

## From the Labour Question to the Labour History Question

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## REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

# From the Labour Question to the Labour History Question

**Chad Pearson**

McIlroy, John, Alan Campbell, John Halstead, and David Martin, eds., *Making History: Organizations of Labour Historians in Britain since 1960* (Leeds: Maney Publishing Press 2010)

Allen, Joan, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, eds., *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (London: Merlin Press 2010)

Haverty-Stacke, Donna, and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Rethinking U.S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756–2009* (New York: Continuum International Publishing 2010)

THE ESSAYS IN THESE COLLECTIONS, several of which were published to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of England's Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH), address numerous issues that will undoubtedly interest historians of labour and the working class: the development of labour history associations, the relationship between scholarship and labour activism, the tensions between public and academic history, the political orientation of labour historians, the emergence of professional conferences and peer-reviewed journals, methodological innovations, and the overall state of the field today. Anniversaries, especially this one, which also marks the fiftieth anniversary of the US journal, *Labor History*, provide a good opportunity to reflect on the subject's health and even predict future developments.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, the articles under review will spark curiosity, raise questions, and stimulate further debate and discussion.

1. For a survey of the development of this journal, see Melvyn Dubofsky, "A Stroll Down Memory Lane: My Fifty Years-Plus Association with *Labor History*," *Labor History*, 50 (November 2009), 399–408.

Some historians seeking to make sense of the place of labour history in the academy tell a rise-and-fall story, one that accounts for scholars' early institutional focus, celebrates the groundbreaking Anglo-American historiographical innovations of the 1960s and 70s, and finally bemoans the conservative "backlash" of the 1980s and 90s. By this time, labour history in many, though not all, countries showed distinctive signs of weakness compared to other areas of history. Currently, sizable numbers of university-based historians write on, say, gender, race, culture, and politics while excluding labour or class.

How do we explain this? First, one must identify the sources of the problem. It is fair to say that resistance to labour history generally, and to class analysis in particular, comes from two corners of the academy. First, business-aligned conservative administrators, particularly those in the US, have attacked, and in some cases dismantled, labour studies departments, including those that have educated trade unionists. Second, and more relevant to this paper, departmental-based scholarly trend-setters have, with greater subtlety than their cost-cutting administrative colleagues, challenged the subject academically, insisting that labour and working-class history is no longer fashionable. These critics have claimed, both in print and especially during informal conversations and in seminars, that labour history has become passé and even boring, and class approaches to the past are reductionist. Such figures, who often contribute to departmental hiring and course selection decisions, have played a part in *un-making* labour history at their respective institutions.

It is mostly correct that labour history's current place in the academy, in light of these multilayered assaults, is not as strong as it once was, but many of the scholarly criticisms of labour and working-class history appear thoroughly wrongheaded. The collections under review note the exciting, innovative, and nuanced work produced by labour historians over the last fifty years. Indeed, researchers continue to write imaginative studies that link class to ethnicity, gender, race, and the state, and in the process have provoked vigorous debates. Few serious examinations of the subfield can avoid recognizing the wide-ranging assortment of subjects that concern such historians: formal and informal workers, agricultural and industrial labourers, free and coerced labour, industrial relations, labour and law, the various ways in which ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality have intersected with class, local and international working-class struggles, etc. In recent years, scholars have written about topics as varied as Canadian strippers, Indian street vendors, and Irish nuns. Some study labour as a movement; others have shown an interest in the dynamics of working-class communities. Given the assortment of studies produced over the past five decades, sober-minded observers cannot honestly dismiss labour history as narrow or old fashioned.

The articles in these collections are a testament to the rich, global tradition of labour and working-class history. Two provide case studies of the development of labour history in different areas of the world. Edited by John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, John Halstead and David Martin, *Making History: Organizations of*

*Labour Historians in Britain since 1960* focuses on the ways in which scholars have written and promoted labour history in Britain and Ireland. The second collection, *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, is edited by Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John McIlroy and includes state-of-the-field essays by specialists on Australia, Canada, Britain, Germany, India, Ireland, Japan, the United States, and labour history internationally. The collections are somewhat geographically imbalanced; Britain is well covered, but there are no studies of several other areas of the world. The editors defend the exclusion of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and many parts of Asia and Europe by noting that writers have previously covered these areas.<sup>2</sup>

The country-specific studies focus chiefly on the decades after World War II and are mostly straightforward descriptions of the rise of labour history in and outside of the academy, noting that labour historians in different parts of the world formed associations, organized conferences, published books, established a presence in the academy and, in many cases, built relationships with trade unions and social activists. Indeed, it should not be surprising that the so-called new labour history emerged during a time of intense political activism. Labour history's rising popularity, both in and outside of universities, coincided with a variety of remarkable new left campaigns, and it appears to have declined somewhat in a period characterized by a relatively low level of political struggle, trade union decline, de-industrialization, and neoliberal assaults on higher education and social services generally. In noting this political shift, several chroniclers mention the rise of Thatcher and Reagan, the failure of labour struggles in much of the industrialized world, and the Soviet Union's collapse. A decade later, labour movements have hardly received much of a boost under New Labour or Democratic Party politicians.

But these reasons alone, though illuminating, are insufficient in explaining the relatively poor position of labour history in universities in much of the English-speaking world. We must also, as a number of the authors in these collections note, consider the decades-long scholarly assaults on class analysis and historical materialism from within the increasingly corporate and centrist academy. This assault has been waged by both relatively young scholars, most of whom came of age after the so-called new labour history reached its peak, and several senior historians, including a number who established their careers as labour historians, but over the decades have become more conservative. In the process they have marginalized or rejected class altogether as a category of analysis.

This is especially, though not exclusively, the case in the US. Although right-wing figures have protested that humanities and social science departments are filled with tenured Marxists, a level-headed examination of universities in general, and history departments in particular, demonstrates the inaccuracies

2. For more on the study of labour history in these, and other, countries, see Jan Lucassen, ed., *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern, Switzerland 2008).

of this complaint. As one careful observer of academic life put it, most professors “aren’t ‘leftists’ at all, but American liberals, whose commitments to equality are relatively clear in matters of ethnicity and gender, but hopelessly confused when it comes to class and workplace issues generally.”<sup>3</sup> It appears that the relatively poor state of the subject reflects this broader context. Rather than view labour and class complementarily to ethnicity, race, and gender, scholars frequently view these categories as rivals.

The purpose of this essay is not to engage in the counterproductive, and increasingly stale, practice of pitting class against other categories of analysis. Indeed, readers of this journal do not need to be reminded that many of the best labour history publications focus on the ways in which gender, race, and the state have intersected with class. Yet an examination of labour history’s place in today’s history departments cannot avoid pointing out some uncomfortable facts, including the relatively small number of university-affiliated historians who study labour and class compared to scholars who specialize in other areas.

But perhaps the tide is turning. Indeed, the editors of *Rethinking U. S. Labor History: Essays on the Working-Class Experience, 1756–2009*, Donna Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz, are confident about labour history’s future. This article concludes by examining the original work found in this collection, which includes a variety of case studies, such as essays on pre-industrial labour, strikebreaking, the labour movement and religion, race and anti-communism, transnational labour movements, and three historiographical surveys. Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz are convinced that they have brought together a collection that, taken together, marks a new chapter in the scholarly development of labour history (at least in the US).

## Creating Labour History across Borders

In order to understand the emergence of professional associations like the SSLH, the creation of modern labour history generally, and its impact on the profession as a whole, it is necessary to assess scholarly activities in the pre-World War II years, which concern most of the authors in these collections. The story of labour history’s place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is mostly uncontroversial, and the authors of these volumes reiterate the core narrative that chroniclers have told for decades. We are reminded

3. Marc Bousquet, “The Worst-Paid High-School Graduates in the Country,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 May, 2010, <[http://chronicle.com/blogPost/The-Worst-Paid-High-School/24127/?sid=at&utm\\_source=at&utm\\_medium=en](http://chronicle.com/blogPost/The-Worst-Paid-High-School/24127/?sid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en)> (20 May 2010). I would like to thank Howard Stanger for bringing this essay to my attention. For more on the ways in which academics have failed to address class concerns, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York 2006). Michaels makes a compelling case, but I believe that he understates the continued presence of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

that Sidney and Beatrice Webb and John and Barbara Hammond in England, John Norton and William Murphy in Australia, and John Commons and his disciples in the US, created some of the first, thoroughly detailed, multivolume accounts of the creation of trade unions and their struggles for economic justice. Together, these foundational scholars noted the growth and character of trade unions, workplace-based labour-management relations, and the state's role during labour conflicts. They sought to make sense of what we can loosely label the *labour movement*. Some were not affiliated with history departments; instead, they were principally interested in industrial relations and public policy generally, seeking to understand the growth of unions, or, as US observers put it, "the labor question."<sup>4</sup> Several were economists with moderate partisan agendas; others enthusiastically cheered on the labour movement.

Yet the writers of these articles note that there was hardly a one-size-fits-all approach to the study of labour history in the century's first decades. Not all labour historians wrote from within the halls of academia, and several followed a different tradition from the ones launched by Commons and the Webbs. Some were labour activists, choosing to write labour history in an effort to celebrate the drama and heroism of working-class struggles. In Ireland, prominent socialists like James Connolly produced some of the earliest and most politically committed labour history. This great revolutionary activist produced *Labour in Irish History* in 1910. Their achievements are assessed by Emmet O'Connor and Conor McCabe in their "Ireland" essay in the Joan Allen *et al.* collection. Worker-intellectuals in Australia, including George Black and William Guthrie Spence, published books and pamphlets celebrating organized labour's role in establishing the eight-hour day and in creating a successful Labour Party. (Greg Patmore, "Australia," in Allen *et al.*, 232)

The subject had only a faint impact on the academic cultures in some countries. Indeed, labour history emerged unevenly in these years, and we learn that some regions lacked labour scholarship altogether. Its impact on Canada and Japan was not especially significant, and in Germany, Klaus Tenfeld explains, the historical profession generally considered the study of labour movements "taboo" during the first half of the twentieth century. Needless to say, scholarship hardly improved under the hyper-repression of the Nazi regime. (Klaus Tenfelde, "Germany," in Allen *et al.*, 263)

In the 1920s and 30s, most scholars were primarily interested in the efforts of white, unionized workers. But not all took such a narrow approach. During the 1930s, a time of worldwide class struggle, radicals like W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James wrote passionately about slaves and their dramatic rebellions for self-determination. These figures, whose studies were inspired largely by their

4. For a useful discussion of this issue, see Rosanne Currarino, "The 'Revolution Now in Progress': Social Economics and the Labor Question," *Labor History*, 50 (February 2009), 1–17.

commitment to fighting racism and ending class inequality, lacked appropriate recognition from their institutionally-based peers. Yet, in recent times they have received critical praise by leading scholars.<sup>5</sup> It is fair to say that Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and James's *The Black Jacobins* are as important to the creation of labour history as works by the Webbs, the Hammonds, and Commons.<sup>6</sup> Du Bois wanted to understand why white workers failed to unite with blacks in the US Civil War's aftermath. This was his labour question, and he insisted that free black labourers engaged in "a normal working-class movement."<sup>7</sup>

## The Postwar Years

THE DECADES AFTER WORLD WAR II constituted a golden period for the study of labour history in much of the advanced industrial world. Indeed, the story of labour history's evolution in the postwar period, especially from the 1960s to the 1980s, is familiar to readers of *Labour/Le Travail*. The essays in the first two collections, edited by McIlroy, Campbell and their associates, will nevertheless offer much to ponder about this watershed age. It was an era affected deeply by the emergence of professional associations, journals, conferences and, above all, innovative scholarship that highlighted the richness of class-based interpretations of the past. These academic developments occurred unevenly, shaping the ways in which scholars approached the subject in Australia, Canada, England, Germany, Scotland, the United States, and Wales. Ireland and Japan were less touched by the historiographical movement. Labour historians in some parts of the globe became involved in various public history projects, including supporting the creation of labour history museums and preserving archives. (See especially O'Connor and McCabe, 137) Such developments reflected one of the SSLH's goals, which were articulated at its inaugural meeting in May 1960: "to develop labour history in the universities and popularize it beyond them." (28)

The SSLH, built by some of Britain's sharpest and most creative minds, including Asa Briggs, John Saville, Eric Hobsbawm, Henry Pelling, Sidney Pollard, E. P. Thompson, Dorothy Thompson, J. F. C. Harrison, and Royden Harrison, succeeded in achieving these objectives. John McIlroy, the author of several essays in two of the collections, deserves praise for offering an almost

5. See David Roediger, "'Labor in White Skin': Race and U.S. Working-Class History," in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, eds., *Reshaping the U.S. Left* (London 1988), 287–307.

6. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London 1938).

7. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York 1963), 383. For a fine discussion of the place of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction*, see Noel Ignatiev, "'The American Blindspot': Reconstruction According to Eric Foner and W. E. B. Du Bois," *Labour/Le Travail*, 31 (Spring 1993), 243–251.

encyclopedic account of the origins and success of this organization, the personalities behind it, and its contributions to the broader historical profession. He has provided well-rounded descriptions of the major labour history conferences, influential publications, and the debates generated by such output. For the most part, the scholars behind the SSLH's formation produced informative, well-received, and readable studies that explored the characteristics of class struggles in different contexts. (McIlroy essay in McIlroy *et al.*, 15–110)

The individuals behind the SSLH taught aspiring academics, adult learners, and trade unionists. Indeed, they opened their organization to many, and a proper assessment of the group must mention these pedagogical developments. History department-based academics hobnobbed with teachers from adult education programs, and those seeking membership were not forced to pass any sort of political test to join. As one writer noted, "Members would only be required to profess an interest in the subject, not declare a socialist faith, produce a party card or satisfy any test imposed by 'the academy'."<sup>8</sup> Trade unionists were welcome as were those without advanced degrees. This is noteworthy: what eventually became one of the academy's hottest subjects, recognized widely by observers in and out of the profession, was promoted by an organization that accepted those from outside of the university's gates. In practice, academics dominated, and tensions remained between degreed scholars and non-professionals, but the association's openness nevertheless demonstrated a genuine anti-elitism that was missing from most of academic life at the time.

Labour historians' impact on the broader historical profession in these years is impossible to ignore, and the essays in these collections, particularly those focusing on Britain, cover the high points. The SSLH's early members wrote influential books that continue to inspire, helped organize dynamic conferences, and launched the *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*. The organization's founding year also saw the publication of *Essays in Labour History*, an extraordinary collection edited by Asa Briggs and John Saville. Dedicated to the prolific scholar G. D. H. Cole, who died the previous year, the anthology included engaging pieces by several rising and established historians, including Hobsbawm, Pollard, Thompson, and Royden Harrison, all of whom shaped the direction of labour history and played a part in setting the agendas of mainstream historical debates and discussions.<sup>9</sup> The single-authored books produced by SSLH members were especially significant, and these collections offer glowing examinations of several, including, of course, E. P. Thompson's pioneering and immensely influential *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>10</sup> Other important studies produced by SSLH members

8. John L. Halstead, "Obituary: Royden John Harrison (3 March 1927–30 June 2002)," *Labour History Review*, 68 (April 2003), 2.

9. Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds., *Essays in Labour History* (London 1960).

10. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of The English Working Class* (1963; New York 1966).



throughout the years focused on Chartism, riots, the origins and nature of the Labour Party, Communists, the so-called labour aristocracy, rank-and-file rebellions on the shop floor, modern management, biographies of labour activists, and various expressions of state repression. Additionally, some of these scholars, independent of the SSLH, helped launch well-renowned journals, including *Past and Present* (established before the SSLH in 1952), *History Workshop Journal*, and *Social History*, all of which continue to produce stimulating articles. This particular generation, more than any other, helped legitimize and popularize the study of labour history, ultimately turning it into what SSLH President Eric Hobsbawm calls “a comprehensive history of the working-classes in modern societies.” (Eric Hobsbawm, “Preface: Looking Back Half a Century,” in Allen *et al.*, 5)

Labour historians outside England also influenced the direction of the historical profession, established links with the labour movement, and formed inclusive associations. Elsewhere, trade unionists and independent working-class researchers with an interest in the struggles of their class joined with established academics. This was certainly true in Australia, where labour historians established an organization in 1961 and developed close links with the labour movement, and in Scotland, where the Scottish Labour History Society viewed itself as, in the words of one writer, “part of the broad labour movement.” (Robert Duncan in McIlroy *et al.*, 117) The Welsh organization, Llafur, according to Deian Hopkin, “become a forum where people from very different parts of the political spectrum met to discuss their mutual concerns for labour history and wider issues relating to working-class culture.” At its peak in 1978, it counted an impressive 1,741 members. (Hopkin in McIlroy *et al.*, 127, 139) Historians formed the Committee on Canadian Labour History in 1970 with the same commitment to scholarly and political inclusivity that was practiced in Australia and Britain. Together, the mostly liberals and leftists of a variety of stripes who held membership in these organizations sought, in the words of a spokesperson from the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, to learn the “lessons of history.” (Patmore in Allen *et al.*, 237)

Rather than self-important careerist academics, many of the postwar generation of labour historians saw themselves connected to broader social movements, turning “to history,” in Robert Duncan’s words, because they wanted “to confirm, validate, and illustrate the reality of the class struggle.” (Duncan, 117) Many, though certainly not all, wrote as creative Marxists, capturing manifestations of class inequality and struggles in multiple historical environments. Yet there was not one Marxist tradition embraced by organized labour historians. In their informative introduction, McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen explain that there were “differences between Marxists.” For instance, they emphasize that Hobsbawm was somewhat of a traditionalist while Thompson embraced what they call an “iconoclastic understanding of class.” Other influential labour scholars, including Royden Harrison, Walter Kendall and James Hinton, established their own distinctive ways of employing Marxist analysis.

In pointing out these differences, McIlroy, Campbell and Allen are undoubtedly correct in saying that "The Marxisms of labour historians were varied and eclectic." (9) Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase reinforce this point. (64)<sup>11</sup>

Labour historians throughout the English-speaking world were, we learn in many of these essays, intrigued by historical scholarship and by Marxist theoretical developments. Most observers illustrate that Thompson's influence was, in many cases, the most significant, but he was hardly the only source of inspiration. Others found ways to employ the insights of thinkers such as France's Louis Althusser, Italy's Antonio Gramsci, and England's Raymond Williams. Several found critical works on the labour process, particularly Harry Braverman's 1974 *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, analytically refreshing, useful, and provocative, though not without problems.<sup>12</sup> Class analysis, enriched by a diversity of vibrant historiographical and theoretical insights, remained central to the study of labour history throughout the 1970s.

In the 1960s and 70s, some of the most stimulating debates and discussions appeared in socialist publications. In Britain, the *New Left Review* included important articles by numerous prominent scholars, including Thompson, Hobsbawm, Saville, Hinton, and others. It carried several on the so-called "labour aristocracy thesis," which sparked dynamic debates on both sides of the Atlantic. As Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase remind us in their valuable survey, "The labour aristocracy were held to espouse the ideals of self-help and bourgeois respectability and, as spokesmen, mediated capitalist industrial practices to a workforce robbed of effective, articulate leadership." This thesis, they maintain, "loomed large in the writings of leading labour historians." (76–7)<sup>13</sup>

Across the Atlantic, Elizabeth Faue, a long-time organizer of the annual North American Labor History Conference, describes the pluralistic traditions that developed in the US, including a somewhat eclectic Marxist intellectual culture that emerged around the New Left journal, *Radical America*, which began in 1967. (175) Edited by Paul Buhle and inspired by the ideas of C. L. R.

11. Also, see Gareth Stedman Jones, "Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution," *New Left Review*, 90 (March–April 1975), 35; Bryan D. Palmer, "Reasoning Rebellion: E. P. Thompson, British Marxist Historians, and the Making of Dissident Political Mobilization," *Labour/Le Travail*, 50 (Fall 2002), 187–216; Paul Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (Manchester 2006), 82–86. In a thoughtful essay on the place of the British Marxist historians, David Renton makes a persuasive case that several of these prominent historians found political and intellectual inspiration from the relative conservatism of the Popular Front in the 1930s. Many abandoned this commitment following the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. See David Renton, "Studying Their Own Nation Without Insularity?: The British Marxist Historians Reconsidered," *Science and Society*, 69 (October 2005), 559–579.

12. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York 1974).

13. For treatments of this subject, see James Hinton, "The Labour Aristocracy," *New Left Review*, 32 (July–August 1965), 72–77; Tom Nairn, "Nature of the Labour Party," *New Left Review*, 27 (September–October 1964), 38–65; and Gareth Stedman Jones, "Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution," *New Left Review*, 90 (March–April 1975), 61–62.

James, *Radical America* featured several critical essays on the history of militant working-class self-activity and on the ways in which gender, race, and ethnicity intersected with class. Although *Radical America*, like the *New Left Review*, was not chiefly a labour history publication, a number of historians of the working class, including George Rawick, Martin Glaberman, Mike Davis, James Green, Mark Naison, Susan Porter Benson, Rosalyn Baxandall, David Montgomery, and Nelson Lichtenstein wrote thoughtful and provocative essays in its pages, hoping to inspire debate and ignite social activism.<sup>14</sup> Like the diversity of Marxist scholars active in the SSLH, *Radical America's* contributors were part of the broad, anti-capitalist left. "The journal," according to one of its editorial board members, "offered an intense political education without the dogmatic indoctrination demanded by other leftists groups of the time."<sup>15</sup> Contributors, encouraged by campus anti-war struggles and GI insurrections in Vietnam, Southern Civil Rights demonstrations, and militant rank-and-file rebellions on the shop floors in the factories of Detroit and Cleveland, were unapologetically critical in their investigations of sexism and racism, class inequality, Democratic Party politicians, trade union bureaucrats, and duplicitous liberals more generally. Like their comrades in Britain, these scholars, some of whom were graduate students and young, university-based professors, were motivated by historical curiosity and a genuine desire to establish a more just society. In the process, they were unafraid to call themselves socialists. In 1975, US historians, including some who contributed to *Radical America*, started the *Radical History Review*, which also contained labour and working-class history essays.

Activists and scholars, most labour historians shared a desire to write history from below. This was the central mission of Britain's History Workshop movement and the motivation behind its journal, *History Workshop Journal*, which receives deserved attention in several of these collections. The movement was launched at a conference on Chartism in 1967, and SSLH members, including Raphael Samuel, an instructor of mature students at Ruskin College

14. George Rawick, "Working-Class Self-Activity," *Radical America*, 3 (March–April 1969), 23–31; Mark Naison, "Marxism and Black Radicalism in America," *Radical America*, 5 (May–June 1971), 3–26; Martin Glaberman, "The American Working-Class in Historical Perspective," *Radical America*, 7 (November–December 1973), 81–90; Mike Davis, "The Stop Watch and the Wooden Shoe: Scientific Management and the Industrial Workers of the World," *Radical America*, 8 (January–February 1975), 69–96; Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, "Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: The Early Years," *Radical America*, 8 (January–February 1975), 97–115; James Green, "Fighting on Two Fronts: Working-Class Militancy in the 1940s," *Radical America*, 9 (July–August 1975), 7–48; Nelson Lichtenstein, "Defending the No-Strike Pledge: CIO Politics During World War II," *Radical America*, 9 (July–August 1975), 49–76; Susan Porter Benson, "'The Clerking Sisterhood': Rationalization and the Work Culture of Saleswomen," *Radical America*, 12 (March–April 1978), 41–55; David Montgomery, "The Past and Future of Workers' Control," *Radical America*, 13 (November–December 1979), 7–24.

15. James Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst 2000), 15.

and one of the founders of the Communist Party Historians Group, played a critical part in its development. (McIlroy in Allen *et al.*, 27)<sup>16</sup> Samuel found inspiration from radical academic developments and from his pedagogical experiences as an instructor of mostly working-class students. In his words, "At Ruskin, a college of mature students, recruited from working men and women, these ideas had a particular resonance, and the History Workshop was in the first place an attempt to replace the hierarchical relationship of tutor and pupil by one of comradeship in which each became, in some sort, co-learners."<sup>17</sup> The *History Workshop Journal*, established in the mid-1970s, included works by several labour historians. It proudly called itself a journal of "Socialist History."

The excitement surrounding the history from below movement combined with the breakthroughs within Marxist historiography, especially the type advanced by Thompson and his SSLH colleagues, greatly influenced the historical profession as a whole. Two decades after the threats of McCarthyism pushed radical academics out of the universities, a new generation established their careers by placing working-class struggles at the heart of their studies (McIlroy in Allen *et al.*, 27).<sup>18</sup> As was the case in Britain, several Marxist-oriented historians in Canada and the US earned professional recognition, tenured employment and, in many cases, a following of devoted graduate students. This was clear with respect to senior historians such as former labour activist David Montgomery and Herbert Gutman.<sup>19</sup> A younger cohort in the late 1970s and early 80s, including Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer in Canada, and Alan Dawley (1944–2008) and Sean Wilentz in the US, published prizewinning studies that examined the dynamics of capitalist expansion and working-class struggles in the nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup> The profession rewarded them handsomely for their class-centred scholarship. In the US, Dawley won the prestigious Bancroft Prize in 1977 for his *Class and Community: The*

16. For more on the History Workshop movement, see Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York 2002), 295.

17. Quoted in David Renton, *Raph Samuel*, 4 February 2007, < [http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/raph\\_samuel.html](http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/raph_samuel.html) > (10 July 2010). Also, see Stuart Hall, "Raphael Samuel: 1934–96," *New Left Review*, 221 (January–February 1997), 119–127; and John McIlroy in *Histories of Labour*, 37.

18. McCarthyism was obviously most pronounced in the US, though other parts of the world felt its impact, too. John McIlroy suggests that conditions in UK universities resembled "mild McCarthyism" in the 1950s. Some leftist historians were denied academic employment because of their politics. Apart from McIlroy, see David Renton, *Sidney Pollard: A Life in History* (London 2004), 24–25.

19. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1852–1872* (1967; Urbana 1981); Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York 1976).

20. For a brief discussion of the Marxist influence on US historians, see Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge 1984), 231. On the prizes for Canadian historians, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Canada," in *Histories of Labour*, 200.

*Industrial Revolution in Lynn*, and Princeton University's Wilentz, who had previously published in the *History Workshop Journal*, received the esteemed Beveridge Award for his 1984 *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850*.<sup>21</sup> By recognizing these studies, the particular selection committees did something new: in both instances, these were the first books with the word “class” in the titles to win these respective prizes. In some ways, Wilentz's first book, which thoroughly analyzed the emergence of working-class organizations and political parties in Jacksonian New York, resembled an American version of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Scholars also produced important edited volumes during the 1970s and 80s. A remarkable Canadian collection edited by Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, was released in 1976 and featured thought-provoking case studies written by mostly young scholars inspired by what the editors identified as “the re-emergence of Marxism.”<sup>22</sup> In the US, Michael Frisch and Daniel Walkowitz released a well-received US anthology, *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society*, in 1983. They noted the influence of the “English Marxist historians, Eric J. Hobsbawm and Edward P. Thompson” as well as “European advances in what came to be called the ‘new social history’.”<sup>23</sup> In some ways, these two collections were to the development of Canadian and US labour history what Asa Briggs and John Saville's 1960 collection was to British labour historiography. Like that anthology, the Canadian and US collections provided a forum to those who, as Donna Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz put it with respect to the US volume, helped “to define the ‘New’ labor history and announce its coming of age.” (Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz, 1) This collection included early essays by rising stars: Jonathan Prude, Sean Wilentz, Christine Stansell, Leon Fink, Francis G. Couvares, Elizabeth and Kenneth Fones-Wolf, Susan Porter Benson, Steve Fraser, Joshua B. Freeman, and Nelson Lichtenstein. They produced scholarship that carried on the edgy, class-centred approaches that had excited graduate students and altered the character of history departments.

Historians were interested in more than class. Few would deny that, as John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, and Joan Allen put it, the “arrival on the agenda of

21. Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); and Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class 1788–1850* (New York 1984). Sean Wilentz, “Crime, Poverty and the Streets of New York City: The Diary of William H. Bell (1850–51),” *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (April 1979), 126–131.

22. Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, “Introduction,” in Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto 1976), 7.

23. Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, “Introduction,” in Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds., *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society* (Urbana 1983), x.

theories of gender and language constituted an innovation of tremendous creative significance." (Allen *et al.*, 11) For decades, most labour historians focused almost exclusively on male workers, neglecting the paid and unpaid work performed by women. That began to change in the 1970s. But before gender became a frequently used buzzword at seminars and in print, historians wrote about working-class women and their struggles. Indeed, historical accounts that have explored women's labour, including studies that highlight reproductive and household work, sexual divisions of labour, wage inequality, and women's trade union activism, have undoubtedly enriched the subject tremendously. In the 1970s, a decade before the so-called linguistic turn was trumpeted aggressively by academics like Joan Scott, historians such as Deirdre Beddoe, Ann Curthoys, Thomas Dublin, Philip Foner, Alice Kessler-Harris, Sheila Rowbotham, Joan Sangster, Leslie Woodcock Tentler, and others produced studies that effectively integrated gender and class.<sup>24</sup> In 1974, the State University of New York, Binghamton hosted a major conference on women and labour.<sup>25</sup> A decade later, *Radical America* published a special issue entitled "Women and Labor Activism," which included essays on working-class militancy in North America and Europe.<sup>26</sup>

Coinciding with women's rights movements in different parts of the globe, some scholars made the decision to explicitly highlight the importance of feminism to the study of history. For instance, we learn that two of the founding members of the labour-friendly *History Workshop Journal*, Sally Alexander and Anna Davin, altered the journal's direction by insisting that its commitment to publishing "history from below" must include studies that explicitly illustrated "the sexual division of labour and class struggle." "The social relationships between men and women," they held, "form the substance of feminist history, and will enrich socialist history." (Joan Allen and Malcolm Chase in

24. Hardly a comprehensive list, but see Deirdre Beddoe, *Welsh Convict Women: A Study of Women Transported from Wales to Australia, 1787–1852* (Barry 1979); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York 1979); Philip Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From Colonial Times to the Eve of World War I* (New York 1979); Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where are the Organized Women Workers?," *Feminist Studies*, 3 (Summer 1975), 92–110; Alice Kessler-Harris, "Organizing the Unorganizable: Three Jewish Women and Their Union," *Labor History*, 17 (Winter 1976), 5–23; Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden From History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London 1973); Joan Sangster, "The 1907 Bell Telephone Strike: Organizing Women Workers," *Labour/Le Travail* 3 (1978), 109–130; and Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900–1930* (Oxford 1979). For an early overview in Australia, see Ann Curthoys, "Towards a Feminist Labour History," *Labour History*, 24 (May 1973), 88–95.

25. Some of the essays were published in an anthology edited by Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, *Class, Sex, and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Connecticut 1977).

26. See *Radical America*, 18 (September–October 1984).

Allen *et al.*, 69)<sup>27</sup> These writers, we must recall, rejected approaches that pitted class against gender, realizing that the two categories were complementary. Beginning in Spring 1982, the *History Workshop Journal* presented itself as a “Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians.”

New Left scholars were equally interested in describing the ways in which race shaped the history of labour. In Australia, Greg Patmore singles out Humphrey McQueen’s 1970 *A New Britannia*. Its release marked a major turning point historiographically because, unlike earlier writers, McQueen identified the presence of racism and imperialism in the country, ultimately challenging the Old Left’s racial blind spot. (Patmore, 242) In this study, McQueen treated the country “as a frontier of white capitalism.”<sup>28</sup> In the US, historian Alexander Saxton documented the ways in which toxic anti-Asian racism influenced the US labour movement on the West Coast.<sup>29</sup> Some union activists overcame racism, and in a hotly debated 1968 essay, Herbert Gutman explored the dynamics of interracial unionism in coalmining.<sup>30</sup> Canadian scholars have written informatively about Aboriginal workers.<sup>31</sup>

By the early 1980s, labour history enjoyed much respect and significant influence within the broader historical profession, where its impact was profound. By the decade’s start, groups like the SSLH, with a membership of over 1000, were flourishing. Commenting on labour history’s place in the broader scholarly context, Richard Price contended that it “stood at the centre of the most innovative contributions to British historiography in the post-war era and could claim as its own some of the most impressive historians of its time.” (McIlroy in Allen *et al.*, 109) Reinforcing Price, Jeffrey Cox maintained that “British labour history is one of the success stories of recent historical scholarship.”<sup>32</sup> Across the Atlantic, another historian, Irving Abella, reflecting on the subject’s health in 1982, observed that “Canadian labour history has finally arrived!” (Bryan Palmer in Allen *et al.*, 204)

27. Also, see “Editorial,” *History Workshop Journal*, 11 (Spring 1981), 1–2.

28. Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia: An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism* (1970; Queensland 2004), 3.

29. Alexander Saxton, *Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Rise of the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley 1971).

30. Herbert Gutman, “The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America: The Career and Letters of Richard L. Davis and Something of Their Meaning, 1890–1900,” in Julius Jacobson, ed., *The Negro and the American Labor Movement* (New York 1968), 49–127.

31. For an early treatment, see H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650–1860* (Toronto 1981), 21–23. More recent studies have explored this topic in greater depth.

32. Jeffrey Cox, “Labor History and the Labor Movement,” *The Journal of British Studies*, 25 (April 1986), 234.

## Outside the West

THE ESSAYS ON INDIA, JAPAN, and labour history internationally offer further evidence of the subject's richness. Following in the footsteps of English scholars who formed the SSLH, historians in India and Japan established their own professional labour history associations. More noteworthy were the studies produced by these non-western scholars; indeed, increased scholarly focus on the developing and non-western world over the last decade has demonstrated the importance of non-factory labour. Marcel van der Linden, the prolific historian of international labour history based in the Netherlands, predicts that it is likely that future historians will increasingly reject traditional disciplinary boundaries, offering novel studies of a host of subjects, including African slaves, indentured servants from Europe, and Indian coolies. This "broadened approach," he insists, will enable historians to appreciate historical "anomalies." (in Allen *et al.*, 366)

Indian labour historians have demonstrated that this is certainly the case, challenging those who have privileged "the free, male wage-worker, labouring in the modern factory." The reality, Rana P. Behal, Chitra Joshi and Prabhu P. Mohapatra contend, is that such workers constituted "a minority, even in the industrialized west." (290) Here scholars began focusing on informal work and workers in the 1970s. In light of India's distinctive economic geography and cultural traditions, several of the country's scholars have sought to employ new theoretical tools. While Marxism had been present in Indian labour historiography for decades, Behal, Joshi, and Mohapatra note the desires to abandon Eurocentric approaches, which found sharpest expression with the rising popularity of subaltern studies in the 1980s, an approach, like Marxism, that examines the activities and conflicts of ordinary people. Yet unlike traditional Marxism, in the words of one writer, "the subaltern condition could be based on caste, age, gender, office, or any other way, including, but not limited to, class."<sup>33</sup>

In Japan, the most popular type of labour history remained, for several decades, workplace-centred industrial relations studies, and much of the western-based "new labour history" was mostly out of reach to the majority of Japanese students. Thompson's *Making of the English Working* was translated into Japanese for the first time in 2003. Nevertheless, the last twenty years has witnessed the publication of several books, in both Japanese and English, focusing on the social history of the working-class, including studies that explore working women and the forced labour of Koreans in places like Hokkaido's coal mines. (Takao Matsumuru, John McIlroy and Allen Campbell, 332)

33. Vinayak Chaturvedi, "A Critical Theory of Subalternity: Rethinking Class in Indian Historiography," *Left History*, 12 (Spring/Summer 2007), 9.



## The Labour History Problem(s)

HOW SHOULD WE DESCRIBE the place of labour history in today's academic environment? Several of the essays underline a troubling recent tendency: a noticeable decline in the number of historians who identify as labour historians. The editors observe that "too few" have chosen to brand themselves primarily as labour historians. "Too few speak out for labour history." (14) Writing about Canada, Bryan D. Palmer points out that "it is rare indeed for graduate students to name themselves 'labour historians.'" (218) In fact, some professors, including those who teach in departments with a formidable labour history background, advise their graduate students *not* to present themselves as labour historians.

Consider, for instance, the case of Rutgers University's history department. Although it is currently home to the excellent journal *International Labor and Working-Class History*, other signs suggest that labour history occupies a rather marginal position at this institution. For instance, only one full-time history department member out of about sixty identifies herself as a labour historian: Carolyn Brown, a specialist in African labour history (other labour scholars such as Dorothy Sue Cobble and David Bensman are chiefly affiliated with Rutgers's School of Management and Labor Relations).

In an earlier period, labour history was a central part of the department's curriculum. Rutgers helped launch the careers of a number of prominent labour historians and once employed leading scholars of the working class. The graduate list is impressive: Steve Fraser, Joshua Freeman, Stephen Meyer, and especially Alice Kessler-Harris, who also taught at the university for a number of years. (McIlroy *et al.*, 13) Furthermore, in 1973 the department hosted the second Anglo-American labour history colloquium (the first was held in 1968 at the University of Warwick). Organized by Peter Sterns and Daniel J. Walkowitz, the gathering featured towering intellectual figures from both sides of the Atlantic. Thompson, Hobsbawm, and Gareth Stedman Jones shared space and debated issues with Gutman, Montgomery, James Green, Melvyn Dubofsky, and Virginia Yans. Some of the papers were later published in a special issue of the *Journal of Social History*.<sup>34</sup> The conference was, according to one source, a "landmark event" that "advanced the transatlantic theoretical tradition that nourished the new work." (Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz, 7-8) In 1989, Edward and Dorothy Thompson spent the year teaching at Rutgers, reinforcing its status as a cutting-edge centre for labour history.

Decades later, the academic climate looks considerably different at Rutgers and elsewhere. In fact, labour history's marginal position at this New Jersey institution mirrors the situation at many places in the English-speaking world, an issue that is addressed, with various levels of detail, by several of the authors of these studies. A visit to history department websites in the US and beyond,

34. See *Journal of Social History*, 7 (Summer 1974).

to use just one assessment, reveals the relative shortage of labour historians compared to scholars of other topics. And in some cases, departments that do employ a good-sized number of labour historians seldom offer labour history courses.<sup>35</sup>

Evidence of labour history's decline was clear by the century's end: conference attendance was down, libraries discontinued subscriptions to journals, and membership in associations shrank. Wales's mighty Llafur, for instance, reached a nadir in 2000 when membership dropped to 450; the current membership is 551. (Hopkin 139) The lack of labour history found in the pages of professional journals is another sign. *Social History*, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy point out, contained only five labour or working-class history essays between 1999 and 2008; it published 149 between 1976 and 1999. (in Allen *et al.*, 120) A recent publication, *A Century of American Historiography*, contained zero essays on labour history. James M. Banner, Jr., the collection's editor, made no mention of this noteworthy omission in the introduction, but gave space to writers who covered fifteen other areas of historical inquiry.<sup>36</sup>

Labour history's problems appear to have coincided with the growth of a more moderate academic and political atmosphere. The shift away from leftist scholarship is apparent in a number of contexts. Take the case of journals. *Radical America* ceased publishing in the 1990s (*Radical History Review* continues, though, like *Social History*, it has published very few articles on labour or working-class history over the past five years), and the *History Workshop Journal*, which printed many left-leaning labour historians throughout the 1970s and 80s, no longer calls itself either a socialist or feminist journal. As one observer put it, the journal has lost much of its critical edge while seeking to achieve "academic respectability."<sup>37</sup>

Larger political and economic forces have undoubtedly played a part in shaping this historiographical and political environment, including de-industrialization, the election of right-wing politicians, and the Soviet Union's demise. In Britain, labour history had thrived both in and outside of the academy, and many study groups were sponsored by Marxists of various stripes, including the Communist Party of Great Britain, which broke up in 1991. Furthermore, the presence of fewer union members in Britain has meant less overall interest in the history of the labour movement.

35. This is the case at Duke University where almost half a dozen scholars identify, at least in part, as labour historians.

36. Contributors wrote on several topics, including African-American, women's, legal and international history. Coverage of business, economic, and technology history are also missing from the pages of this volume. James M. Banner, Jr., *A Century of American Historiography* (Boston 2010).

37. Keith Flett, "Obituary: Artisan of history," *Socialist Review*, 204 (January 1997) <<http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr204/samuel.htm>> (5 July 2010).

Questions about the state of labour history have been especially pointed from within the academy. Dozens of commentators have weighed in on this so-called crisis, posing a rather blunt question: was there a future for labour history? Writing about the subject in 1994, David Roediger observed that the “sharpening concern with the future direction of labor history is an international one – but the forces feeding that concern are perhaps distinctive in the US case.”<sup>38</sup> Ten years later, another historian offered an especially bleak, almost over-the-top, assessment: “labor history has not just fallen off the academic wall; it has been pushed, only this time by the troubling triumvirate of feminism, queer theory, and postmodernism.”<sup>39</sup>

What happened to labour history? Over the years, several observers have pointed to the role of postmodernism and the so-called linguistic turn as one reason why class analysis has fallen out of favour in many circles. But, on close inspection, this is only part of the story. The notion that that one can attribute labour history’s decline to, say, the popularity of “feminism, queer theory, and postmodernism” is somewhat of an exaggeration, at least if we consider conditions in Britain. And neither feminism nor queer theories are incompatible with labour history. The question of postmodernism is more complicated, and several of the authors in these collections mention the work of postmodern-friendly historians like Patrick Joyce, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Joan Scott in insisting upon the significance of language over historical materialism. Yet McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen declare that the linguistic turn had only “restricted resonance in Britain.” (Allen *et al.*, 10) They write, “With the exception of Patrick Joyce, it is difficult to recall a single labour historian, at least in Britain, who was transformed by postmodernism or quit the field because of it.” (12) Emmet O’Connor, Conor McCabe, Joan Allen, Malcolm Chase, and Takao Matsumura make similar points in their case studies.

It is absolutely correct that postmodernist approaches have received a bit of a bruising lately, and several historians have offered convincing and unforgiving critiques.<sup>40</sup> But could McIlroy *et al.* be correct? Is Joyce really *the* lone defector, choosing to meticulously deconstruct discourse and engage in clever wordplays rather than investigate the forces of capitalist political economy and the dynamics of class relations?

38. David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (London 1994), 69.

39. Ardis Cameron, “‘Boys Do Cry’: The Rhetorical Power of the ‘New’ Labor History,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History in the Americas*, 1 (Fall 2004), 99. Also, see Raelene Frances and Bruce Scates, “Is Labour History Dead?,” *Australian Historical Studies*, 25 (April 1993), 470–481.

40. See Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1990); Judith Stein, “Where’s the Beef?” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 57 (Spring 2000), 40–47; Neville Kirk, “Decline and Fall, Resilience and Regeneration: A Review Essay on Social Class,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 57 (Spring 2000), 88–102; Alan Knight, “Patterns and Prescriptions in Mexican Historiography,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 25 (July 2006), 340–366.

A glance across the Atlantic reveals that postmodernism and the linguistic turn continues to inspire scholars, shape the profession and, in the process, blunt the edges of a once radical, class-centred labour history. In Canada, Bryan D. Palmer notes its intrusive presence throughout the 1980s and 90s, but believes that it “has perhaps slowed of late.” (215) In the US, it seems slightly more influential, but arguably not as strong as it was previously. Further south and east, its popularity is evident. Indeed, it would be difficult for McIlroy, Campbell, and Allen to sustain their position had they focused on the current state of Indian or Latin American labour historiography. In the area of Latin American historiography, for instance, they would discover an especially lively, decades-long debate that has pitted the more culturally-oriented John French and Daniel James against the more industrial relations-orientated John Womack Jr.<sup>41</sup> Although they have adopted aspects of postmodernism in their research, French and James continue to identify as labour historians. Yet several other Latin American scholars no longer do. Like a number of Indian academics, Latin America historians, including former Marxists, have found subalternism, which is compatible with postmodernism, useful.<sup>42</sup>

In order to understand labour historians’ concerns in the 1990s and the subtle – and not so subtle – dismissals of the subject in the early 2000s, it is necessary to explore academic trends in the previous decade. While several commentators celebrated advances in labour history in the 1980s, others spent part of the period engaging in forceful, multi-angle attacks on the subject, which coincided with employers’ remorseless assaults on the working class as a whole. Those who embraced the linguistic turn constituted one of a number of somewhat hostile groups. Others faulted labour historians for failing to more fully incorporate race and gender in their studies. A few were inspired by postmodernism, calling for scholars to break from historical materialism.<sup>43</sup>

41. John D. French and Daniel James, “Squaring the Circle: Women’s Factory Labor, Gender Ideology, and Necessity,” in John D. French and Daniel James, ed., *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* (Durham 1997), 1-30; John Womack Jr., “Doing Labor History: Feelings, Work and Material Progress,” *Journal of the Historical Society*, 5 (September 2005), 255–296; and John D. French and Daniel James, “The Travails of Doing Labor History: The Restless Wanderings of John Womack Jr.,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 4 (Summer 2007), 96–115. In a sign that Latin Americanist scholarship may be shifting away from attention to issues of identity at the expense of oppression, Brazilianist Barbara Weinstein, a former president of the American Historical Association, wrote that historians should focus more on expressions of structural inequality. See Barbara Weinstein, “Developing Inequality,” *American Historical Review*, 113 (February 2008), 1-18.

42. For a useful survey, see Florencia E. Mallon, “The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History,” *American Historical Review*, 99 (December 1994), 1491-1515.

43. William H. Sewell, Jr., “Toward a Post-materialist Rhetoric for Labor History,” in Lenard R. Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana 1993), 15-38. In recent years, Sewell has become more critical of postmodernist approaches.

Others were less theoretical. Finally, several attacked labour history from a variety of political economy perspectives, including some who have insisted on the fruitfulness of employing a state, as opposed to a class, centred analysis of the past.

Indeed, many appeared to have become uncomfortable with class analysis. More than a few broke with Marxism and had become liberals, choosing respectability over radicalism. Several who once identified as labour historians eventually, in John McIlroy's words, "reinvented themselves and pursued new careers." (Allen *et al.*, 95) McIlroy's point, which is echoed by Bryan D. Palmer, is demonstrably accurate. In fact, in the 1980s and 90s, some took parting shots at the subject before transitioning into something else, choosing to follow, in McIlroy's words, "fashion or funding." (41) Such figures had presumably decided that labour history was no longer important, which ultimately helped to reorient the cultures of history departments and shape the decisions of hiring committees.

A number of criticisms were found in the pages of labour history journals. Perhaps most famously, Princeton University's Joan Scott, who engaged with the labour aristocracy scholarship in her prizewinning 1974 study of French glassworkers, notoriously criticized labour historians for, in her view, paying inadequate attention to gender relations a decade later.<sup>44</sup> Without naming names, Scott, who also proudly identified Thompson and Gutman as key influences on her first book, made an especially forceful, though insufficiently footnoted, intervention in 1987, claiming that most scholars of labour have been only "half-hearted" in their "attention to gender." Recognizing that "gender" had "acquired a certain legitimacy" in the work of some, she nevertheless showed disappointment that others apparently did not "have time to study" it.<sup>45</sup> Partially motivated by Gareth Stedman Jones's use of language in his 1983 study of Chartism, Scott argued that greater attention to language and its different meanings would allow historians "to see the gender that is in the history of the working-class."<sup>46</sup> A year earlier, Scott published an even more pointed defense of language against class and materialism, which remains an

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See William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago 2005), 49.

44. See Joan Wallach Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), ix, 19-20, 218.

45. Joan Wallach Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 31 (Spring 1987), 2. In making these claims, Scott failed to offer concrete examples.

46. Joan Wallach Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 31 (Spring 1987), 12. On Gareth Stedman Jones, see *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1834-1982* (Cambridge 1983).

influential essay and has secured her position as perhaps the leading proponent of gender-centred studies.<sup>47</sup>

The complaint that labour historians have been unsatisfactorily attentive to working-class racism receives less attention in these collections than the debates surrounding questions of gender. Yet a full account of the controversies within labour history, at least in the US, must acknowledge the extent to which labour historians have, or have not, engaged with racial issues. Another Princeton University historian and long-time *Labor History* editorial board member, Nell Irvin Painter, argued that several scholars of the working class had failed to explore the ways in which white workers' racial identity found expression. In 1989, she criticized the work of three historians – Gutman, Montgomery, and her colleague, Wilentz – claiming that their lack of attention to working-class racism indicated that “the new labor history has a race problem.”<sup>48</sup>

Not all critics raised issues of gender or race. Others were unimpressed with the Thompsonian style of labour history. This was clear in Canada, where the more politically moderate Kenneth McNaught published an award-winning essay in the *Canadian Historical Review* criticizing, in a somewhat condescending, father-knows-best, fashion, the “young researchers who have been lovingly adapting E. P. Thompson to the mines, production lines, and even the countryside.”<sup>49</sup> Bryan D. Palmer reminds us that McNaught advised two leading labour scholars, David J. Bercuson and Irving Abella, who, like their mentor, wrote from a social democratic perspective, albeit outside the Thompsonian paradigm. They nevertheless identified as *labour historians* at the time.<sup>50</sup> (Palmer 198).

47. Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review*, 91 (December 1986), 1053-1075. Joan Sangster, noting that previous historians like Natalie Zemon Davis had called for more scholarly engagement with gender in the mid 1970s, reminds us that Scott’s insights have received more attention “than is warranted.” See Joan Sangster, “Beyond Dichotomies: Re-Assessing Gender History and Women’s History in Canada,” *Left History*, 3 (1995), 117.

48. Nell Irvin Painter, “The New Labor History and the Historical Moment,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2 (Spring 1989), 369. Perhaps more important than Painter’s intervention were those by the late Herbert Hill, a former National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) official. In 1988, Hill offered a pointed critique of Gutman, charging the influential scholar with understating expressions of working-class racism. See Herbert Hill, “Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2 (Winter 1988), 132-200.

49. See Kenneth McNaught, “E. P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s,” *The Canadian Historical Review*, 62 (June 1981), 168. Palmer outlines the context surrounding the publication of this essay in *Histories of Labour*, 201.

50. For more on the divisions between the social democrats and Marxists, see Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal 1995), 18.

Meanwhile, others found problems with the mostly British Marxist-oriented scholars who stressed the history of militant, shop floor traditions of rank-and-file union activists. Throughout the 1970s, several had pointed out divisions and conflicts between the general membership and union leaders, and in the process noted instances in which rank-and-filers had rebelled against their bosses *and* the union leadership, which, some argued, were in cahoots with management. Speaking at a SSLH-sponsored conference in 1982, Jonathan Zeitlin took issue with this interpretation, denying that there were sharp separations between the rank-and-file and the union bureaucracy. He charged James Hinton, Richard Price, and Richard Hyman with failing to account for "rank and file passivity and conservatism" and for overlooking the extent to which union leaders responded "to pressure from below." The "rank and filist approach," Zeitlin concluded, "is fundamentally unsatisfactory and should be abandoned outright rather than further refined."<sup>51</sup>

A prolific and polemical scholar, Zeitlin's criticisms did not cease with his cutting analysis of the "rank and filist approach." In future interventions, he called for less Thompsonian-style scholarship and for greater numbers of studies that examined institutions like those written by an earlier generation of scholars. Rather than focus on the informal activities of the working classes as a whole, Zeitlin, who receives much attention from McIlroy, suggested revisiting and emulating the work of scholars like the Webbs. In Zeitlin's words, the "future of labour history should be sought in its redefinition as the history of industrial relations, understood as the changing relationships between workers, trade unions, employers and the state."<sup>52</sup>

At roughly the same time, others complained that labour scholars neglected official politics and the state's role more generally. Some challenged Marxist class analysis altogether while a few wrote fair-minded articles on the ways in which greater sensitivity to political institutions could deepen our understanding of labour's past. At the decade's beginning, Geoff Eley and the late Keith Nield launched a polemic in the journal *Social History* on the failure of social historians generally, and labour historians in particular, to examine "formal political processes."<sup>53</sup> By mid-century, a more energetic attack on class-centred approaches to history was under way by those who insisted on "state autonomy." The state, these figures argued, was not simply an instrument of the ruling class. According to Theda Skocpol, "the classical wisdom of

51. Jonathan Zeitlin, "Trade Unions and Job Control: A Critique of 'Rank and Filism,'" *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 46 (1983), 6-7.

52. Jonathan Zeitlin, "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations," *The Economic History Review*, 40 (May 1987), 178. For a somewhat similar analysis, see Howard Kimeldorf, "Bringing Unions Back In (Or Why We Need a New Old Labor History)," *Labor History*, 32 (Winter 1991), 91-103.

53. Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, "Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?," *Social History*, 5 (May 1980), 262.

Marxian political sociology must be turned, if not on its head, then certainly on its side.”<sup>54</sup> Writing about labour history’s decline in 1994, Ira Katznelson, inspired by Eley and Nield’s 1980 essay and Henry Pelling’s politically moderate studies of British labour politics, argued that scholars could revitalize the subject *if* they focused more on what he called “the ‘new institutionalism’ in political science, sociology, and history.”<sup>55</sup>

It is worth noting that several of these strong-minded debaters, including Scott, Painter, Zeitlin, and Katznelson, prominent scholars who supposedly wanted to play a part in directing labour history’s future, have little, if anything, to do with the subject today. Moreover, David J. Bercuson and Irving Abella, figures who helped shape the character of Canadian labour historiography in the 1970s and 80s, have also moved on; Bercuson is largely interested in military history while Abella, a former president of the Committee on Canadian Labour History, now identifies himself mainly as a historian of ethnicity and immigration. He was recently appointed a Distinguished Senior Fellow in the Vered Jewish Canadian Studies Program at the University of Ottawa.

The departure of Scott, Painter, Zeitlin, and Katznelson from labour history is somewhat surprising, since they finished their various interventions with clear and ambitious agendas for the subject’s future. By any measure, they seemed, at the time, genuinely engaged. Consider, for example, the case of Scott, who concluded her 1987 contribution confident that “a rich and challenging” experience awaited labour historians who embraced gender as a category of analysis.<sup>56</sup> In much of her recent gender-related research, Scott appears to have little interest in labour or class.

What about race? One does not need to look far to recognize impressive output, especially in the years since Painter published her article. Increasingly, historians have come to realize that African Americans, in Steven Hahn’s words, have been “more consistently a part of the nation’s working-class, over a more extended period than any other social, ethnic, or racial group.”<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, American labour historians were instrumental in launching “whiteness” studies. For instance, David Roediger, the leading figure associated

54. Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research,” in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, ed., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge 1985), 25.

55. Ira Katznelson, “The ‘Bourgeois’ Dimension: A Provocation About Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labor History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46 (Fall 1994), 9. For a thoughtful critique of state-centred approaches to labour history, see James Naylor, “Bringing Which State Back in?,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 36 (Fall 1995), 317-328.

56. Joan W. Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 31 (Spring 1987), 12.

57. Quoted in Brian Kelly, “Emancipations and Reversals: Labor, Race, and the Boundaries of American Freedom in the Age of Capital,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 75 (Spring 2009), 170. In this important essay, Kelly notes the proliferation of strong studies that integrate race and class.



with this scholarship, placed white working-class racism in the nineteenth century at the heart of his hugely influential and widely debated *The Wages of Whiteness*.<sup>58</sup> Painter's 2010 *The History of White People* draws on some of the insights of the whiteness literature produced by labour historians.<sup>59</sup> Yet, unlike racially-sensitive labour scholars, she is less concerned with illustrating class divisions and power relationships generally than she is in exploring race as an idea over the centuries.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps Painter, whose earlier publications investigated labour and African-American struggles, has a class problem.

Zeitlin and Katznelson, multidisciplinary scholars who called for labour historians to focus on formal institutions and the state, have followed their own advice – but labour appears to be mostly left out in their current scholarship. In recent years, Zeitlin, based at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has become a researcher of the European Union and business-politics relations. Columbia University's Katznelson, one of the original editors of *International Labor and Working-Class History*, is currently investigating the history of democracy and liberal ideas in twentieth-century US history.

More US historians appeared to have jumped ship than scholars from other countries. But unlike McIlroy and Palmer, Elizabeth Faue, Donna Haverty-Stacke, and Daniel Walkowitz, chroniclers of the United States' state-of-the-field, say little about this tendency, though they openly acknowledge that American labour history has seen better days. How does one explain this? For Faue, the subject's decline is related to the shortage of labour history jobs and a lack of general financial support for the subject. (175) In other words, scholars chose not to study it for practical and financial reasons.

Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz complement Faue in their introductory chapter in *Rethinking U.S. Labor History*. Here they discuss the subject's evolution since the publication of the 1983 volume, which was co-edited by Walkowitz. The "then young historians [who contributed to that volume]," they explain, "helped reconceptualize" the history of the American working class. (Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz, 7) This seems true and rather uncontroversial, though, given Walkowitz's involvement, somewhat self-serving. More than a quarter of a century later, we must ask: where are they now? More than half, including Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf, Jonathan Prude, Steven Fraser,

58. David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London 1991). According to one senior scholar, "no book in my academic lifetime has had a greater impact on scholars and students than Roediger's book." See Bruce Laurie, "Workers, Abolitionists, and the Historians: A Historiographical Perspective," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 5 (Winter 2008), 18.

59. Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York 2010).

60. In her recent study, Painter inexcusably neglected to cite the late Theodore W. Allen's path-breaking two-volume study of the roots of white supremacy. See Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control, Volume 1* (London 1994); and *The Invention of the White Race: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America, Volume 2* (London 1997).

Joshua Freeman, Leon Fink, and Nelson Lichtenstein continue to research, write, and teach labour history. Lichtenstein and Fink have been particularly active in promoting labour history at their institutions and beyond through graduate programs and by organizing conferences. Fink is editor of the highly-respected journal *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* and is one of the three organizers of the Newberry Library's monthly speaker series in Labor History. Lichtenstein heads the University of California at Santa Barbara's Center for the Study of Work, Labor, and Democracy, which hosts regular conferences and speakers.<sup>61</sup>

But four contributors, including co-editor Michael Frisch, have, like Joyce, Scott, Painter, Zeitlin, Katznelson, Abella, and Bercuson, little to do with labour history at present. Frisch has established himself as a specialist in oral history. Francis G. Couvares, Christine Stansell, and Sean Wilentz study mostly culture and politics independent of labour. In one of his last contributions to a labour history journal, Wilentz announced that he very much agreed with Katznelson's ideas, echoing his support for "the importance of government, law, and politics to the study of labor," but faulted him for not going "far enough in his criticisms." Yet Wilentz maintained that "labor historians hardly have been unique in their flatness."<sup>62</sup> Many of Wilentz's political and historical writings over the last few years have appeared, not in labour history journals, but in the *New Republic*, a widely-circulated magazine owned and edited by hardcore Zionist and former leftist Martin Peretz. Today, Wilentz, who recently authored well-received books on nineteenth-century politics and Ronald Reagan's presidency, appears more interested in emulating vital centre theorist and John F. Kennedy advisor Arthur Schlesinger Jr. than in follow-

61. Politically, Lichtenstein has certainly mellowed over the years. In 2000, he wrote somewhat nostalgically about what he called "the corporatist bargain" of World War II. Alarmed by decades of corporate and right-wing assaults on labour unions, he insisted that the wartime labour-management agreement, which permitted unionization provided that union leaders promised to prevent strikes, "looks much better than it did just thirty years ago. Resistance to union organizing declined dramatically during the war as the union movement nearly doubled in size." See Nelson Lichtenstein, "Class Politics and the State during World War Two," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 58 (Fall 2000), 264. The former Trotskyist appears to have lost interest in reasserting, as he put it in a response to a critic on the left, "the validity of a somewhat shop-worn set of Trotskyist debating points." See Nelson Lichtenstein, "Rejoinder to Sharon Smith," *Historical Materialism*, 11 (December 2003), 446.

62. Sean Wilentz, "Labor History: Out of Vogue?" *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 46 (Fall 1994), 89-90. Couvares's case is also interesting. In his review of the 1983 collection, prominent labour historian Robert H. Zieger wrote that Couvares's essay on class and culture in Pittsburgh was the collection's "best." See Robert H. Zieger, review of Michael H. Frisch and Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Working-Class America: Essays on Labor, Community, and American Society*, 70 (December 1983) 635. *The Journal of American History*, 70 (December 1983), 635. In recent years, Couvares, an Amherst College professor, has explored the history of movie censorship and free speech.

ing in Thompson's footsteps.<sup>63</sup> It is difficult to believe that Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz failed to notice that the scholarly priorities of Frisch, Couvares, Stansell, and especially Wilentz, had changed.

One of the most forward-thinking and talented contributors to the 1983 collection, Susan Porter Benson, passed away in 2005. Benson, who concluded her career as a professor at the University of Connecticut, published the marvelous *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* in 1986, which examines the ways in which female department store workers at places like Filenes and Macy's coped with unfulfilling labour, catered to the demands of middle-class shoppers, and confronted the challenges of exploitative and sexist managers.<sup>64</sup> *Counter Cultures*, which included one chapter previously published in *Radical America*, represents the best tradition of the groundbreaking scholarship encouraged by the feminist-socialists who shaped the editorial flavor of *History Workshop Journal* in the early 1980s. In light of her close attention to gender and class dynamics, this study has gained respect from critical investigators of consumerism. According to a scholar of workplace relations in Canadian retail stores, Benson's study "remains one of the strongest works in consumer history."<sup>65</sup>

Apparently, the University of Connecticut's history department was uninterested in hiring another gender-minded labour historian or labour-minded gender historian after Benson's untimely death. Instead, in Fall 2007, the department advertised a job for "U.S. Gender and Women's History": "The successful candidate will contribute to developing a graduate program in twentieth-century U. S. history with an emphasis on gender, race, ethnicity, and other categories of identity."<sup>66</sup> Rather than give class equal weight to gender, race, or ethnicity, the job advertisement's drafters presumably believed that labour or class fit into the "other categories of identity." Three years after circulating the advertisement, the University of Connecticut's history department employs five historians who identify, at least in part, as gender scholars. No one in the department identifies as a labour or working-class historian.<sup>67</sup>

63. See Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York 2005); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York 2008). For more on Wilentz, see Eric Lott, *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual* (New York 2006), 2, 8, 12, 32; and Christopher Shea, "Sean Wilentz, Bringing It All Back Home," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 September, 2010, <<http://chronicle.com/article/Sean-Wilentz-Bringing-It-All/124221>> (7 September 2010).

64. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana 1986).

65. Donica Belisle, "Negotiating Paternalism: Women and Canada's Largest Department Stores, 1890-1960," *Journal of Women's History*, 19 (Spring 2007), 58.

66. Copy of job advertisement in author's possession.

67. The University of Connecticut's history department is hardly unique. Neither the University of California at Davis nor the University of Michigan hired labour historians following the retirement of prominent historians David Brody and Sidney Fine respectively. Many

What explains the widespread abandonment of labour history and class analysis over the last couple of decades? Irish labour historian Emmet O' Connor offers one of the more provocative, though mostly convincing, reasons: "It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that more enduring explanations lie in the class background of Irish academics, and in an aversion to acknowledging the importance of class as a historical concept or, indeed, as a factor in Irish society." (O' Connor in McIlroy *et al.*, 154) This is a rather astute observation, and there is no need to restrict it to Ireland. The same could be said in numerous countries, where the topic of class inequality and struggle often make historians, especially those who come from financially privileged backgrounds (there appear to be fewer class traitors in the academy today than there once were), uncomfortable. In light of O' Connor's insight, supporters of labour and working-class history should remain skeptical when commentators declare that its practitioners are old-fashioned, narrow-minded, or insufficiently attentive to race, gender, or the state. Often, though not always, such criticism masks the historian's personal uneasiness with class analysis. After all, these same critics are rather selectively argumentative, rarely challenging scholars of official politics, gender, or race for failing to properly examine class divisions.

### What Next?

ORGANIZATIONALLY, US LABOUR HISTORIANS, hoping to revitalize the subject and regain respect, formed an SSLH-style organization, the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA), in 1998. With respect to scholarship, in the years since the interventions of scholars like Scott, Painter, Zeitlin, Katznelson, and others, labour historians have, in fact, become even more sensitive to gender, race, and the state, and several have written institutionally-focused studies that fall outside the Thompsonian model. Importantly, many do so, unrepentantly, as labour historians. Another legacy of these interventions has been the declining popularity of studies that examine strikes, lock-outs, shop floor struggles, and other instances of working-class militancy. More generally, fewer write as orthodox or neo-Marxists. This phenomenon has coincided with the rightward drift of many history departments. An honest assessment reveals that most university-based historians are centrists or liberals.

And the question remains: is there a future for labour history in this neo-Schlesingerian academic and political climate? Donna Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz answer affirmatively, maintaining that the case studies in their new collection, taken together, demonstrate the subject's "rejuvenation" and "renaissance." (11-12) Unlike the earlier anthology, also co-edited by Walkowitz, this volume contains essays by junior, mid-level, and senior historians, including many LAWCHA members: Eric Arnesen, Daniel Bender, Eileen

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other departments, too many to list here, have not employed labour historians in decades.

Boris, Elizabeth Faue, Joseph McCartin, Steve Rosswurm, Shelton Stromquist, and Peter Way. They are joined by younger scholars, such as Theresa Case and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein. Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf, historians who contributed to the 1983 book, return with another essay on the ways in which religion shaped working-class experiences.

What about ideology and politics? While Frisch and Walkowitz acknowledged the centrality of the English Marxist traditions to the writing of American labour history in 1983, Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz make no explicit mention of Marxism's value to the subject in *Rethinking U.S. Labor History*, though they point out the enormous impact of Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* as well as the influence of Hobsbawm, Gutman and Montgomery. (5) To their credit, in an effort to understand the scholarly place of labour history since the 1980s, they join with others in noting that a "new focus on cultural history" played a part in marginalizing "class as a central category of scholarly inquisition." (7) With the exception of a few major omissions, their introduction seems fair-minded.

The twelve chapters demonstrate the continued relevance of class as well as gender, race, religion, and politics. At least one embraces an institutional approach advocated by scholars like Jonathan Zeitlin in the 1980s. Nine are original case studies while three, written by Daniel Bender, Elizabeth Faue, and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, focus on "new directions in U.S. labor history." Taken together, the variety of the essays reinforces the points made by several of the contributors to *Histories of Labour* and *Making History*: labour history remains a highly dynamic subject produced by a diverse set of historians.

Several of the authors, including Peter Way, Teresa Case, Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, and Elizabeth and Ken Fones Wolf, examine particular working-class struggles. Collectively, they explore conflicts from the eighteenth-century to roughly the present. Way's study, a labour history of military service during the Seven Years War, is one of the strongest. Way, the author of an outstanding book about canal builders, offers a unique glimpse into the world of eighteenth century combat by exploring the life of James Miller, a soldier who served on the North American continent. He insists, correctly in my view, that labour historians must take the lives and struggles of soldiers seriously. (43) After all, desertions and mutinies "were," as he puts it, "a product of class struggle and informed by an enduring plebeian oppositional culture that clearly perceived the difference of interests between masters and servants such as soldiers and the officer class within the military labor relationship." (62) In writing about labour in the eighteenth century, Way has answered the question posed by Christopher Tomlins more than a decade ago: "Why Wait for Industrialism?"<sup>68</sup>

68. Christopher Tomlins, "Why Wait for Industrialism? Work, Legal Culture, and the Example of Early America: An Historiographical Argument," *Labor History*, 40 (February 1999), 5–34.

While Way deserves recognition for highlighting the life and struggles of Miller, his broader point, that “virtually no work has been done on the subject of military labor,” seems overstated. (43) Way is right that few have treated military services as labour in the North American context, although this University of Windsor historian, surprisingly, fails to acknowledge some important exceptions, including Jacalyn Mary Duffin’s *Labour/Le Travail* article on soldiers, work, and health in British North America.<sup>69</sup> Outside the North American continent, historians have been less guilty of the sins of omission. In Australia, Bruce Scates observes, “labour historians have long been cognisant of the impact war has had on Australian culture and society.”<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, Way’s study leaves us with important questions, such as: should one consider military service a form of free or coerced labour? What is the relationship between nationalism and class? How does violence relate to working-class consciousness? We can hope that historians will produce additional studies that engage with the class conflict nature of military service, both within the North American context and outside of it, in the future. If so, will we see greater collaboration between military and labour historians? It is plausible that such an assorted gathering will take place at forthcoming conferences, including at the next Latin American Labor History conference, “Beyond the Battlefield: The Labor of Military Service in Latin America and the Caribbean,” which will be held at Duke University in Spring 2011.

The studies by Case and Boris/Klein illustrate the drama of labour struggles in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively. Each emphasizes the importance of gender. Case explores the ways in which masculinity found expression during strikes on the Southwest Railroad while Boris and Klein investigate the recent struggles of mostly female immigrant home health care workers. These low-paid employees labour in an industry that Boris and Klein astutely call “part domestic service, part health care,” and they explain that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has denied them collective bargaining rights. (330) By organizing outside of the NLRB’s framework, building alliances with community members, and protesting on the streets, these workers have won some victories, occasionally even securing collective bargaining rights. (350)

In her description of railroad workers on both sides of the picket line, Case, following historian Stephen Norwood, invokes the importance of masculinity: “The sense of dignity and responsibility that railroaders identified with was linked closely to nineteenth-century notions of manliness; the traits of a good railroad man were understood to be naturally masculine and a measure

69. Jacalyn Mary Duffin, “Soldier’s Work; Soldier’s Health: Morbidity, Mortality and their Causes in an 1840s British Garrison,” *Labour/ Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), 37-80.

70. Bruce Scates, “Review Article: The Price of War: Labour Historians Confront Military History,” *Labour History*, May 2003 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lab/84/scates.html>>

of manliness.”<sup>71</sup> In her judgment, several railroaders, aware of their roles as breadwinners, crossed picket lines not because they were anti-union, but rather because they felt the need to provide financially for their families. This appears to be a reasonable assessment, but too much focus on, say, “notions of manliness,” turns our attention away from the equally important class-based hatreds that the strikers and their supporters, including women, had for both the scabs and railroad owner Jay Gould. After all, we must not lose sight of the forces responsible for the strike in the first place.

Other contributors examine the ways in which religion and conservative politics influenced labour movements. Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf offer a well-reasoned study of how various southern Protestants responded to the labour movement’s post-World War II organizing efforts, and Steve Rosswurm focuses on the conflicts between Catholic and Communist union members in Waterbury, Connecticut during the early 1940s. In both cases, conservatives prevailed: Catholic members of Waterbury’s chapter of the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelters (Mine-Mill) established control of their local and Protestant anti-unionists, led by organized employers and right-wing ministers, succeeded in keeping most southern workplaces union-free.

What ultimately killed the southern unionization drive? What caused the communists’ defeat in Waterbury? With respect to the south, the Fones-Wolfs maintain that labour organizers failed to “appreciate the intricacies of southern evangelical Protestantism.” (220) This is a sensible explanation, but I can think of others, including the role of repression, which, despite the talk in some circles about the state’s supposed “autonomy,” involved politicians and police forces working hand-in-hand with employers and right-wing religious figures in campaigns against union activists. In Waterbury, a city where 70 per cent of the population embraced Catholicism, we should be unsurprised by the development of a strong, and ultimately successful, anti-communist current, which included the involvement of a Father Donnelly, one of a handful of clergy members nationally who denounced communists from the pulpit, coordinated with national anti-communist unionists, and encouraged non-communists to run in union elections. (294)

Of course, not all expressions of anti-communism were religiously-inspired. Some of the most passionate opponents of the Communist Party USA were liberals, and historian Eric Arnesen, a critic of Marxism himself, explores African-American union leader A. Philip Randolph’s anti-communism. Assessing the state of American communist and anti-communist historiography, Arnesen suggests that “scholars need to take the black anti-communist critique more seriously.” (237) One of the very few US scholars to serve as an endowed labour history professor, Arnesen believes that historians who have

71. Theresa A. Case, “Losing the Middle Ground: Strikebreakers and Labor Protests on the Southwest Railroads,” 119. See also Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill 2002).

written favourably about the CPUSA's positions on race are guilty of "romanticization" and of sidestepping criticism, including arguments meant to draw attention to the authoritarian character of Stalinist Russia and to the ways in which the party was subordinate to Moscow's decisions. (236, 244) He is certainly correct that revisionists have been somewhat silent on the topic of black anti-communism and, more generally, that several scholars of American communists have been uncritical of their subject.

Arnesen links the source of Randolph's anti-communism chiefly to international affairs, noting the ways in which the 1939 Hitler-Stalin pact disillusioned the former Popular Front activist. Soon, conflicts between Randolph and Communists escalated; CP members condemned him as a "reformist" after he began criticizing the Party. Firing back, Randolph charged, rather outlandishly, that no force represented a more serious "danger to the Negro and labor than the Communist Party." Communists, Randolph proclaimed, constituted the "Number One Enemy of the Negro People." (252, 254) Bitterly opposed to their involvement in social movements, Randolph supported efforts to bar communists from holding positions in labour unions.

Like many biographers, Arnesen appears to sympathize with his subject. Although he is critical of Randolph's imperfect organizational strategies, which, in his words, included an "over-centralized and at times ineffective" leadership style, he finds Randolph's assessments mostly sound. But some of Randolph's comments were frankly over-the-top, including the statement that communists were the number one enemy of African Americans. Based on evidence marshaled by scholars like Mark Naison and Robin D. G. Kelley, historians who have skillfully explored the ways in which CP members tackled instances of racial inequality in northern and southern workplaces and neighbourhoods, Randolph's position seems rather disingenuous.<sup>72</sup> Arnesen does not challenge Randolph's statements. Nor does he seem disturbed by Randolph's support of union officials who barred communists from leadership positions.

It is worth considering Arnesen's larger role as a critic of popular interpretations of the past. Indeed, he has earned a reputation for being somewhat of a contrarian, and his challenge to historians sympathetic to the CPUSA is consistent with his criticism of whiteness studies, his polemical approach to scholarship on the so-called "long civil rights movement" – a popular historiographical trend that dates the emergence of African-American freedom struggles to the decades before the movement's official start in the 1950s – and his unimaginative criticisms of political judgments that are to the left of his own increasingly centrist politics.<sup>73</sup> What body of scholarship will Arnesen

72. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana 1983); and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill 1990).

73. Eric Arnesen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 60 (Fall 2001), 3-32; and Eric Arnesen, "Reconsidering the 'Long Civil



target next? Perhaps he will find fault with his colleagues who insist on the need to study informal workers. Or maybe he will take on scholars of the new right, a popular topic in many circles. Whatever the case, unlike other former leftist historians who have become liberals, centrists, or conservatives, Arnesen will likely continue to write as a *labour historian*, and in the process will sometimes force us to examine historical issues in new ways, even if his interpretations often seem overstated.

Whereas Rosswurm and Arnesen have underlined political tensions within the labour movement, Joseph McCartin focuses on the broader political economy over the last forty years, noting the ways in which the election of right-wing politicians and de-industrialization have weakened organized labour altogether. While an earlier generation of labour historians attacked liberals from the left, McCartin, like growing numbers of liberal scholars is, in part, concerned with charting the "rise of the right."<sup>74</sup> In particular, he documents the reasons behind the decline in strikes, which, he believes, was caused by "a remarkable confluence of events and forces" that came together between 1979 and 1983.<sup>(379)</sup> Economically, McCartin points to airline deregulation, plant closures, and threats of such closures. Politically, he notes actions by politicians like Ronald Reagan, including his 1981 assault on the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). After this mass firing of 11,000 strikers, employers, often in consultation with union-busting attorneys, showed a greater willingness to use permanent replacements during strikes. Employers had enjoyed these rights since the Supreme Court's 1938 *NLRB v. Mackay Radio and Telegraphy Company* decision, but very few used this weapon for fear of provoking controversy. Emboldened by Reagan's infamous clampdown, employers began using scabs with greater frequency in the 1980s.

Conditions hardly improved in the 1990s under Democratic President Bill Clinton, who enthusiastically supported the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). High-paying

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Rights Movement,'" *Historical Speaking*, 10 (April 2009), 31-34. Arnesen apparently does not like Lenin, and in a review criticizes Bryan D. Palmer for neglecting what Arnesen calls "Leninist brutality." See Eric Arnesen, "Faction Figure: James P. Cannon, Early Communist History, and Radical Faith," *Labour/Le Travail*, 63 (Spring 2009), 257.

74. Studies focusing on postwar anti-unionism have become somewhat of a cottage industry. Howell J. Harris, *The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s* (Madison 1982); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-1960* (Urbana 1994); Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, "Origins of the Conservative Ascendancy: Barry Goldwater's Early Senate Career and the De-legitimization of Organized Labor," *The Journal of American History*, (December 2008), 678-709; David M. Anderson, "'Things are Different Down Here': The 1955 Perfect Circle Strike, Conservative Civic Identity, and the Roots of the New Right in the 1950s Industrial Heartland," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 74 (Fall 2008), 101-123; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York 2009); and Kim Phillips-Fein, "Business Conservatism on the Shop Floor: Anti-union Campaigns in the 1950s," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, (Summer 2010), 9-26.

unionized factory jobs were victims of these agreements. To his credit, McCartin, unlike many historians and trade union leaders, exposes both Republican *and* Democratic Party politicians, noting that powerful, bipartisan forces have backed laws that have hurt, rather than helped, organized labour. In this context, fewer unions felt confident enough to strike.

But in order to understand why many unionized workers have not participated in strikes in recent years, one must not merely focus on management and politicians. McCartin's list of reasons for the decline in working-class protests, the neoliberal onslaught, the rise of union-busting consultants, and the role of anti-labour politicians, is ultimately incomplete. We must also, despite Jonathan Zeitlin's plea decades ago, take seriously the often de-radicalizing roles played by some union leaders. After all, one hardly needs to look far to identify historical examples of union leaders who have appeared largely disconnected from the rank-and-file, have actively discouraged strikes and other expressions of working-class combativity, and have, in the worst cases, assisted bosses in policing the activities of union activists.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, strike support is expensive, and numerous union leaders prefer maintaining the flow of dues money into their coffers over forfeiting it temporarily during periods of conflict. To be fair, their tepidity, self-interest, and occasional acts of class collaborationism are less significant in explaining the declining power of organized labour than broader political economy changes. Yet one must not let such figures off the hook.

Shelton Stromquist's "Rethinking Working-Class Politics in Comparative-Transnational Contexts" is the collection's most ambitious essay, adding to the growing number of studies on international labour history. Stromquist, who is best known for his important books on nineteenth-century railroad conflicts and the limits of Progressive Era reformers, is principally interested in the ways in which union activists influenced municipal politics in Brisbane, Australia, Wellington, New Zealand, and the US city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin from 1890 to 1920.<sup>76</sup> "Localist politics within the emerging labor and socialist parties," he notes, "challenged the national framework of their respective movements with a different set of internationalist loyalties." He refers to this as "localist internationalism," and describes how labour activists and socialists influenced politics in these cities profoundly, including, most importantly, by winning political office. (147–8)

75. For more on this, see Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York 1999); and Kim Moody, *US Labor in Trouble and Transition: The Failure of Reform from Above, the Promise of Revival from Below* (London 2007).

76. For Stromquist's earlier work, see Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana 1987); Shelton Stromquist, *Reinventing "The People": The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Twentieth-Century Liberalism* (Urbana 2006).

Stromquist, like Marcel van der Linden, spotlights several recent studies of transnational and comparative labour histories, and maintains that this burgeoning scholarly development is comparable to the conceptual breakthroughs of the new labour history.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, we are guaranteed to witness the publications of more comparative and international studies of working-class politics and struggles in the future. A forthcoming volume edited by Leon Fink, slated for release in December 2010, boldly suggests that this scholarship constitutes “the transnational turn in labor history.”<sup>78</sup> Whether or not this approach represents a new stage, or turn, analogous to the historiographical advances associated with Thompson, Hobsbawm, Gutman, Kessler-Harris, and Montgomery is difficult to predict. Practical concerns, including the high cost of conducting research in multiple countries, will insure that only the best funded (or independently wealthy) scholars will succeed in producing well-crafted studies. Certainly, the economic downturn and budget crises, which have caused many university administrators to reduce research funding, will not help matters.

The final three essays, written under the heading, “New Directions in U.S. Labor History,” are historiographical and emphasize cultural, as opposed to political economy approaches, to the study of labour history. This imbalance is problematic, especially since a good-sized number of the volume’s case studies focus on political divisions and disputes, the forces of oppression, and the characteristics of labour protests, not working-class identities or non-combative cultural experiences. Articles by two contributors, Daniel Bender and Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, seek to illustrate the usefulness of the so-called cultural turn to labour history, while Elizabeth Faue surveys recent literature on the linkages between gender and labour. Together, their articles demonstrate that class remains important, but it is merely one of a number of categories of analysis.

Faue’s “Re-imagining Labor: Gender and New Directions in Labor and Working-Class History” outlines the continued relevance of gender and historicizes the shift from women’s to gender labour history. In describing this transition, Faue, perhaps unsurprisingly, gives credit to Joan Scott. But unlike several critics, Faue is uninterested in finding fault with the former labour historian. Instead, she identifies value in Scott’s scholarly interventions, noting that, by emphasizing the significance of gender in a broad sense, she “opened up questions about working-class masculinity and its expression in a muscular and masculinist labor ideology.” (460) Beginning in the 1990s, several historians began producing studies of working-class manhood, and Faue singles out Steve Meyer, Stephen Norwood, and Craig Heron for demonstrating the

77. John McIlroy shares this view. See *Histories of Labour*, 45.

78. The volume will include essays by scholars of Britain, Canada, Latin America, and the US. Leon Fink, ed., *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (Oxford forthcoming).

wide-ranging approaches to masculinity. Teresa Case's work is certainly part of this tendency.

Bender and Schwartz-Weinstein are the collection's most culturally-sensitive authors. Seeking, in part, to address the "questions of crisis [that] linger over the field," Bender insists that historians should explore the topic of class itself in new ways. (410) Rather than view the so-called "cultural turn" as a threat to labour history, Bender believes that labour scholars should join with their non-labour historian colleagues and embrace it; by following such a path, labour historians will likely gain greater institutional respect. Specifically, he calls for more attention to the senses – hearing, tasting, seeing, and especially smelling – noting that such an approach will expand "our understanding of class as a category of analysis" and illuminate "its connection to other constructed categories of difference, especially race and gender." (424) "The study of senses," he maintains, "bridges the methodological gap between cultural and social history by defining class as something that is both experienced and represented." (430)

Readers will likely find Bender's insights clever, but incomplete. As he puts it, "class remains defined by experience, that is, the experience of smell, sound, taste, sight, and touch." (430) This is partly true. The senses have definitely shaped the lives of ordinary people, but for many, class has always been defined more profoundly by the ways in which capitalism promotes feelings of financial insecurity and forces countless numbers to confront expressions of exploitation and humiliation daily. Workers also experience class by engaging in collective and individual acts against their oppressors. In short, class is experienced through formal and informal struggles. Comprehensive histories of the working class must certainly engage with identity as well as confront issues of oppression and struggle. Several ivory tower cultural and political historians may find such studies unpalatable, but this should not deter future labour scholars from writing about the often painful reality of working-class life, both in and outside of the workplace.

Zachary Schwartz-Weinstein's "The Limits of Work and the Subject of Labor History" is the volume's most theoretical essay. He makes two proposals: "First, I suggest that labour history look to the processes of marginalization and accumulation which constrict and expand the definitions of work and the classes of workers." Second, he insists that we must "focus on how newly 'labored' (and de-labored) forms of work are situated in relation to contemporary and historical capitalisms and articulations of race, gender, and nation." (489) Rather than focus primarily on "productive labor," scholars should pay greater attention to "the contingent and socially constructed means by which particular acts can become known, politically, legally, and in broader social and cultural frames, as labor." (494) Neither liberal nor classical Marxist accounts, he argues, can accurately address the diversity of laboured experiences. In light of these proposals, we should hardly be surprised that he, like Bender, finds "valuable lessons" in the cultural turn.

Yet by insisting that labour historians must, essentially, expand the definition of what constitutes work, Schwartz-Weinstein makes a rather familiar argument. Many, especially non-western labour historians, have previously “problematized,” as the once fashionable postmodernists liked to say, the meanings of labour. For decades, historians have explored labour at the margins, informal workers, non-waged work, and non-unionized workplaces – and many have written, proudly, as *non-Marxists*. They have already, to use Schwartz-Weinstein’s terminology, “reoriented labor history’s subject.”(494) The more relevant question is: why do so many cultural historians continue to ignore class and minimize the importance of *all* types of work?

## Conclusion

THE ARTICLES IN THE THREE collections underscore several key issues, including, most prominently, that scholars of labour and working-class history are an assorted group with a diverse set of interests, ideologies, and methodological approaches to the subject. Too few non-labour historians have acknowledged the reality of this big tent. Some, having taught at institutions with no labour historian colleagues, are simply unaware; others, including some liberals, find class analysis unpleasant, have little respect for the working classes, and feel ambivalent about labour unions. For labour history to regain its standing, defenders must join SSLH-style organizations, participate in conferences, publish studies, argue with colleagues, and network with labour activists. Labour historians must relentlessly point out the subject’s richness. Indeed, as Robert Duncan puts it in the McIlroy *et al.* collection, “there is still a lot of work to be done.” (123)

Despite the confidence articulated by the contributors to the Haverty-Stacke and Walkowitz volume, it will not be easy. Some problems are structural. As long as we live in a class society, powerful forces will attempt to minimize the development of critical scholarship that focuses on the oppressive and exploitative features of capitalism and the ways in which ordinary people have confronted these pressures. Inevitably, such studies will displease high-level administrators and some academics, figures responsible for establishing and maintaining corporate-friendly and politically moderate systems of higher education throughout the globe. Despite the risks, labour historians should not concern themselves with offending these people. Instead, they should continue to educate, build networks, and agitate for a greater role in the universities. In other words, defenders must draw lessons from labour history.

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