Labour/Le Travailleur

The Saga of History 492: The Transformation of Working-Class History in One Classroom

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The Saga of History 492:
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Jim Barrett and Diane P. Koenker

Journals, conference panels, and on-line newsgroups are filled these days with talk of a crisis (or backlash or decline) in labour and working-class history. This loss of confidence is sometimes linked to the rise of new theories or forms of analysis such as critical race theory, gender analysis, or postmodernism; or to the decline of Communism, Marxist theory, or the organized labour movement. Such scholarly discussions are worthy and can tell us a lot about the writing of working-class history, but we wonder what is going on in labour history classrooms amidst this crisis? How has the teaching of working-class history changed over the past two decades? What are we trying to do in our courses on working-class history? What does this tell us about who “labour historians” are, what they do, and why anyone else should pay attention?

We offer “the saga of History 492” not as a firm answer to these questions, but rather as an effort to open a more self-conscious discussion of the relationship between the re-conceptualization and rewriting of working-class history


and the ways in which the teaching of the subject has changed over the years. Looking at the question of teaching might even tell us something about where we are headed.

For the past 22 years we have taught a graduate seminar in comparative European and U.S. working-class history. Diane Koenker works in the area of Russian and Soviet working-class history, Jim Barrett in U.S. working-class history. The influence of other scholars in our department and well beyond has pressed us to expand the geographical perspectives a bit. More recently we have included some material on Canada (not too much) and some nods to colonial labour in various settings, but the course has remained largely concerned with Western Europe, Russia, and the United States.

This decision in itself deserves some reflection. Given our own particular interests and the quality of much of the literature on Europe and the United Kingdom, our original focus is not surprising. Yet, as in most other comparative efforts, the extremely promising comparison of the U.S. and Canada is largely overlooked here. While there are undoubtedly some exceptions somewhere, this seems rather typical of working-class history in the United States. Just recently the journal *Labor: Studies in the Working Class History of the Americas* has made a concerted effort to re-conceptualize U.S. working-class history in the broader context of the “Americas,” but most labor historians in the United States are far more likely to reach across the Atlantic for a comparison than across the Detroit River. Given the vibrant quality of work in Canada, the strong tendency of Canadian labor historians to view their own field in relation to studies in the United States, and the obvious points of comparison between the two societies, the apparent indifference in the U.S. is rather striking – even if it is not surprising to our Canadian colleagues.

From the beginning, we have always started the course with several weeks on key concepts, which used to mean various conceptions of proletarianization and class formation, in order to provide an overall framework for discussion. We then focused most of the remaining seminar sessions on work, family and community, unions and strikes, aspects of working-class culture, and characteristic forms of working-class politics, meaning, usually, socialism and communism (see Appendix 1 for the 1986 syllabus). From the start, we thought that the question of “American exceptionalism” provided important heuristic value that helped to focus our comparative analysis. We also focused the readings quite tightly around the early part of the 20th century. In the beginning, our units of comparison were nation-states – initially the United States, Russia, Great Britain, and France – but over time we paid increasing attention to distinctions between capitalist and socialist systems as well.

Over the years, a variety of “subjectivities” – gender, of course, and race, but also sexuality and ethnicity – have elbowed out a lot of the discussion of class per se (see Appendix 2 for the most recent version of the seminar, offered in 2005). These are not just topics added to the syllabus; students tend to embrace them as categories of analysis that help to explain workers’ lives
and behaviour. Much of the seminar discussion takes the form of interroga-
tions of the concept of class with reference to these other forms of identity.
Early on in the seminar, lest anyone be given to glib generalizations, we read
Joan Scott’s wonderful but terrifying article, “Experience,” which questions
any fundamental assumptions, including the notion of historical experience
itself.2 Alice Kessler-Harris’s article, “Treating the Male as Other,” and other
readings tend to de-center the workplace and direct students’ attention to the
domestic sphere. Works by Joan Scott and Sonya Rose encourage students to
question categories and assumptions inherent to the field.3 Readings by Diane
Koenker, Kathleen Canning, and others consider older problems like class
formation, the transformation of work processes, and shop-floor relations in
the context of gender.4 If there is an archetypal worker in the current version
of the seminar, she is as likely to be a domestic or service worker as a miner
or steelworker. The far sexier topics of leisure, consumption, and style largely
crowd out the frumpy old topic of work. We talk as much about reproduction
as production. We still discuss socialism and communism (one session each),
but these are handled as much in personal as in collective terms, and they
share the stage with the history of emotions, for example “workers in love”,
and the spatial dimensions of class experience, such as “workers on vacation”.
We extended the time frame of the course both backward and forward, but
mostly forward: in other iterations of the syllabus, the 19th century played
an important role (in order to draw on Katznelson and Zolberg’s stimulat-
ing comparative collection, Working-Class Formation5), but most recently the
course has become pretty much a 20th century affair, focusing on the indus-
trial and post-industrial worlds of labour.

A major departure came about six years ago with a focus on working-class
autobiographies and other forms of personal narrative. The narratives are one
way to build what Liz Faue sees as the next frontier in labor history – the sub-
jective dimensions of working-class life.6 After we discuss the production and

2. Joan Scott, “Experience,” in Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds., Feminists Theorize the
3. Alice Kessler-Harris, “Treating the Male As Other,” Labor History, 34 (Spring 1993),
190–204; Joan Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History,” in Scott, Gender
and the Politics of History (New York 1988), 53–67; Sonya Rose, “Class Formation and the
4. Canning, Kathleen, “Rethinking German Labor History: Gender and the Politics of Class
Formation,” American Historical Review, 97 (June 1992), 736–768; Diane P. Koenker, “Men
Against Women on the Shop Floor in Early Soviet Russia,” American Historical Review, 100
(December 1995): 1438–64; Kevin Boyle, “The Kiss: Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s
5. Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century
Patterns in Western Europe and the United States (Princeton 1986).
6. Elizabeth Faue, “Retooling the Class Factory: United States Labour History after Marx,
functions of personal narrative, students are each asked to choose and analyze a worker’s autobiography. The object in this case is to consider the significance of social class — and other forms of identity — at a personal level, and to consider the more subjective dimensions of this experience. It is more difficult, we think, for students to objectify their working-class subjects beyond this point in the semester. The effect is to take the discussion from the global to the personal.

When we sat down to evaluate the course at the end of our last semester teaching it, we realized that this last time around, in a course on working-class history, we had largely neglected to discuss the transformation of unions and the evolution of that characteristic form of working-class protest, the strike. We began thinking a bit more critically about just what it is that labour historians do and what they have to offer other scholars and perhaps even the broader public, a question always worth asking.

Why has the seminar changed so considerably over the last 22 years? First, like all good graduate courses, our selection of topics represented a combination of our sense of what the “field” of labour history should look like, our own particular research interests, and our desire to encounter new literature by teaching it. Themes in the course have changed because the work of working-class history has changed. Both of us started out with projects that were more or less typical of the “new labour history” of the 1970s and 1980s in terms of subject and methods — workplace/community studies. In 1986, both of us were engaged in research on labour protest, the meaning of skill, urban communities, and that moment of heightened political crisis surrounding the First World War and the Russian Revolution of 1917. Our subsequent research trajectories (themselves related to ongoing changes in the “labour history” field) took us to the interplay of work, culture, and politics in the U.S.S.R. and the U.S., to biography, to the role of personal experience, to religion, working-class cosmopolitanism, leisure, and consumption. Barrett’s interests shifted more to issues of racial and ethnic identity and relations, a shift characteristic of many others in U.S. working-class history, and these emerged as stronger themes in the syllabus. As Koenker became more interested in the ways that

8. Koenker’s co-authored book with William G. Rosenberg, Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917 (Princeton 1989) was published three years after our course started.
gender shaped relations at work and in the community, suitable readings and topics emerged.\textsuperscript{11} The rise of personal narratives and issues of personal identity rose more or less directly out of work that each of us was doing on workers' autobiographies and questions we had about the relationship between personal experience and social movements.\textsuperscript{12} Interest in consumption has led to an exploration of the role of leisure in workers' lives.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, what is going on in the classrooms reflects the changes that are taking place in the field more broadly. As teachers and as scholars, we are engaged in an ongoing conversation about what is important to understand about work and workers, about individuals and society. To explore why we as individual historians have shifted our gaze from strikes to vacations, from the killing floor to the personal lives of communists, perhaps takes us further into the realm of \textit{égo-histoire} than either of us is prepared to travel here.\textsuperscript{14} The point is that this, and probably

\begin{quote}


\end{quote}
other courses in working-class history, are products of both the transformation of the field and also our own personal evolutions as historians.

The length of our most recent syllabus also points to the explosion of outstanding scholarship on many aspects of labour history and to the integration of work that used to be considered marginal to the field. Paradigms (class formation, proletarianization) have shifted and have been challenged, principally but not only by considerations about gender and race. In 1986, historians worked on a variety of topics, but most of them employed similar frameworks and sets of references. Three or four readings on a given topic could provide adequate geographical coverage and pretty successfully convey the range of scholarship at the given time. If the community of working-class historians operated then in a circumscribed realm of shared assumptions, this uniformity is no longer true. The field of labour history has become more complicated, contested, and diffuse. We need to direct our students to widely diverging approaches, methodologies, and voices – and the reading list gets longer every year.

To a lesser extent, the evolution of the syllabus has also reflected the changing composition of graduate students in the department, itself a sign of changes in the department and in the discipline of history more broadly. When we began teaching this course, social history was not well developed at the graduate level at the University of Illinois, and women's and gender history had not yet made their way into the graduate curriculum. In fact, our course was one of the few to offer such topics, albeit under the rubrics of "families" and "community." The modest enrollment in our first offering in 1986 – seven students, four of whom came from outside the history department – perhaps reflected the novelty of our effort. Later offerings of the course drew an average of ten students, with an increasing number from within the history department, among them U.S. historians. Many of these history students had already been exposed to issues in U.S. labor history, allowing us to include a wider range of topics in the seminar. In every seminar, some students, but not a majority, brought with them extracurricular interests in activist politics. The most recent offering of the course in 2005 saw fifteen students enrolled, eleven of whom were graduate students in the history department, and all but one in U.S. history. The students in this course were the most racially diverse and the most evenly divided by gender of any of our offerings since 1986. We do not claim credit for this diversity, which has been the result of concerted departmental efforts, nor did it influence our syllabus, which as always we designed before we knew who would take the course.

In general, the nature of the students enrolled in the course has been less influential in determining the content of our syllabus than our own changing research interests, with perhaps one important exception. In 1999 and again in 2003, women were disproportionately underrepresented in our seminar, at a time when women represented an increasing share of the department’s graduate students overall and when purposeful faculty recruiting had created
a vibrant graduate program in women’s and gender history. Whether this program was “siphoning” off women into other more gender-specific courses, or whether this drop in enrollment by women was a short-term anomaly, we could not say, but the gender imbalance sometimes produced some awkward class discussions. This, in turn, caused us to consider what we might do to encourage more women to include comparative working-class history in their course programs. The 2005 syllabus indicates some of this thinking, but this emphasis dovetailed well with our own research interests.

At the same time, because the course is a kind of snapshot of our particular interests at any given moment, the “course” is not the “field.” Students take this seminar for a variety of reasons, and they come from different backgrounds. Some are preparing to enter research and teaching fields in (mostly U.S.) labour history; others are seeking to complement their coursework in other broad fields; still others come from outside the history department aiming to add a historical (and comparative) dimension to their field work in anthropology or in their studies of the working-class novel. Although the field of labour history has also expanded significantly over the span of this course, a comparison of two sets of preliminary exam questions in comparative working-class history between 1986 and 2006 suggests more continuity than our course syllabi reflect (see Appendices 3 and 4; comparative working-class history has been a regular preliminary exam field of study in our department since 1986). Trade union politics, protest, and revolutionary situations still matter in establishing the parameters of the field: these topics remain central in our own undergraduate courses in U.S. and European working-class history and, we expect, in those of our students who have gone on to careers as labour historians. Continuity as well as novelty is important in establishing the broader parameters of the field. Those specializing in any historical subdiscipline need a good sense of the historiography and evolution of their field. They need to read “classics” and seminal works (E. P. Thompson and Selig Perlman, for example) not only to know where the field has come from, but also to appreciate the continuing methodological relevance of these key works. Such works might not settle easily into the current seminar structure, but they are essential for any specialist. And while our course has become increasingly focused on the 20th century, labour historians must consider the long history of working-class people and movements, extending from pre-industrial settings to the contemporary world.

If the content and topics we cover in the course have changed over these two decades, so too has our incorporation of “theory”: class, of course, but also gender, race (including “whiteness”), post-colonialism, and aspects of language and discourse. Yet the centrality of class remains the organizing principle of our approach to labour history. We believe that class – however

multiple, however manipulated, but always material — still offers a powerful way to interrogate the constitution of identities and collective behaviours in 20th century settings, whether capitalist, socialist, or post-socialist. The experience of the Soviet Union strongly suggests that “class” continued to exist after the socialist transformation of the economy, even if scholars debate the precise relationship between official and unofficial “class” identities.16 Class identity is also historical. We might suggest that there were moments in history — including that period of revolutionary ferment around World War I — when class identity trumped all others. The memory of those moments became part of the legacy of labour movements as well as our field of labour history. One way to understand our focus on many more dimensions of the working-class — family life, youth culture, consumption and style, even personal identity and relationships — is as an effort to grasp the broader significance of social class. We understand class to be formed and experienced in the various venues of everyday life and not just in the workplace. Likewise, the turn toward the subjective has, in this case, raised the question of how class was experienced on a personal level, how it has shaped relations between individuals within families and communities, and how it has shaped personal identity. So we welcome the idea of thinking of our subjects as suitably complex individuals and not just as “masses.” If our own motivations and consciousness are bewildering amalgams of ideas, experience, and emotions, why should our subjects be assumed to be any more straightforward? The utility of class as a measure of stratification and as source of personal identity remains for us analytically strong. What has changed over the years is where we look for evidence of class identity and how we deal with countervailing sources of social aggregation such as religion and nation.

What does the saga of History 492 suggest? Certainly not that we should go back to our original syllabus. The life of this particular course might be very different from what others here have experienced, but we doubt it. Do we really believe that a focus on work, unions, and strikes provide us with an adequate understanding of workers’ lives? We don’t think so, although understanding the materiality of the world of workers remains crucial. Is it not necessary to leave the factory and go into peoples’ homes, churches, and other more personal sites to understand them? Are we satisfied with knowing how much people earned and how long they worked, or do we also want to know whom they loved and why? Labour historians, with their strong emphasis on material conditions, social movements, and radical politics, have probably done as much as other scholars to objectify working-class people, though perhaps toward different ends. We strive to understand our subjects as individuals as

well as participants in mass social movements, for example. Yet how are we to come to grips with the histories of large numbers of individuals, if not by aggregating them in some way, in many ways, into collectivities, into social groups? The history of societies demands that we use tools of classification in order to understand the object of our study.

And we need to address the question: what is it that justifies our bundling of all these topics into a course called “Comparative Working-Class History”? We ended our most recent seminar with a lively discussion of what the “core unities” of this “field” might be; what should not be considered fair game for a labour historian? A consensus of sorts coalesced around the idea of “life chances” resulting from material inequality. Labour historians study the lives, work, culture, hopes, emotions, and dreams of individuals without privilege. They do not study the rich, well-born, and powerful.

The range of venues for class experience suggested in our current syllabus, the range of identities considered as forming workers’ consciousnesses, the range of possibilities in workers’ behaviours all suggest that there is little danger of our going back to the beginning. But we don’t think we will leave the unions and strikes out next time. The workplace and its attendant conflicts remain vital as sources of identity and centers of politics; we may have set work and conflict aside as we turned to other topics, assuming our students shared our understanding of these fundamental sites of working-class experience. It is perhaps time to bring work and protest back in, though this means difficult choices about what to exclude in future editions of the course.

Many contemporary scholars would not recognize themselves in Liz Faue’s recent observation that they remain “grounded in nineteenth century theories of class” and “have given primacy to productive relations as both the determinant and dominant source of class consciousness and conflict.”17 On the contrary, the course’s evolution suggests we are still talking about social class but in much more capacious terms than “nineteenth-century theories.” Actually, working-class history seems particularly porous in relation to new themes and theories. Yet the very fact that this course still exists, and the decision to organize it comparatively, suggests that we have not abandoned the concept of social class grounded in material inequality as an important way of understanding the historical experience of poor and working people. The seminar’s comparative approach, a choice we made 22 years ago and have retained, suggests that we still assume characteristics of capitalism, of industrialism, and patterns of working-class life are shared from one society to another, for all their differences. Without common characteristics between social organization and workers’ behaviour, what do we have to compare? Long before we started talking about “transnational history,” assumptions regarding capital-

ism and the class experiences it shaped led scholars at Warwick, Pittsburgh, Yale, Michigan, Illinois, and other centers of working-class history to cross national boundaries and make some rather bold comparisons. We are certainly less bold in this regard than we were when we hatched the idea for this course, but we still share some of those assumptions. We might ask our colleagues in working-class history if all of this is also true for them.
APPENDIX 1: COMPARATIVE WORKING-CLASS HISTORY FALL 1986

University of Illinois
Fall 1986
History 492
Thursday 1–3

Comparative Working-Class History
Syllabus

August 28 Organization

September 4 The Old Labor History and the New
*Tony Judt, “Minerva’s Owl and Other Birds of Prey,” International Labor and Working-Class History, no. 16 (Fall 1979), 18–28.

September 11 Proletarianization and Work Process
Reginald E. Zelnik, Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia (Stanford 1971), ch. 6.
September 18  Varieties of Work Experience


September 25  Migration and Immigration


*James R. Barrett, “Unity and Fragmentation: Class, Race, and Ethnicity on Chicago’s South Side, 1900–1922” *Journal of Social History*, 18 (Fall 1984), 37–56.


October 2  Working-Class Families


October 9 Community


October 16 Culture


October 23 **Protest**

*William Rosenberg and Diane Koenker, “The Limits of Formal Protest: Worker Activism and Social Polarization in Russia, March to October 1917,”* unpublished.


October 30 **Workers and the State**


November 6 **Socialism**


November 13 **Rationalization and Scientific Management**


November 20 **Syndicalism and Mass Strikes**


W. Z. Foster, *Syndicalism* (Chicago 1911).
December 4  War and Revolutionary Situations
David Brody, Steelworkers in America: the Nonunion Era (New York 1970), ch. 9, 10, 11.

December 11  American Exceptionalism
*Please review whatever reading notes you might have for S. Perlman, A Theory of the Labor Movement.

The following books have been ordered and are available for purchase in the local bookstores:


Other required readings will be available on reserve in the History library.

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are required for all students.

Additional supplementary readings will be supplied as we go along. These and suggested discussion questions will be distributed to the class the week before the appropriate session.

**Requirements:**

Two short essays (5–7 pp.) on problems related to the readings. These will be due on Oct. 2 and Dec. 11.

A bibliographical essay, about 20 pages, on a comparative topic of working-class history. A statement of topic is due on October 9, a list of works to be included is due on October 30, and the final essay is due November 20.

Students will take turns leading the discussion of readings in class each week: assignments will be made at the start of the semester. Discussion participation based on readings is required of all students, and will be an important part of the final grade for the course.
APPENDIX 2: COMPARATIVE WORKING-CLASS HISTORY FALL 2005

History 502 Comparative Working-Class History
Section KB James Barrett and Diane Koenker
Mondays 3–4:50 Fall 2005
4 Gregory Hall

Syllabus

Week 1 Wednesday, August 24: Organization

Week 2 August 29: Class and Comparison


Week 3 September 12: What Is Work?


Week 4 September 19: Immigration, Migration, Race, and Ethnicity


Michael K. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers (Urbana 1993).


**Week 5 September 26: Personal Identity and Class Experience**


Mary Jo Maynes, Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers’ Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization (Chapel Hill 1995), ch. 1, 2.


Week 6 October 3: Family Ties


Barbara Weinstein, “Unskilled Worker, Skilled Housewife: Constructing the Working-Class Woman in Sao Paulo, Brazil,” in John D. French and Daniel James, eds., The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box (Durham 1997), 72–99.


Week 7 October 10: Gender – Conflict and Love

*Kathleen Canning, “Rethinking German Labor History: Gender and the Politics of Class Formation,” American Historical Review, 97 (June 1992), 736–768.


*Alice Kessler-Harris, “Treating the Male As Other,” Labor History 34 (Spring 1993), 190–204.


“Labor History after the Gender Turn,” various authors, International Labor and Working-Class History, no. 63 (Spring 2003), 1–36.
Week 8  **October 17: Religion**


Week 9  **October 24: The Intellectual Life of the Working Class/“Blue Collar Cosmopolitans”**


Week 10  **October 31: Working-Class Politics, I: Socialism**


Nick Salvatore, Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist (Urbana 1982) (esp. ch. 8, 9).


Week 11  **November 7: Working-class Politics, II: Communism**


*Diane P. Koenker, “Class Formation or the Unmaking of the Working Class?” (ch. 9) in Republic of Labor, 271–298.


Elizabeth J. Perry, “Labor’s Love Lost: Worker Militancy in Communist China,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 50 (Fall 1996), 64–76.


**Week 12  November 14: Consumption and Style**


**Thanksgiving break**

**Week 13 November 28: Leisure – Sports, Drinking, Vacations**


**Week 14  December 5: Colonial and Postcolonial Labour Regimes**


Other suggested readings to be added.

Readings marked with an asterisk (*) are required for all students.

**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS, PARTICIPATION IN THE SEMINAR, AND ASSESSMENT**

We will base our assessment of your performance in the course on three elements:

1. **Seminar Discussions**

   a. Your role in weekly discussions. Historical conversations are like a foreign language: you learn a lot more when you try to express your ideas and engage in discussion rather than sit back and simply absorb what is going on around you. Participation comes more easily for some than others, but learning to
speak (and learning to listen) are important elements of the historian’s craft. Any such assessment is somewhat subjective, but we will assign grades. We will try to give you some idea of how you are doing in this regard about halfway through the term.

b. Your presentation of a particular session. Here we will consider your integration of some of the collateral readings, the interpretive questions you present for discussion, and your role in the discussion itself.

Questions for discussion should be prepared and distributed to the class and to us by the Thursday before your scheduled class session. You can do this in either or both of two ways: e-mail to each class member; or putting paper copies of the questions in the mailboxes of each student by 5 p.m. on Thursday. Your object in leading the discussion is not to summarize readings but, rather, to stimulate and if necessary to direct the discussion. You propose questions that you think will stimulate discussion and encourage students to distill the essential from each of the readings; you help us to make connections between the various readings; you help us to distill from the discussion important interpretive points. The two of us will help with this process, while trying not to get in your way. You should also be prepared to engage the corollary readings for the benefit of the students in the class who may not have read all of them. In the interest of fairness, we will assign topics to individual students at our first meeting. We will provide you with an assessment within a week of your session.

2. Personal Narrative Essay

An essay (8–10 pages) on a personal narrative relating the narrative to themes of working-class history, including but not limited to problems of autobiography per se. We will circulate a list of possible narratives from which to choose. This paper will be due Friday, October 7.

3. A historiographical essay on a comparative topic of labour history.

By “comparative,” we intend that you include the secondary literature on the topic for at least three countries. By “historiographical,” we mean a paper that explores how historians have examined the particular topic under study. A statement of topic is due Friday, October 14. You will need to consult with us well before that date: we expect to meet with you early in the process and again toward the time the list of works is due. A list of works you will evaluate is due Friday, November 11. The final paper, which should be about 20 pages, is due Friday, December 9.

Because the papers will explore themes and sources beyond those in the course, we think it would be useful for the class to share their findings with
each other. Therefore, we will schedule an evening meeting of the seminar on a date to be announced, 6:30–9:30 p.m. Over pizza we will ask each of you to summarize your paper in NO MORE THAN 10 MINUTES in a way that conveys some of the issues you have dealt with. We will also ask you to make an electronic copy of the paper available to the class, so that students with a particular interest in some of these topics can learn more about the relevant literature.

Your work will be weighed as follows in the determination of your grade:

- Seminar discussion and presentation: One-third
- Personal narrative essay: One-third
- Historiographic essay: One-third
APPENDIX 3: COMPARATIVE LABOUR PRELIM SPRING 1986

Comparative Labour/Social History
Preliminary Examination
Spring 1986

Answer any 2 comparative questions and any two others – total 4.

COMPARATIVE

1. How would you differentiate the “new working-class history” of the 1960s–1980s from older examples of labour scholarship? Can you identify important groupings, or schools of historians based on their differing focuses, interpretations, methodologies? What do you think are the most promising directions for future working-class historians?

2. Why do artisans and skilled workers play such a leading role in labour activism? Are there types of activism more likely to involve skilled workers? Cite some examples.

3. How does the concept of a labour aristocracy help to explain the character and development of the labor movement in England and the United States during the latter half of the 19th century?

4. Compare the changing nature of working-class organization and protest in relation to broader economic and political change between the 1890s and the 1930s for two of the following: Germany, England, Russia, and the United States.

EUROPEAN

5. Compare the importance of Marxism in European labour movements, concentrating on two countries of the following: Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Luxemburg. What accounts for the differences?

6. Discuss the concept of proletarianization by describing the process in two of the following periods:
   - England 1790–1830
   - France 1830–1870
   - England 1890–1914

Who are the proletarians? Where do they come from?
AMERICAN

7. Discuss the following: “class conflict reached a crescendo in the U.S. during the late 19th century, but between 1900 and 1920 the American working-class was effectively integrated into the emerging corporate political economy. There is little if any evidence of working-class influence in either the industrial or political sphere.”

8. From a position of extreme weakness in the early 1930s, American workers built by the end of World War II a strong and influential labour movement with an expansive, progressive conception of its role as a movement for social reform. By the 1970s, this movement had been greatly weakened from within and without and had retreated from its advanced political views. Discuss the economic, political, and social factors that contributed to the rise and fall of “progressive labour” between the mid-1930s and the 1970s.
Choose one question from each of the following three sections and write an essay to answer it. Take some time to think about your answer. Write your outline. Then answer. Good luck!

I. EUROPE:

A. What is the relationship in 19th-century Europe between an artisanal mode of production, the rise of capitalism, and the development of labour politics? In other words, in what ways does the structure of production influence the ideas artisans bring to understanding their position in the society and economy? To what extent do gender roles and gender politics in this artisanal culture influence political and social ideas and actions?

B. Compare the tactics of resistance and the modes of accommodation of industrial workers in authoritarian societies in 20th-century Europe, focusing on the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany (but you may use more examples if you choose). To what extent do the authoritarian ideologies structure, produce, or mitigate resistance and accommodation? To what extent is worker behavior in these societies similar in form to that in capitalist societies in twentieth-century Europe?

II. COMPARATIVE:

A. Studies of autobiography emphasize the important role of childhood as a key moment in working-class formation. Using examples from at least two continents, discuss the role played by family, including the years of childhood and the relations between parents and children, in the production of “working-class consciousness.” What sources do historians use to explore this question? Be sure to define your terms and to provide specific examples. Does the role of family in the formation of working-class culture change over time?

B. Define the concept of working-class formation and apply it to two of the following societies – England, France, and the U.S.A. Discuss the cultural and political dimensions of this process and suggest a chronological framework for each case. To what extent, if at all, is the U.S.A. exceptional?
III. USA:

A. To what extent and why were U.S. workers able to build a strong labour movement and achieve some measure of political influence between the bleak situation of the early 1930s and the heady atmosphere of the post-World War II period? Was this in some sense a social democratic labour movement, and what happened to these aspirations between the end of World War II and the late 1950s?

B. How do you and other labour historians explain the catastrophic decline of the U.S. labour movement between the 1950s and the 1980s?