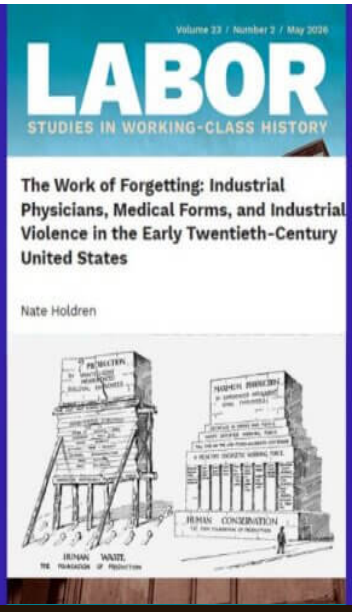

The Work of Forgetting

Posted on June 13, 2026 by Nate Holdren

Nate Holdren's essay "The Work of Forgetting: Industrial Physicians, Medical Forms, and Industrial Violence in the Early Twentieth-Century United States" in Labor: Studies in Working Class History *Volume 23:2, is a thoughtful exploration of the way that medical forms organized the work process of industrial physicians and made possible what he calls "the work of forgetting" and how "industrial physicians helped normalize harms to workers. Here Holdren explores some of the key findings of the essay. We hope you will read the full essay.*

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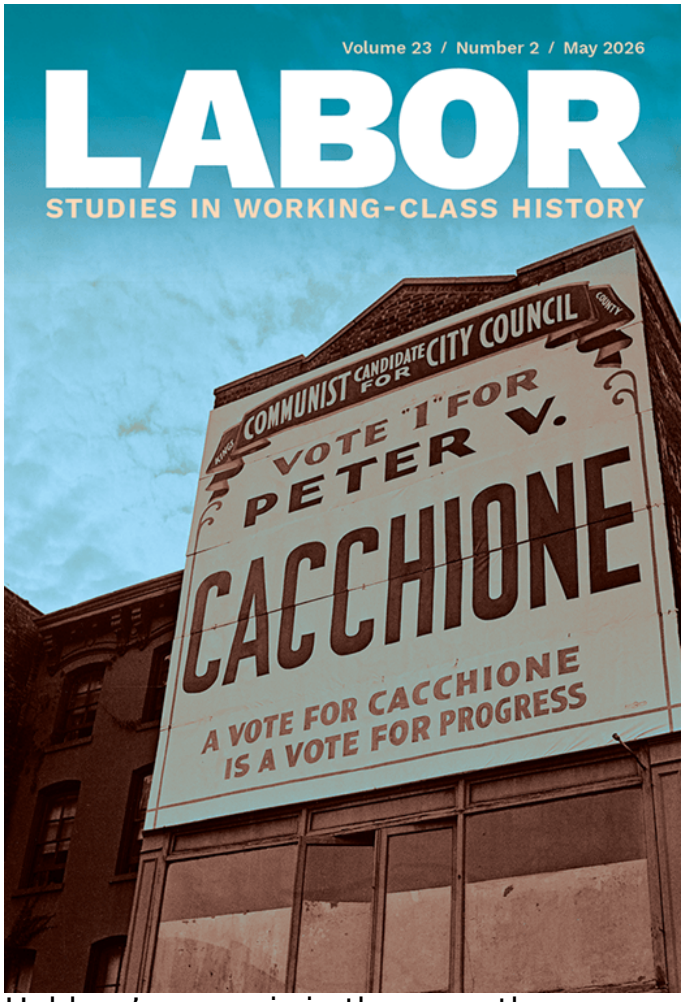

Holdren's essay is in the recently published number of Volume 23 of *Labor.*

Work and working-class life more generally is full of dangers, and we all live with that in various ways. I want to tell you about an article I wrote that gets into some of this, which appears in volume 23, issue 2 of Labor. The article borrows a concept from the historian Lori Flores, in an article that I think literally everyone should read. The concept is "amnesic landscape of labor," which Flores defines as "a realm of work not designed to retain memories but instead to continually purge histories of how it has lured, entrapped, injured, and even killed multiple waves of workers" (831).

I apply the concept to the early twentieth century medical subfield of industrial medicine, meaning medical professionals employed by large companies to meet the employers' needs for medical supervision of their employees. I focus in particular on what may appear like an innocuous or even trivial aspect of the work of industrial

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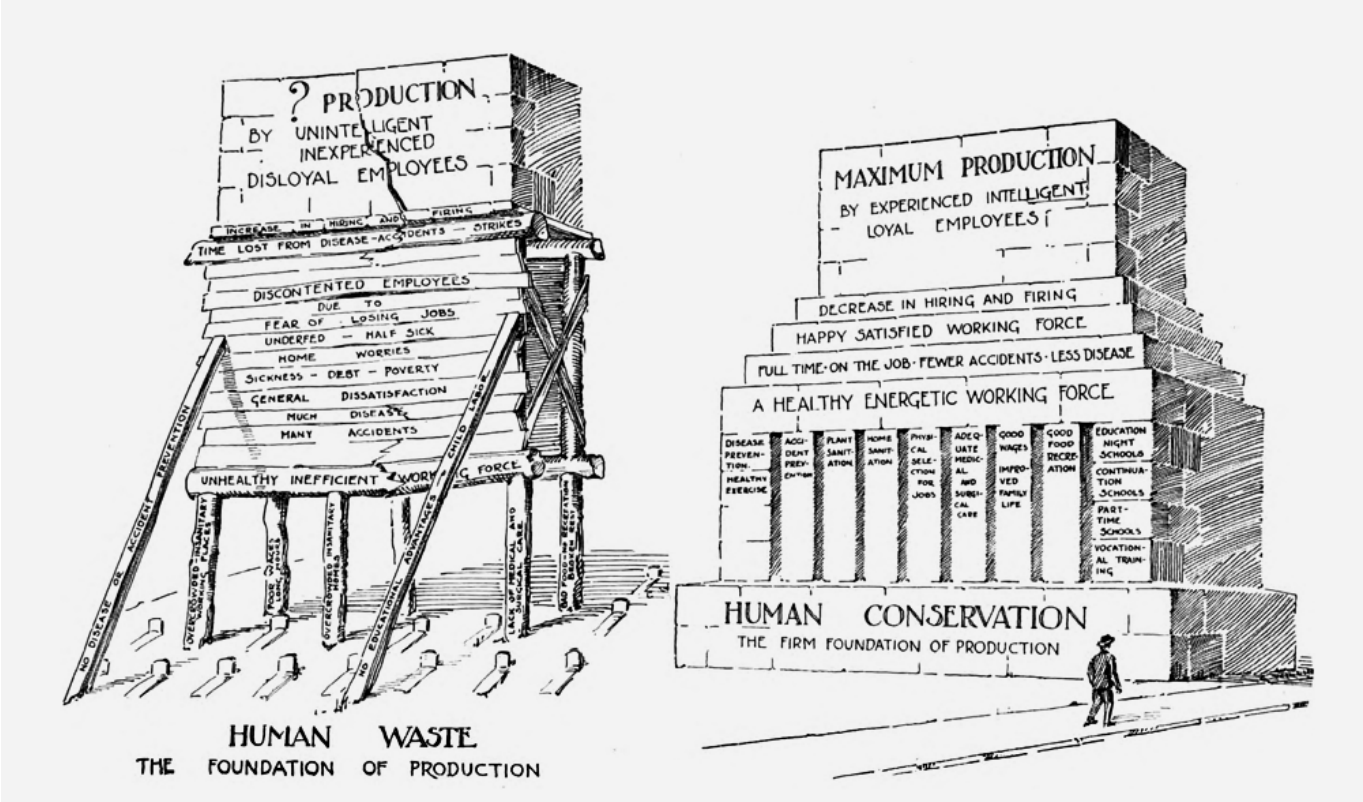
medicine, namely, medical paperwork. I argue that medical paperwork in that setting should be understood as a kind of information technology in the workplace, and one (like most information technology!) with important moral and ideological effects. More specifically, medical paperwork was part of how the terrible harms regularly inflicted on workers as part of corporations' drive for profit was represented to the people in charge of those corporations. I argue that medical paperwork helped management to live in a kind of bubble so that, for them, the brutal production processes they oversaw formed a kind of amnesic landscape. I also suggest that just as literal landscaping is a kind of work, so too is the metaphorical landscaping involved in producing the amnesic condition Flores's article so powerfully illuminates. Industrial medicine involved, in part, a labor of forgetting, the production of amnesia for some.



Human Waste: The Foundation of Production from Harry Edgar Mock, *Industrial Medicine and Surgery* (1919). A leading author in the new field, Mock suggested that industrial physicians improve workers health so that employers could sustain profits and physicians could be mutually beneficial to employee and employer. Holdren argues that this was something of a marketing project for the field.

The article is personally important to me (so, to be blunt, I'm nervous about it!) for

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a few reasons. For one thing, very simply, I found some of the material I use in the article in 2010 or 2011 at the Newberry Library. Much of that ended up in my dissertation but in what were some of the least developed parts of the book as I didn't know what to make of that material. I had a strong gut-level intuition that it was important, but I couldn't articulate why. I still couldn't articulate the importance of the material a few years later when I came to write Injury Impoverished, my book on workplace injury and the law thereof in the early twentieth century US. I was in effect staring in horror but couldn't explain why. The best I could manage was that it struck me as really gross that the often literally bloody world of work tended to be represented in the metaphorically bloody and often genuinely boring form of medical paperwork. In scholarly settings in trying to talk about this I'd often do a mix of animatedly waving my hands and mumbling about this relatively new and exciting area of scholarship called "agnotology" on the social production of ignorance ("a" meaning without, "gno" meaning knowledge, and "-ology" meaning a field of study). This made Flores's article feel incredibly exciting and illuminating, as it gave me better terms to express what was happening and why I thought it mattered.

For whatever it's worth, this remains something I'm compelled by, in a horrified way, and something about which my thinking isn't finished. I am in part still processing who I have become by writing my book: in doing work we work on ourselves or are worked on by others, and writing my book left me with some new questions, impulses, hunches, and so on, as well as some new-to-me certainties. My work after the book has been in part a process of trying to make sense of all of that. Among other things, I've arrived at a few conclusions, which are also a jumping off point for further inquiry, as follows.

Class is like racism and sexism, which is to say, it's a name for a pattern of social relationships that is unjust and harmful. Thus, just as labor historians should be anti-racists and oppose sexism, we should also oppose class as such: our field should be understood as a field that wants to see a new society come about where there are no such social relationships like racism or sexism or class. (I argue this point in another article from early last year "Labor History and Class Violence: A Meditation on the Anniversary of Lochner V. New York.") Closely related, capitalism is not the only kind of class society and capitalist societies organize class relationships in capitalism-specific ways. As part of that, capitalist societies generate harm to working class people in wide range of ways, including occupational hazards, direct and explicit political repression, war, poverty and

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deprivation, harmful products, environmental pollution, and more. In short, capitalism kills. Literally, not metaphorically. Friedrich Engels called this “social murder.” I had an impulse to say this as I was writing my book but I’m not sure if the book makes the point adequately. In a book chapter from a few years after my book and which is now a few years old, Social Murder: Capitalism’s Systematic and State-Organized Killing, I get into the details via Engels and Marx, establishing the point more fully.

In doing this work I repeatedly found myself asking (and, in talking about the horrors my work focuses on with students, colleagues, and anyone else willing to endure it, I find that people often raise this question spontaneously) “how is it that anyone can live with all of this, especially the powerful people who benefit from it?” In my view, Flores’s concept of amnesic landscapes gets at this, and I hope my article helps shed a little more light on it. The ugly reality is that a brutal society is a society where some people are able to live with inflicting, witnessing, and profiting from brutality. That ‘living with’ requires resources, and those resources are produced through work. Often a major resource to foster that ‘living with’ is rendering some subject forgotten or not even thought about at all in the first place. (I got into this a little in an essay last winter at the JHI Blog about the relationship between intellectual history and political economy, in case that’s of any interest:) That what’s accomplished by what I call the work of forgetting.

The article here also reflects the influence on my thinking of writing by Raymond Williams, a lifelong socialist who moved from literary critic to sociologist of literature to cultural theorist writ large. When I wrote the article, I was early into my first forays into Williams. I’ve since read a lot more of it. I’ll say that people interested in my article might consider reading his work – a good starting point would be his books Marxism and Literature and Towards 2000. Some of the key points I take from Williams, which speaks to things I often previously thought in an unclear, intuitive way, are that everything in society is made, that making is always political, could always be done differently though sometimes the pressures against change are temporarily overwhelming, and that making always shapes the world and the makers. Applied to ‘amnesic landscapes’, I would say that this means we should be aware that the systematic production of harm – what Engels called social murder – is accompanied by the systematic production of ways of processing that harm culturally and politically, to render it acceptable, inevitable, largely unknown, and so on: in short, to make something that doesn’t challenge the powerful. I don’t mean this metaphorically. I think this is a real set of activities – forms of work, some of

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them paid (I'd point to industrial physicians as one example, the journalists and propagandists that Chad Pearson calls "narrative creators" in his book Capital's Terrorists are additional examples, there are many others). This work occurs in wide range of concrete forms in particular times and places, and as labor historians we can study those activities empirically, as one small part of our field's opposition to the ongoing harms inflicted on workers.

In short, capitalism inexorably kills and injures working class people, and it adds to those injuries the insults of rationalizing, victim blaming, and forgetting. Indeed, those insults help defend the injurious processes. Some people are employed in well paid, officially respectable jobs organizing the processes that create those injuries and produce those insults. While I am painfully aware that writing historical scholarship is a highly limited form of revenge, it seems to me pretty important that as labor historians we should insist that in the short term we shouldn't let them just get away with it unremarked, and as people of conscience in the long term we need to end the death machine that is capitalism and replace it a society free from the inherently violent social relationship that we call class.

Author

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