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A return to materialism? Putting social history back into place.¹

Katrina Navickas

Social history is the study of societies and the structures that compose them. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, these societies and structures have been shaken by global economic crisis, riven by increasing inequality, and challenged by political revolutions, protest movements and wider debates about the power of economic elites within society.² Questions of class and materialism – that is, the large socio-economic structures of power that shape society – are integral to these debates. It is the duty of social historians to understand how economic and political systems shape social structures and relations.

Class and economic structures are however often distant and in the background rather than foreground of historical analysis, at least in Western Anglophone social history. Outside of the specific discipline of global studies, social historians often concentrate on small and targeted case studies of small groups, objects, localities or events. This focus on the specific runs the risk of losing sight of the bigger picture. Moreover, the development of cultural history within and alongside social history, particularly its emphasis on representations and identities, has shifted historians' attention away from larger socio-economic structures shaping cultures and identities.

This chapter surveys how and why this shift away from the 'big structures' has occurred in social history. It does not argue that social and cultural history are diametrically opposed. Nor does it suggest that historians should be backwardly revisionist. We should not return to older ways of understanding society such as Marxist

interpretations known as historical materialism, which presented a rigid and overly-theoretical economic structure that determined relations between classes and the development of social change. Rather, this chapter points to new directions for where social and cultural history can go to produce a more holistic and indeed grounded way of examining society. In particular, it calls for historians to learn from the discipline of labour geography, which offers new methods of understanding class, including an emphasis on social conflicts shaped by particular places and by local and global connections between societies.

The traditional historiographical narrative

Historians have gradually shifted away from explaining society and social change through the material forces of economics, political power and class. This shift is not a new story. In 1979, the early modern historian Lawrence Stone argued that historical research was returning to narrative. His now classic essay for *Past and Present* charted how in the 1960s and 1970s, historians had rejected the social scientific and economic explanations that dominated historical analysis, and had begun to prioritise the idea that ‘the culture of the group, and even the will of the individual, are potentially at least as important causal agents of change as the impersonal forces of material output and demographic growth’.³ They increasingly looked beyond large quantitative records of economic production and population change towards the more qualitative records and stories of individuals and specific groups. A person was no longer subsumed into a statistical table, reduced to the status of a number among many. Rather by looking at their

culture, their words, their objects, an individual was given agency, that is, the power to change their own history.

This emphasis on culture, texts and objects and the consequent agency of individuals was and remains a significant development in social history. Traditionally, studies of history writing ascribe the shift to the following factors: first, the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to Marxist historians losing their influence. Their explanations of class struggle and stages of development no longer seemed to fit the new, post-communist global world. Similarly, trade unions lost their prominence in politics and society from the 1980s onwards, their power diminished by capitalist individualist economics and right-wing politics. Traditional labour history, with its roots in trade unionism, Fabian and Marxist politics, therefore also no longer seemed relevant or even necessary.⁴ Stone's article came in the middle of this stage.

A second stage occurred as industrial and manufacturing industries entered major decline in the West during the 1980s. Heavy statistical economic histories of industrial production and commerce became out-dated. Instead, socio-economic historians began to emphasise the history of consumption, particularly in its cultural contexts. Studies of what people bought and consumed offered new insights into everyday (or moreover luxury) lives rather than the more traditional emphasis on calculating how much they produced or sold.⁵ The material became an object in histories of objects, consumerism and display, rather than the historical materialism of economic structures in Marxist theory. This emphasis on consumer goods naturally highlighted the middle classes as a topic of study, notably in eighteenth-century England and the British empire, in ways that previous histories of class identity had ignored. Studies highlighted the global and

imperial channels of exchange, with the research questions centring on orientalism or cultural appropriation, and how much of this influence trickled down to the lower classes. Class was an identity shaped by culture and the display of material goods.⁶

The third major development in social history, as predicted in Stone's article, was the emergence of post-structuralism and post-modern approaches to methodology and sources. Post-structuralism promised a way of writing history without being bounded by structures – the economic, political or chronological frameworks upon which historians hang their explanations of change. Its methods and approaches to history sought to challenge the old Marxist and Whiggish narratives of stages and progress that, its proponents argued, were overly determinist. Post-structuralist histories emphasised that nothing is inevitable; individuals had agency and could change their own destinies, particularly through culture and words. It also importantly drew attention to the historian's own perspectives and relationship with the narratives and texts that they studied as primary sources. Historians could never know the real 'truth' of history as their interpretation could never be objective. Their own life experience and perspectives always influenced their interpretations.⁷

Initially, post-structuralist history sought to understand political identities in new ways. Proponents of what became known as the 'linguistic turn' argued that words were a channel that allowed people to challenge existing power structures and develop their own power or agency.⁸ From the 1990s onwards, historians 'turned' in various ways, focusing on what words, images, objects, buildings and emotions represented about individuals and groups, particularly in relation to their identity. Representation is a key feature. Within the framework of representation, class is individualised; it is relegated to one part

of an individual identity. Cultural history has focused on individual and group identities outside political or economic structures. Where cultural historians consider class, they see it as a collective identity, but often class is equated to another form of symbolism or representative experience. They argue that agency is individual rather than collective through class.⁹ Economic and social structures are underplayed.

The emphasis upon representations contained in language, culture, media and physical objects remains a major feature of the study of historical societies.¹⁰ Gender, postcolonial and labour histories have enriched and revised their approaches through the framework of representations and identities. In doing so, however, class has increasingly been squeezed out. Though arising from and alongside Marxism in the 1970s, feminist history increasingly displaced class with gender as a framework of analysis of the oppressed and/or active against dominant elites. As cultural history took hold from the late 1980s, gender history lost some of its political agenda to forcibly highlight the lack of women and gay people in mainstream history. Rather, it broadened into histories of identities, including masculinity as well as femininity as areas of study.¹¹ Labour historians similarly moved away from class as a defining framework of their discipline. Daniel Walkowitz notes that the problem with traditional labour history was that it 'focused on industrial working-class communities and predominantly on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where their struggles were most evident and heroic'.¹² Cultural history helped to alter this blinkered focus from the 1990s, and also in response also to the declining power and prominence of trade unions in national economies and political parties, labour historians diversified. They began to investigate how labour history is as much about identities as well as class relations. They shifted to examining

other types of identity shared by working peoples, especially gender and race.¹³ In the new labour histories, patriarchies and imperialist hierarchies became the powers against which subalterns rallied or were suppressed, though class remained a determinant of who formed those hierarchies.¹⁴

Nor was this trend confined to Western Anglophone historiography. Kevin M. Jones has shown how, despite the often different ethnic, political and religious contexts to Western history, Middle Eastern history also followed similar trajectories. Whereas labour history thrived in the 1970s and 1980s, from the 1990s, 'the centre of gravity in the social history of the Middle East has shifted from the factory to the mosque'. The dominance of political Islam and the major political instability of the region caused practical and economic problems for archival research. Other factors paralleled those in the West, though to a more extreme extent. The regimes' clamp down on organised labour eroded the collective identity of the working class, and consequently the concept of class had less meaning and interest for new generations of historians. Middle Eastern studies also had a similar 'cultural turn' as Western history, with the same result of refocusing away from class to the history of identities in culture, particularly of the middle classes.¹⁵ Ethnicity and (inter)nationality rather than class have become the dominant reference for studies of communities and migration.¹⁶

The multitude of new approaches and ever-increasing complexity of identities and representations offered by cultural history has enriched our understanding of society. Historians are now much more sensitive to contextualisation of sources, and understanding how historic actors were shaped by multiple influences, including of culture and texts as well as economic and political conditions. There are, however,

broader consequences of this change of focus. As Jurgen Kocka has pointed out, 'Historians have become less interested in establishing the causes and conditions, and more interested in (re)constructing the meanings of past phenomena, i.e. the meanings a phenomenon of the past had for contemporaries as well as the meanings it has or may have for present historians and their audiences'.¹⁷ Kocka convincingly argues that '*explanation* has become less self-evident' in historical accounts, whereas *understanding* gained centre-stage'.¹⁸ This shift from explanation to understanding is evident in the resurgence of 'history from below', outside the original Marxist parameters encouraged by the History Workshop group in the 1960s. History from below seeks to understand the impact of political and economic forces and structures upon unrepresented or powerless groups in society. It seeks to find 'truth' about individuals' lives in their archival records rather than in abstract theories, and it argues that class formation is a historically specific rather than general or global process. This emphasis on placing individuals within their specific historical context paralleled a strand of Marxism known as 'voluntarism', which suggests that individuals can voluntarily change some of their situation rather than their actions and identities being predetermined by economic conditions.¹⁹

Discussing materialism and structure is therefore no longer an automatic part of historical explanation, or at least is done without direct analysis of its causes or processes. Even if historians 'of below' ignore historical materialism completely, they run the risk of ignoring the factors from 'above' that shape why particular groups of people are 'below'. In 2003, Peter Stearns complained of the fragmentation of social history, consisting of 'a variety of subtopics rather than a general vision of the past'. Topics such as family, crime, protest and slavery are studied separately without understanding the

interrelations between them.²⁰ By 2007, Geoff Eley and Keith Nield asked ‘what’s left of the social?’ in social history (a repeated cry, as they reflected back on their previous articles questioning the future of the field back in 1980 and again in 1995). They lamented the ‘future of class’ as an analytical term, whereby ‘historians of the working class became far more hesitant about connecting their particular social histories to the broader patterns of national political history or larger scale questions of societal stability and change’.²¹ Lawrence Stone’s predictions about the direction of history writing in the 1980s had indeed come to fruition.

A divide between social and cultural history, or a straw man?

So where does social history stand as a discipline and methodology in the first decades of the twenty-first century? Critics periodically bemoan ‘the state of social history’ and propose how the discipline can be ‘saved’.²² First, there is an acceptance of the congruence of social with cultural history. Notably, Selina Todd has taken issue with the traditional chronology of the shift from social to cultural history, as outlined above. She argues that the two fields are not distinctly opposed, and that many historians continued to analyse class and gender as analytic categories throughout the period of debate.²³ Patrick Joyce has similarly argued that critics of cultural history have misunderstood its purpose and range, and compounded the idea that culture is merely about discourse and symbolic meanings (semiotics).²⁴ Tellingly, the journal of the Social History Society is titled *Cultural and Social History*, reflecting the zeitgeist of its foundation in 2004, and encouraging studies that emphasise the interactions of the cultural with the social.²⁵

Interdisciplinarity has always been an easy word to bat around when calling for new approaches. From the integrative ‘total history’ approach of the Annales school in France from the 1930s to the History Workshop group from the 1970s, social historians have always stressed the necessity of learning from anthropology, economics, ethnography, sociology and other disciplines.²⁶ History Workshop also attempted (if not always democratically), a genuinely integrative interdisciplinary way of working as well as writing social history with a contemporary purpose. In the 1980s, this purpose included a strident Marxist and later feminist critique of unequal power relations both in history and the contemporary, aimed at engaging the general public as well as academic scholars.²⁷ Perhaps more ‘standard’ political history, which had stood apart from Marxist-influenced histories from below, has begun to rethink its purpose and approach. In 2015, the Modern British Studies group at the University of Birmingham offered a spirited defence of the uses of history.²⁸ Their 2015 conference ‘rethinking Modern British Studies’ emphasised that working across disciplines is the key to revitalising social history and integrating politics and economics with the rich vein of social histories of twentieth century Britain emerging today. Its model is ostensibly explicitly apolitical, and enables collaboration and through the online medium of blogging, which History Workshop Online has also taken on as a main means of encouraging ‘history from below’.²⁹ Echoing the original aims of History Workshop, Staughton Lynd proclaims that history from below should ‘challenge mainstream versions of the past’, notably by regarding historical actors as ‘colleagues’ in writing history rather than just ‘sources of facts’.³⁰ Patrick Joyce calls for a stronger analytical framework for ‘the social’ as well as the cultural in history.³¹

The history of popular protest in Britain has also been in revival and suggests new ways of thinking about social structures. Carl Griffin, Adrian Randall and others have revised our understanding of a range of English social protest, including early modern riots against enclosure of common land, eighteenth-century riots over the price of food, and the Swing riots that swept across agricultural southern England in the early 1830s.³² They have reinterpreted the role of poverty and economic conditions as well as culture in shaping social relations and fomenting protest. They emphasise how protest was not a simple reaction to economic distress but came at the fracturing of class relations. In this, they reflect upon E. P. Thompson's model of the 'moral economy' of social protest, which still plays a large part in the explanations of conflict between local elites and lower classes in these histories, a complex interplay of deference and resistance during periods of economic depression.³³ Importantly many of these studies are based on 'deep' studies of the longer histories and social structures of regions. The region offers a useful medium to explore comparisons between 'micro-histories' of individual settlements and wider trends in the national economy.³⁴ As will be discussed below, much of this new work has been influenced by the methods of cultural and labour geography, which seek to connect the economic and social structures making up place as essential features in popular protest movements and collective action by labour and political groups.

European studies are also rethinking the meaning of social protest. For example, the work of Pedro Ramos Pinto has highlighted the role of democratic resistance movements to the fascist state in twentieth-century Portugal.³⁵ Much of this literature is inspired by earlier postcolonial and peasant studies of non-Western societies, although, as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker have pointed out, Western histories tend to be

‘from the lower middle up’ and disregard the wageless as incapable of agency or even consciousness.³⁶ Another major influence has been the sociological and anthropological models of James C. Scott. Scott studied peasants and workers in south-east Asia in part to understand their behaviour where more overt methods of protest and organised resistance were not possible. He uncovered how subaltern or oppressed people used strategies that he termed ‘weapons of the weak’ and ‘hidden transcripts’. Rather than organising in Western forms of collective action, resistance was enacted through individual actions such as foot-dragging and gossip, disguised from employers and authorities. Scott’s model has shaped the approaches and writings of historians of peasant resistance in early modern Europe to race relations in America and South Africa. There has been criticism, however, that Scott’s portrayal of subaltern people as living in a permanent state of resistance to economic elites in fact ignores the power of religious elites in Islamic states or indeed presumes that individual agency can have a significant effect against major economic structures.³⁷

Much of ‘history from below’ in British history focuses on poverty and the poor. Previous histories of poverty relied either on descriptive narrative in the mode of the original Victorian social investigators, or economic analysis that often de-individualised paupers by reducing them to simply numbers and costs listed in a line of a statistical table. Since the 1990s, however, social historians have attempted to reconstruct the experiences of the poor as individuals as well as groups. New studies illustrate how the poor in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain used letters and direct appeals to negotiate with the providers of charity and relief for their survival.³⁸ Nearly all of these studies use the term ‘pauper agency’ to describe this process of negotiation and choice of

rhetoric. But it is sometimes unclear in this scholarship what ‘agency’ actually meant over and above an individual cleverly manipulating welfare providers for the benefit of themselves and their families.³⁹ Perhaps indeed this was all that such evidence shows: indeed, we cannot presume that collective needs took precedence over individual in situations of subsistence and survival, or that the poor were or should have been connected in collective resistance. But some of the studies of poverty and the poor often tend to sidestep the issue of larger class and economic structures that shaped the paupers’ ‘economy of makeshifts’ whereby they attempted to gain small pots of income from a wide range of sources.⁴⁰ However, the history of poverty cannot solely examine the language of pauper letters to understand why the poor were poor. Also, as Selina Todd has noted, the pendulum swing towards emphasising the individual agency of the poor perhaps has ventured too far from the role of collective action and organisations. Historians risk assuming that personal testimonies such as letters as more ‘authentic’ than the more traditional foci of labour history such as trade union records or political petitions.⁴¹ American activist Staughton Lynd, moreover, rallies that history from below should ‘not be mere description of hitherto invisible poor and oppressed people, not least because much current history from below in the USA, by ‘slightly altering’ the master narrative, simply revalidates it in a form that still ignores class struggle and separates the ‘the poor’ into just another category within the story.’⁴²

Solutions? A Thompsonian approach to materialism and cultures of class

Should we go back to the tried and tested modes of discussing class? The ‘rise and fall’

of labour history is much lamented by old labour historians.⁴³ But is there any point trying to turn the clock back? It is unlikely that most historians will engage with the traditional Marxist models of class struggle and historical materialism, and apply them retrospectively to their own studies.⁴⁴ We cannot go back to old models that were based solely on the importance of white male labour and an assumption of determinist progression towards class conflict and revolution.⁴⁵ Materialism ironically has little material depth to it.

The solution proposed by many of the litany of historiographical reviews of social history today is to return to the work of E. P. Thompson.⁴⁶ The canonical cultural English Marxist of the 1960s and 1970s, Thompson offered a foot in both camps of traditional materialist social history and newer cultural approaches. Thompson defined class as a process rather than an objective category, created as much from 'below' by the experience and narratives of workers as much as by the economic structures oppressing them. He integrated culture into the Marxist model of class formation, while retaining a grip on the material and structure that later scholars left behind. Both class and capitalist economics were produced not by abstract forces imposed from above and without but by specific histories, values and passions. These features were created by and mediated through people's own experience of everyday life.⁴⁷ Thompson's work was situated in a very specific English and nineteenth-century context, and a product of its times (the revised edition of his most well-known work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, was published in the revolutionary year of 1968). But it nevertheless inspired and continued to inspire similar studies of the working classes across the globe and of different time periods. His model was never so restrictive as to preclude adaptations to

include people other than white English men as actors in the formation of class.⁴⁸ Eley and Nield were more positive about the state of social history in Britain than in the USA, in part because they were reassured that the ‘discursive tendencies’ of cultural history were moderated by the continued influence of Thompson.

Experience and the moral economy continue to be influential models. Selina Todd explicitly uses Thompson’s concept of ‘experience’ as a central organising framework for understanding the meaning of class in twentieth-century Britain.⁴⁹ In this model, class is relative to social groups’ positions in social relations in particular economic circumstances and therefore situated in particular points in time. Class is therefore relative and changing over time, not just in relation to other classes but also dependent on groups’ experience of previous economic circumstances, a desire for autonomy or stability during periods of economic distress, and economic and political policies of the government. Thompson thus found class formation occurring during a period of flux and uncertainty in the first stages of industrialisation and its consequent socio-economic upheavals caused by the development of free market capitalism in Britain. Todd thus argues strongly against the claim that class in Britain was destroyed by Thatcherism in the 1980s, because that presumption assumes that one static class ‘beat’ another class. In areas where and times when the working classes bought into Conservative aspiration, ‘social and economic circumstances shape class relations, limit horizons and circumscribe actions’.⁵⁰ Thompson’s moral economy has remained influential outside British history, and has been applied to studies of contemporary trade unions and working-class bargaining in Sweden and Sri Lanka among other countries.⁵¹

Admittedly, this chapter is in effect another contribution to the debate about the

future of social history. And perhaps inevitably, therefore, I argue for renewed emphasis on the material or structure – if not materialism and structuralism - in history. New materialism understands class as a process shaped by ‘lived experience’ rather than a fixed economic category. Society is and was made up of a contested spaces in which elites determine dominant meanings and access to power. Class is not a monolithic and all-encompassing social structure that determines historical change on its own: it is intersected by other forces and groupings, not least race, gender, religion and nation. New materialism thereby examines the structural forces shaping class and social relations such as economic and political dominance of elite groups, but it does not assign a determinist ‘script’ for those relations or struggle to be followed according to abstract laws of capital. Nor are classes strictly stratified.⁵² It includes insights offered by the legacy of postmodern approaches but grounds them in an appreciation of structures and human experience. New materialism also always leads back to the archive: it finds materiality in empirical research as well as theory, in documents and primary sources. It unpicks the materiality as well as forces of materialism in the ‘lived experience’ of workers and indeed the other classes. It emphasises that agency can take multiple forms, and that the outcomes of agency are conflicting or contested and not always progressive.⁵³

But as well as coming back yet again to a Thompsonian way of examining class and its significance, and a renewed emphasis on archival depth, new materialism draws in particular from recent developments in labour geography.⁵⁴ Labour geography offers new approaches to labour relations and the production of class. Materiality and materialism are at the core of thinking about geographies of production and class. Again as with history, economic geography experienced a shift from a Marxist ‘geography of labour’

towards a more multifaceted and cultural 'labour geography'. Labour geographers use space and place as frameworks to explain how both local and global societies are fragmented by differentials of class, gender, race and concentrations of political and economic power. Economists have always taken the 'long view', but recent debates about the economic power of the '1%' have pointed attention again to the relevance of examining social and economic change together over longer chronologies.

In the 1980s and 1990s, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre and other Marxist geographers emphasised how capital(ists) constructed economic and social landscapes that formed an essential part of how elites enforced political power.⁵⁵ The work of Harvey and others showed how capital(ism) spread unevenly across the world and over time. However, their methods and evidence relied too much on focusing on capitalist firms and elites, while workers played an overly abstract and passive role in the process. Andrew Herod therefore called strongly for 'a much more active conceptualisation of workers as engaged in the uneven development of capitalism'.⁵⁶ Since then, labour geography has investigated contested, and even conflicting, forms of class formation and popular agency. Indeed, by 2012, Neil McCoe's review of the state of the field showed that notions of worker agency became 'the central leitmotif of labour geography'. Moreover, he argued that perhaps labour geographers have gone too far with emphasising labour agency above all other factors, and suggested that 'an unpacking of the notion of agency needs to be combined with reconnecting agency to the wider societal structures in which it is embedded'.⁵⁷ This again appears a recurrent warning to both geographers and social historians. Just as cultural representations cannot be fully situated without understanding the social, political and economic forces and structures that produced

them, so the actions of workers collectively or individually cannot be appreciated in isolation, without a grounding in the material forces that enabled or restricted their opportunities to act.

More recent labour geography investigates how labour markets operate on many different geographic levels, which are often based in local places but connected by national or international institutions and structures.⁵⁸ David Featherstone and Andrew Cumbers in particular have rethought Raymond Williams's concept of 'militant particularism'. Williams studied labour relations in the Cowley motorworks in Oxford in the 1960s, and found that 'local' conflicts between capital and labour were embedded in place, specific to the location and organisation of the institution. David Harvey interpreted Williams's concept of 'militant particularism' to mean that collective action that is bound in a specific place cannot achieve wider class consciousness until it moves away from fighting particular grievances towards uniting with other groups under more abstract political ideologies.⁵⁹ Featherstone and Cumbers argued against this limited view of the connection between class and place. In paying close attention to the global nature of capital and finance, they show how labour collective action can be enmeshed in a 'much broader and multi-scalar set of political and economic relationships'.⁶⁰ Workers connected their local dispute against a particular employer to a global struggle against capital because the changing economics of the industry across the world, where employers were choosing to distribute capital and production in different regions of the world.

Labour geographers are therefore more versed with the 'precariat' and are collating the methods, sources and approaches that future labour historians should be

adopting to understanding the history of the twenty-first century.⁶¹ Labour geography offers an alternative to the largely white, western and male labour histories. It demonstrates that labour had and has many and varied forms, including marginal migrant and domestic work. Social conflict involves different combinations or contestations of class, race, gender and religion, which shape action, outcomes and consequences. Geographers, sociologists and historians have of course long recognised these complex interrelations, but we should go further and understand intersections within each category: classes divided within themselves, and understanding different groupings that do not fall into the traditional labour history categories of activist (often white male and skilled) workers. Class and geographies of resistance can be exclusionary rather than collective, a feature ignored or indeed ‘often silenced by an older generation of labour historians who tended to treat the forms of whiteness articulated through labour organising as a given’.⁶²

Increasingly, therefore, migrant and casual labour in the globalised economy is a major theme. It demonstrates how agency is shaped not only by class identity but also by intersections of gender and race in new contexts of the ‘precariat’. Studies of unorganised migrant workers stress the role of different forms of individual agency, including how people used everyday coping strategies to improve their material conditions. Such efforts took precedence over collective resistance and direct challenges to capitalist social relations.⁶³ Ruth Pearson, Sundari Anitha and Linda McDowell’s research on the Gate Gourmet strike in London in 2005 explained the intersection between local agency and global forces, gender and race. The striking catering workers were predominantly female migrants from south-east Asia. They shifted from apparent compliance to an un-

unionised system to creating their own strategies of militant collective action in a way that could not be predicted by traditional studies of skilled organised labour. Examining the organisation of marginal and de-skilled groups such as the catering workers requires ‘an intersectional analysis that goes beyond the management of the labour process and takes into account a holistic understanding of their experience’, and thereby questions the traditional Marxist conceptions of agency.⁶⁴ Andrew Cumbers’s study of the strike similarly shows the potential of labour geography to revitalise labour history with its contemporary appreciation of the impact of the globalisation of capital and restructuring away from tied and place-based production. Like E. P. Thompson’s nineteenth-century English artisans before them, even twenty-first century marginalised and increasingly globalised workers were able to build on earlier radical histories of struggle: the Gate Gourmet strikers ‘drew on histories of multi-ethnic struggle in shaping articulations of labour, ethnicity and gender’.⁶⁵ The multiple spatialities of labour relations are clearly evident in international and multiple connections of class and resistance.⁶⁶ Studies of slavery, temporary workers and the ‘precariat’ similarly point to the importance of intersectionality in understanding the complex nature of modern economic structures.⁶⁷

In response to the mobile nature of labour in the global capitalist economic system, other work in historical and labour geography similarly emphasises ‘trans-local’ interpretations of social movements and class.⁶⁸ Yet this need not be confined to the contemporary economic situation, but can be applied to historic situations. David Featherstone’s studies of the international connections of seamen involved in port strikes in London in 1768, and the anti-slavery connections of the London Corresponding Society in the 1790s demonstrate ‘why past struggles matter to resistance to neoliberal

globalisation'.⁶⁹ Similarly, James Yeoman's study of Spanish anarchist communities in Wales in the early twentieth century consciously employs concepts drawn from current sociological, geographical and economic scholarship on the relationship between poverty, class and place. He cites for example Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo's proposals for how to tackle global poverty in the twenty-first century which point to the significance of place-based grass-roots movements connecting the local to the global.⁷⁰ Future historians of the late twentieth century will need to consider materialism and labour relations within this mobile and unstable – and arguably increasingly unequal – economic system.

Historical materialism should be revitalised to take into account social and cultural historical approaches and new forms of economic institutions. Historical materialism is not merely about economics, but also encompasses the law. Marc Steinberg's latest book, *England's Great Transformation: Law, Labor and the Industrial Revolution*, has reinterpreted how local elites and employers used the law to control workers in mid-nineteenth century Britain.⁷¹ Again, his first reference point is E. P. Thompson and his consideration of the law as a material structure, but he then models his analysis of labour relations within historical materialism. He emphasizes the 'embeddedness' of social relations within 'state policies and legal systems that critically contour capitalist dynamics'. His interpretation of the relationship between ruler and ruled, and employers and workers, is situated firmly within space and place. This is his original contribution to the model of understanding social control, and is reflective of the new thinking championed by labour geographers. As a counter-weight to historians' usual emphasis on the nation-state in relation to historical institutions, Steinberg posits the importance of the region and locality in shaping labour control regimes. Path-

dependence is also an important part of the model - using John L Campbell's definition, Steinberg defines path-dependence as 'a process whereby contingent events or decisions result in the establishment of institutions that persist over long periods of time and constrain the range of actors' future options'.⁷² Again because production is always rooted in specific geographies, the choices available to both enforcers and receivers of the law are therefore spatially uneven and place-dependent. Understanding the embeddedness of economic structures in place therefore is the key to explaining how labour regimes are particular and long lasting in their localities.⁷³ Yet these regimes were challenged by workers either at points of crisis or gradually in 'geographies of resistance'. The law was thus not immutable, but as E. P. Thompson originally muted, a terrain of struggle over 'actual practice'.⁷⁴

Economic historians have returned to examining financial structures in the wake of global crises. This development has perhaps been represented most publicly by the economist Thomas Piketty and his huge best-seller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. The book struck a chord because it was published during a major period of global economic instability and during a series of occupations by anti-globalisation movements in America and Europe, which were in turn inspired by new social and political movements in the Middle East. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* appears to have become an essential reference point for the debate. Its central theme concerned the increasing inequality of income, caused by interest on the inherited wealth of the rich. Significantly, Piketty foregrounded his book as a historical study, placing it consciously in the tradition of nineteenth-century economic theorists such as Malthus, Ricardo and Marx, and later 'more data-intensive and historical approaches pioneered by Kuznets and

Atkinson'.⁷⁵ In collating and analysing historical data on economic distribution patterns since the industrial revolution – and thereby building upon the trend for analysis of ‘big data’ - Piketty aimed to ‘put the study of distribution and of the long run back at the centre of economic, social and political thinking’.⁷⁶ Notably, he cited the Annales school of ‘total’ history as an influence in his attempt to ‘renew a long tradition of research by historians and sociologists on the long run evolution of wages, prices and wealth’.⁷⁷ Historical and national specificity and reactions to war and political revolution as central factors shaping whether or not different institutions and societies choose to adopt particular policies to combat inequality.⁷⁸ In essence, as Deirdre McCloskey has pointed out, there is essentially nothing new about pointing out how the rich are getting richer because of their inherited advantages. His pessimism about the future of capitalism and class relations is part of a long narrative stretching back, as he admits, to Malthus and Marx.⁷⁹ But Piketty has at least provided a focus for new debates and a contemporary evaluation of inequality of distribution rather than class. American historians are developing a ‘new history of capitalism’, which promises to engage with the debates raised by Piketty’s book. Sven Beckert warns that ‘if this newly demarcated subfield is to have any interpretive or political vitality, it must draw in and develop the strengths of social and labour history’.⁸⁰ Kenneth Ripartito review of recent literature in *American Historical Review* is more confident, however, noting how this new history encompasses social and cultural history’s foregrounding of agency and personal choice in market decision making and rethinking the place of slavery and its legacies in the economy to present a ‘mosaic of economic forms and fluid institutions that constitute a capitalist system’.⁸¹ Focusing especially on the ‘material’ of the market – money, natural

resources, people - he argues for a new materialism that 'avoids the trap of both structuralism and linguistic determinism, seeing instead the social (and thus the economic) as formed through assemblages composed of relationships among heterogeneous collections of subjects and objects'.⁸² Capitalism and its history are material and cultural, shaped by the militant particularism of place and the multiple agencies of workers as well as by the dominant forces of employees, financial institutions and the state.

Conclusions

So where do social and cultural historians go next in the twenty-first century? We should look to labour geographies and new materialism to remind ourselves about the fundamentals of what history writing is and what it is for. We should ground their explanations of both existence and change of social factors with reference to the following:

- The 'state' and the political frameworks governing laws, policing and the economy;
- Capital, and the economic systems built on capital, and their materiality;
- Labour in all its various forms, from the organised to the unskilled, casual, domestic and migrant;
- Identities of class, but also intersected by gender, age and race.

Examining cultural representations in primary sources is important, but they are not the sole explanations for change. Nor should historians be taken in by 'big data; big

chronology' studies, especially those that serve to de-individualise and anonymise the actions of individuals as well as underplay the historical specificity of social and political structures at particular periods of time. New materialism in particular highlights the continued importance of issues of class in social and cultural history. It takes into account new rethinkings about capitalism and its revived relevance in the twenty-first century context of debates about global economic inequalities. It argues that class is shaped by material forces; its expression through collective action is bounded in places but also can be connected nationally and globally. It shows that people's agency takes multiple forms, often conflicting and not always progressive. Social history is at its foundations about people, and how people interrelate in larger social structures shaped by place, time and the material forces of the economy and the state.

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