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## New Working-Class Studies

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## New Working-Class Studies

### Abstract

In this book, contributors trace the origins of the new working-class studies, explore how it is being developed both within and across fields, and identify key themes and issues. Historians, economists, geographers, sociologists, and scholars of literature and cultural studies introduce many and varied aspects of this emerging field. Throughout, they consider how the study of working-class life transforms traditional disciplines and stress the importance of popular and artistic representations of working-class.

### Keywords

gender, class, history, working, studies, labor, African American, economics, representation, politics, education

### Comments

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# What's New about New Working-Class Studies?

John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon

**A**lthough the study of the working class has a long history and deep roots, over the past decade scholars have focused on working-class life and culture with renewed interest. Equally important, recent work has raised new issues, new approaches, and new challenges. This book provides a wide-ranging exploration of both the roots and the new directions that are shaping the emerging field we call “New Working-Class Studies.” The essays illustrate the ways in which new working-class studies is at once rooted in existing disciplines and innovative in the ways it integrates multiple disciplines and uses different kinds of materials. This approach allows some clear themes to emerge, such as the emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches and the centrality of cultural representations as sources for understanding working-class experience. Simply put, this volume aims to create an intellectual meeting ground. By pulling together essays that approach this new field in different ways, *New Working-Class Studies* allows readers from different perspectives to reflect on both the intellectual traditions that make new working-class studies possible and the innovative new work that is shaping its future.

## **Foundations of the Field**

New working-class studies builds on foundations laid in several core fields. These foundational fields provided important models that suggested useful ap-

proaches and essential concepts, but then they either moved away from a focus on working-class life and culture or never fully developed an approach that took the working class seriously. Working-class studies owes much to these foundational areas, and we see important opportunities for building on these fields by refocusing on class.

Perhaps the most important foundation for new working-class studies is labor studies, which traces its history to the early twentieth century and programs such as the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. As Dorothy Sue Cobble has noted, these early forms of worker education emphasized culture—art, literature, philosophy, music—as avenues for worker self-activity and expression.<sup>1</sup> While this early approach may have carried some taint of paternalism in the notion that elite educators should enlighten working women about the arts and culture, it also celebrated worker culture as valuable, engaging, and significant. In 1932, Myles Horton and Don West founded the Highlander School, offering grassroots, “popular” education focused on fighting for economic and social justice and understanding the value of the experiences and insights of “ordinary people.” By the middle of the twentieth century, labor studies, and especially worker education programs, had moved toward more practical, utilitarian approaches that emphasized specific union skills, such as contract negotiations and handling grievances. The cultural approach to labor studies has resurfaced periodically, as in the work of Paulo Freire and his followers, who focused on putting worker culture at the center of labor education as a means of fostering empowerment and activism. For new working-class studies, these cultural approaches offer important models for linking the academic study of working-class history and culture with activism and education, not only of unionized workers but of K-12 and college students who come from working-class backgrounds. In addition, labor studies exemplifies the possibility of linking academic work with political organizing by working-class communities and groups.

Labor history also provides foundational ideas and approaches for new working-class studies. Much American labor history has focused on the history of organized labor, offering a model that takes seriously the history of work, workers, and working-class organizations. Yet, as David Roediger reminds us, much of this work has championed the perspective of white, male, native-born workers. By the 1960s, however, labor historians had embraced the (then) new social history, putting everyday working-class life and culture at the center of historical analysis. Such scholarship built on models offered by E. P. Thompson’s *Making of the British Working Class* and the History Workshop movement, which Tim Strangleman discusses here, and by Herbert Gutman and his colleagues at the American Social History Project. The latter developed a widely used alternative history text, *Who Built America?*, and, more recently, a host of online materials aimed at dramatically changing the way American history is taught by emphasizing cultural materials and working-class experience. This approach laid the

groundwork for a number of key analyses of working-class leisure culture, such as Roy Rosenzweig's *Eight Hours for What We Will* and Kathy Peiss's *Cheap Amusements*.<sup>2</sup>

Along with emphasizing class as an aspect of culture, social historians emphasized issues of race, ethnicity, and gender. Yet, ironically, as Elizabeth Faue argues here, the rise of social history ultimately led many labor historians to focus on race and gender and to downplay class, while others focused on the racism and sexism of the white working class. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, it seemed to some that the phrase "working class" operated as code for talking about white men, as in Roediger's groundbreaking study *The Wages of Whiteness*. As Roediger notes in the afterword to the second edition of that book, he had approached his study of the history of class and race with a "white blind spot." Although his book focuses on the intersection of race and class, the working class he studied was clearly white and male. Black slaves were not seen as part of the working class, either by Roediger or, equally important, by the white workers he studied. Nor were women included. At the same time, as Faue and Phillips note in their essays here, a new tradition of women's labor history and African American labor history emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although the people and movements studied in these works were almost always working class, such scholarship has tended to focus on how their working lives and communities were shaped by gender and race, not by class. Thus, "working class" came to be read as by definition white, male, racist, and sexist, while issues of gender and race eclipsed attention to class consciousness and class organizing.

For other labor historians, as Faue points out, the 1990s saw a return to a focus on unions as institutions, a move away from social history altogether. For new working-class studies, labor history provided a variety of models of how to study working-class life; yet that field ultimately moved away from a focus on class and put race, ethnicity, and gender at the center of its work. In addition, although some historians ventured beyond the traditional boundaries of their field to consider leisure and popular culture, few engaged extensively with materials, methods, or ideas from other fields. So even as scholars in other fields drew on labor history for their work, labor history itself remained a subfield of history.

Yet interdisciplinary approaches have long been central to the study of working-class life and culture. Within the United States, American studies provides a rich model of multi- and interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, and by the 1960s, the field had turned away from its earlier emphasis on consensus and nationalism to explore a much more critical, contested model of American culture. At the heart of the new approach was the American studies mantra, "race, class, and gender." With a few notable exceptions, such as Michael Denning's *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*,<sup>3</sup> class was rarely given prominence (though often mentioned). In the late 1990s, when a small group of American studies scholars formed a working-class studies caucus,

very few of the hundreds of papers presented at the annual American Studies Association conference gave class primary attention. This was true even as the organization elected two prominent scholars of working-class culture, Paul Lauter and later Michael Frisch, to the association's presidency. As in other fields, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality took center stage.

In part, this reflected the American adaptation of British cultural studies, which modeled interdisciplinary scholarship that focused on everyday life, pop culture, and identity studies, especially class issues. The American version, however, focused largely on media studies and on race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Again, and despite the strong model for working-class studies offered by the Birmingham school, class became the element that was named but was rarely the focus of research or teaching. Cultural studies and American studies offered important models for using popular and everyday culture, for asking questions about how individuals and groups negotiated complex identities, and for connecting power with identity, politics, and cultural practices. Yet even when these fields attended to class, many humanities scholars and graduate students who were interested in working-class life and culture still felt homeless and isolated.

At about the same time, and indeed as part of the same historical and social developments, multiculturalism came to the fore in American academic culture. Emerging out of liberal politics and the civil rights movements of the 1960s, over the next three decades critical analysis of race, class, gender, and sexuality found a home in most colleges and universities. By the early 1990s, scholars in many disciplines focused their research on issues of difference and identity, and this became a dominant approach in many fields. New courses were developed, both within traditional disciplines and in new programs and departments that focused on race, ethnicity, and gender. Campus, professional, and national projects began to provide grants and institutes to help faculty develop courses and teaching strategies for integrating multiculturalism into the curriculum. General education programs began to include required diversity courses. Attention also expanded beyond the traditional categories of race, gender, and ethnicity to encompass globalization, postcolonial studies, border studies, and other variations. Despite conservative critiques, multiculturalism flourished. Although multiculturalism may not have created the dramatic changes that some hoped for, it has had a powerful influence on higher education.

Yet, as in labor history, American studies, and cultural studies, despite the habit of naming class as one of the elements of diversity, few of these programs focused on working-class life and culture. Indeed, when we submitted a proposal to the diversity curriculum project of the American Association of Colleges and Universities in 1995—which asked “Will the working class be invited to the diversity banquet?”—we learned that ours was the only one out of more than eighty proposals to emphasize class. Looking at university bulletins around the country, one might find hundreds of departments, programs, and courses in black studies and



critical race studies, ethnic studies, gender and women's studies, and sexuality studies but only three centers specializing in working-class studies, and relatively few courses in working-class history or culture. Somehow liberal and leftist politics and the social movements of the 1960s led to an academic culture that pays relatively careful attention to race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender but views class as somehow already covered, much the way some academics once said that we didn't need to have women's studies programs because we already studied women in "regular" courses.

Recently, a new version of multiculturalism has emerged that emphasizes the intersections among multiple categories of identity and culture. Yet most of these programs define their focus as the intersection among race, ethnicity, and gender, leaving class out of the equation, even though the people studied are often working class. Students and scholars alike resist studying class, in part because class is a difficult concept to discuss, both personally and intellectually. These discussions create discomfort both for those from working-class backgrounds, who may feel ashamed that their families were not more successful, and those from more privileged families, who may resist recognizing their own privilege. Intellectually, conversations about class must take into account multiple definitions of class as well as changes in social and economic structures at the end of the millennium and the beginning of a new one. Others resist on a more political basis, fearing that working-class studies is too close to "whiteness studies," or that it is really a way of claiming space in the conversation for white, working-class, straight men. For others, talking about class may complicate discussions of the marginalization of people on the basis of race or gender; after all, looking at class differences reminds us that some people of color are in positions of privilege relative to others. For still others, lingering fears remain from earlier "red scare" periods when leftist scholars whose work focused on class were vulnerable to repression both in society at large and in the academy.

Although the reasons are no doubt complex, in multiculturalism as in other foundational fields class often gets short shrift. Yet despite this, multiculturalism, cultural studies, American studies, labor history, and labor studies provide useful models for the interdisciplinary study of working-class culture, experience, and the social politics of power. Equally important, in these areas as well as a few key disciplines individual scholars have led the way with innovative models of scholarship and groundbreaking work in teaching and organizing. Although individual scholars have always studied class, work, and working-class culture, during the 1990s several notable examples of interdisciplinary work that highlighted working-class culture and the intersections of class with race and gender laid the groundwork for the development of new working-class studies.

In labor studies, several important examples have pointed the way toward a more engaged, political, and interdisciplinary approach to labor education. As early as the 1980s, Andy Banks, Jack Metzgar, and John Russo began arguing for

an “organizing model of unionism” that would focus on fostering working-class consciousness and a sense of ownership and capability.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, labor educators such as Elise Bryant and Joyce and Hy Kornbluh modeled an approach that put workers’ culture, stories, and experiences at the heart of worker education and labor organizing. A decade later, Bob Bruno and Lisa Jordan, both at that time working for the Labor Education Service of the University of Illinois, designed an innovative model for worker education. Illinois History Works used storytelling, music, film, and audience engagement to teach the history of the American labor movement.<sup>5</sup> Such work also opened up the possibility of linking labor studies and labor organizing with scholarship and teaching by faculty in American studies, literature, and other academic fields.

In labor history, David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* and Robin Kelley’s *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* modeled new approaches to examining the intersection of class, work, and race, a theme that has always been central to new working-class studies. Alessandro Portelli reexamined oral history, suggesting new ways of thinking about how working-class people describe their lives and experiences. Portelli also modeled cross-cultural working-class studies with significant work on both Italian and American workers. Michael Frisch offered another innovation in labor history in his collaboration with photographer Milton Rogovin, *Portraits in Steel*, a book that combines oral histories with powerful photographs of steelworkers, male and female, white and black. As with labor studies, these examples demonstrated ways of studying working-class experience that put workers’ voices, memories, and perspectives at the center.<sup>6</sup>

The themes of memory and identity have also been explored in some of the most important innovations to emerge out of American studies. As does Denning’s *Mechanic Accents*, George Lipsitz’s *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* and his popular culture study, *Time Passages*, model interdisciplinary approaches that use popular culture as a key resource in studying working-class culture. Late in the 1990s, Nan Enstad’s *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* demonstrated the value of studying class as culture, as well as the intersection among cultural practices, representations, and working-class consciousness.<sup>7</sup> In all of this work, intersections among class, race, gender, and ethnicity are central, as are representations, especially popular culture—movies, music, television, and popular literature. Analysis of representations has become one of the dominant approaches to the study of working-class culture.

Although the national conversation about multiculturalism generated little work that focused primarily on the working class, multiculturalism provided the impetus for several key organizing projects that helped to make new working-class studies possible. Youngstown State University’s 1995 proposal to the “Diversity and Democracy” project of American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) argued that class should be a central element in the study and

teaching of diversity. The AAC&U's support helped make possible the formation of the Center for Working-Class Studies at YSU, the first such center in the country. The Ford Foundation provided additional support to the CWCS, through its Education and Scholarship program, whose goals are "to increase educational access and quality for the disadvantaged, to educate new leaders and thinkers, and to foster knowledge and curriculum supportive of inclusion, development, and civic life."<sup>8</sup> In part because of the CWCS's success, additional centers and projects have been established that focus not only on class but also on its intersections with race and gender. The Center for African-American Women and Labor at the University of Maryland, directed by Sharon Harley and also funded by Ford, supports research by individual scholars and symposia that explore how African American women's work has been shaped by cultural constructions of race, class, gender, and family. The Center for the Study of Working Class Life at SUNY-Stony Brook, a social-science-oriented program developed by Michael Zweig, has sponsored faculty colloquia and national conferences. A consortial center in Chicago, cosponsored by several universities there, offers an annual series of public programs, including poetry readings, education projects, and exhibits.

Beyond these developments in the foundational fields, several disciplines have produced key work that models new ways of thinking about and studying the working class. In literary studies, for example, many view Paul Lauter's 1980 essay "Working-Class Women's Literature" as *the* foundational work, offering for the first time the idea that literature by working-class writers mattered. In the early 1990s, collections of literature and essays appeared, most notably Janet Zandy's two anthologies, *Calling Home* and *Liberating Memory*; the poetry anthology *Working Classics* edited by Nicholas Coles and Peter Oresick; and a series of collections and single-author works published by Larry Smith's Bottom Dog Press. Other scholars published key studies of working-class literature, such as Constance Coiner's *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* and Laura Hapke's *Labor's Text*. By the end of the decade, Coiner, Lauter, Zandy, and the collaborative team of Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson had all published essays that offered defining theories of working-class literature.<sup>9</sup>

Researchers and teachers of composition have long understood that class background, perhaps even more than race or ethnicity, shapes students' attitudes toward and uses of language. As Renny Christopher discusses here, advocates such as Ira Shor and Mike Rose have argued for pedagogical approaches that address the needs of working-class students, for whom college can seem an alien place. Shor's *Empowering Education* and Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* offered early explorations of how class shapes educational experiences and how higher education creates obstacles for working-class students.<sup>10</sup> The Working-Class Special Interest Group and Working-Class Students Listserv of the National Council

of Teachers of English were among the first organizations to form within any discipline with a focus on working-class issues. Other caucuses and organizations have since formed in American literature, American studies, and film studies, suggesting a strong interest among humanities scholars in working-class life and culture.

One of the hallmarks of new working-class studies is its focus on how class and place are mutually constitutive, a trend that reflects the influence of geography on the field. As Don Mitchell argues here, labor geography has developed over the past two decades, emerging out of the Marxist and postmodern approaches of key figures such as David Harvey and Doreen Massey. In the 1990s, Mitchell's own work, especially his study of how the California landscape shapes and is shaped by migrant labor, *The Lie of the Land*, and an anthology edited by Andrew Herod, *Organizing the Landscape*, demonstrated the deep connections between the organization of space, labor politics, and the everyday lives of working-class people.<sup>11</sup> Mitchell was named a MacArthur Fellow in 1998, and his award helped to fund the People's Geography Project, a national collaborative effort that is developing studies of place written by and reflecting the experiences of working people.

No discussion of working-class life and culture would be possible without the formative ideas from three social sciences: sociology, anthropology, and economics. While sociologists have long examined class as a concept, arguing about how to define class and why it matters, a few key scholars have contributed ideas and approaches that make new working-class studies possible. A number of sociologists have explored ways of defining class and analyzed how it functions, from Max Weber through Erik Olin Wright. But while many of these have focused on defining class categories, the most useful sociological models for new working-class studies are those that focus on class formation, class conflict, and the intersections between race and class. A former steelworker and union organizer, sociologist Stanley Aronowitz has published a series of essential works along these lines. From his early study *False Promises* to his 2003 book *How Class Works*, Aronowitz has explored the meaning and practice of class with a consistent focus on the real lives, attitudes, and experiences of working-class people. William Julius Wilson developed sharp analyses of the links between race, class, and economic structures in his 1996 study, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*.<sup>12</sup>

Anthropology contributes essential concepts about and strategies for studying culture as lived experience. Ethnography, especially, demonstrates the possibility of learning about culture from the inside, through participation, observation, and interviews. Although anthropologists have not necessarily focused their attention on class, they remind us of the importance and the difficulty of moving beyond one's own frame of reference in order to understand how culture works. This understanding has been especially useful for academics that do not come from working-class backgrounds, because it reminds us of the class biases that we may

bring to this work. In recent years, however, a number of cultural anthropologists have applied this approach to the study of work and class. In books such as Kathryn Marie Dudley's *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America*, Maria Kefalas's *Working-Class Heroes: Protecting Home, Community, and Nation in a Chicago Neighborhood*, and Dimitra Doukas's *Worked Over: The Corporate Sabotage of an American Community*, cultural anthropologists, like many geographers, show how the experience and meaning of being working class is grounded in everyday life, in human interactions, and in the relationship between work, place, and community.<sup>13</sup>

As Michael Zweig notes in his essay here, class and economics are closely intertwined. After all, the foundational idea of classes being formed by the means of production and by the different, competing interests of people who play different roles in production comes from economics. Economists have explored how class works, though with somewhat more focus on economic structures and processes than on culture and experience. Thus, economics plays a central role in new working-class studies, even though the field moved away from class-based analysis for much of the twentieth century. Yet Zweig's own 2001 book, *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, suggests a return to class-based economics. He uses economic analysis to argue for a model of class that links socioeconomic structures with power differences based on work and production. As Zweig notes, reading class in this way reminds us that the majority of Americans are working class and therefore have enormous potential for political power.<sup>14</sup>

These various threads are now coming together in landmark books that provide introductions and overviews of new working-class studies, texts that are—like this volume—helping to define the central questions, approaches, and insights of this emerging field. The first of these volumes is Janet Zandy's 2001 collection, *What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies*, which reprints articles from a 1995 issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* together with a range of new pieces that show how the field is growing. Zandy's collection includes a section of essays and poems representing working-class voices, examples of course syllabi, and brief critical articles that illustrate the field's development. More recently, Michael Zweig's collection, *What's Class Got to Do with It? American Society in the Twenty-first Century*, includes eleven articles based on presentations from the 2002 "How Class Works" conference at SUNY–Stony Brook. The articles Zweig selected for the volume reflect several discussions that are central in the field, including the relationship between class, gender, and race; class in a global economy; and class and education. Contributors include scholars and activists from labor studies, literature, psychology, and other fields. These two books represent the diverse range of scholarly work in the field, but they also demonstrate that new working-class studies is generating interest among readers for whom the field suggests strategies for connecting scholarly work with social justice activism.<sup>15</sup>

Why did all of this work develop over the past two decades? This might seem ironic, since the image most often conjured by references to “working class” is of the blue-collar industrial worker, exactly the kind of worker most likely to have been displaced by late twentieth-century economic restructuring and deindustrialization. Yet Alessandro Portelli reminds us that working-class culture remains even when work disappears. Indeed, even as work is changing dramatically, almost half of Americans continue to identify themselves as working class.<sup>16</sup> In part because of this, although new working-class studies has a strong interest in both the history of the industrial working class and the experiences of displaced workers, the field has resisted simple nostalgia. For new working-class studies, dramatic changes in work raise new and significant questions about class in general and working-class culture specifically. New structures and kinds of work and the fact that working-class people are less likely than ever to belong to unions call for new ways of studying working-class life, culture, and politics. These historical and economic developments make clear that working-class culture does not exist only in the workplace, and that class conflict is not limited to the “traditional” working class. This leads to questions about how class works in both communal and individual experience, how people make sense of their class position, and how consciousness of class might lead to collective action.

### **New Working-Class Studies**

While this brief history helps to position new working-class studies in a broad landscape of intellectual activism, it leaves unanswered the key question: “What’s *new* about new working-class studies?” Clearly building on and learning from the interdisciplinary, socially critical intellectual traditions of the last thirty years, new working-class studies incorporates theories and methods from these foundational areas without privileging any single approach. New working-class studies brings together scholars, artists, activists, and workers from a variety of perspectives, disciplines, and theoretical schools. Yet within this broad and inclusive framework, new working-class studies has developed several important patterns that differentiate it from earlier approaches to the study of class. Indeed, one distinguishing feature is that it draws on such varied intellectual roots and embraces diverse and even contradictory ideas about how class works, why it matters, and how we can best understand it.

Perhaps the most striking and central difference from previous efforts is that we put the working class, in all its varieties, at the center of our work. New working-class studies is not only about the labor movement, or about workers of any particular kind, or workers in any particular place—even in the workplace. Instead, we ask questions about how class works for people at work, at home, and in the community. We explore how class both unites and divides working-class people,

which highlights the importance of understanding how class shapes and is shaped by race, gender, ethnicity, and place. We reflect on the common interests as well as the divisions between the most commonly imagined version of the working class—industrial, blue-collar workers—and workers in the “new economy” whose work and personal lives seem, at first glance, to place them solidly in the middle class. In the twenty-first century, perhaps more than ever before, defining who is or is not working class is a slippery, complex task, and class as a concept carries multiple, contradictory, and complementary meanings. Understanding that class is a homograph (a word that has multiple, shifting, contested meanings), new working-class studies takes as its mission not the struggle among scholars and theorists to reach agreement about what class is but rather the exploration of how class works, as both an analytical tool and a basis for lived experience.

Within the field, individuals adopt several different positions about how to define class. Some use traditional Marxist models that define everyone who works for a wage, who does not own the means of production, as working class. Others focus on social status and factors such as education, lifestyle, and self-definition in determining class position. Still others emphasize the uses of class and the working class in contemporary political and popular language, and how these linguistic patterns influence people's responses to their class situations. For many in the field, these approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary. New working-class studies almost always begins with some combination of the power relations associated with work, political struggle, and lived experience, grounding the study of how class works in the lives, words, and perspectives of working-class people, and using these as the foundation and location for analyses of systems of power, oppression, and exploitation. Attention to discourses of class, whether in popular culture, the arts, or political activism, is also central to this work. As Jack Metzgar argues here, the vernacular of class plays a key role in whether people will act in their own class interests, so we must pay attention to language and images as well as economic and social structures. What unites this work, regardless of which of these approaches an individual scholar or artist might find most persuasive or useful, is that working-class people and their lives take center stage.

It is in part because of this interest in the lived experience of working-class people that new working-class studies has been so influenced by representations that provide access to working-class voices and perspectives. To a large extent, this means collecting and studying representations that capture the voices of working-class people, such as oral histories, songs, poems, and personal narratives. In her essay here, Rachel Rubin shows very effectively how much we can learn about working-class experience and perspectives by listening to popular music. Yet in many cases, these representations also reflect efforts by the media to capitalize on the working class as an audience, something popular music also illustrates clearly. Representations can also rely at least partially on the framing ef-

forts of academics who collect and make available oral histories. So representations can tell us much not only about how working-class people view the world and their own experiences but also about how the working class is seen by the media, the academy, and in contemporary culture at large. On some level, perhaps, scholars in working-class studies, even (and, in some cases, especially) those who come from working-class backgrounds, are very conscious of their own class privilege and the potential problems involved in studying the working class from the outside. We recognize that we must study and use these materials thoughtfully, respectfully, and without romanticizing the working class. One way of putting working-class people at the center of new working-class studies is to make working-class voices a primary source for the study of working-class life.

While putting working-class people and culture at the heart of its work, new working-class studies does not privilege class over other aspects of identity or social processes. Some leftist scholars have argued that class should be the center of discussion because it was the most important category of analysis, the one that should, in theory, supersede all divisions and provide a source for unity across boundaries of difference or location. In contrast, new working-class studies puts class at the center because we see class as deeply interwoven with other formative elements of society—race, gender, work, structures of power—and because we see class as the element that is often least explored and most difficult to understand. As bell hooks suggests:

Class is still often kept separate from race. And while race is often linked with gender, we still lack an ongoing collective public discourse that puts the three together in ways that illuminate for everyone how our nation is organized and what our class politics really are. Women of all races and black people of both genders are fast filling up the ranks of the poor and disenfranchised. It is in our interest to face the issue of class, to become more conscious, to know better, so that we can know how best to struggle for economic justice.<sup>17</sup>

New working-class studies argues that class should be taken as seriously as race and gender, given as much critical attention, questioned as deeply, and brought into not only academic but also public discussions about identity, difference, and cultural politics. Thus, we see new working-class studies as closely allied with other emerging approaches to what Bonnie Thornton Dill calls “intersectional studies,” work that analyzes how multiple social categories work together. Yet, as Dill acknowledges, few of these intersectional projects put class at the core of their work because American culture so powerfully resists talking about class.<sup>18</sup> New working-class studies recognizes that the common interests of class can bring together people who view themselves as competitors, yet we also recognize the very real divisions that have shaped, for example, white working-class racism. The unifying potential of class will always remain as mere possibility unless discussions of race, gender, and ethnicity become central to class-based organizing.



New working-class studies attempts to develop strategies for making sense of the complex mosaic of class, race, gender, and ethnicity, both intellectually and politically. This work takes many forms, from historian Kimberley Phillips's study of the community life of black workers and their families who migrated from Alabama to Cleveland to the novels of Afro-Caribbean writer Agymah Kamau, which explore how class and race together shape experiences of community life and immigration for the residents of a fictional Caribbean island.<sup>19</sup>

As this comparison suggests, new working-class studies takes many forms, not all of them traditionally academic. It is as involved in the creation of representations as it is in the study of them. For example, the study of film in new working-class studies includes not only explorations of how the working class has been portrayed in film, such as in the work of Stephen Ross,<sup>20</sup> but also, as Tom Zaniello suggests here, the consideration of filmmaking itself is a way of studying class. The significance of new working-class studies in fostering the creation of representations can also be seen in the growing interest in working-class poetry that Jim Daniels documents here. The cultural work pursued by the Bread and Roses Project of Service Employees International Union 1199, for example, which sponsors a variety of arts projects, exemplifies the intellectual goals of new working-class studies.<sup>21</sup> Bread and Roses and other organizations have sponsored photographic exhibits that allow audiences to see the lived experiences of working people. In newspapers and magazines, we've seen greater attention to working-class people, through stories of displaced workers, for example, and in the equal attention given to working-class victims of the 9/11 bombings in the series of obituaries in the *New York Times*. Both Elizabeth Faue and Renny Christopher mention autobiographies as key *sources*, but we would argue that memoir is also an important *form* of new working-class studies. Many of the scholars active in the field come from working-class backgrounds, and their own stories offer valuable insight into how class works and how it does and does not change as individuals gain education and professional identity. Among the foundational works for the field have been anthologies of personal essays by working-class academics and cultural workers, such as *This Fine Place So Far from Home* and *Liberating Memory*.<sup>22</sup> Texts like these illustrate how new working-class studies combines personal reflection, storytelling, and class analysis.

In part because of the influence of geography on the field, new working-class studies also offers a model for studying class that links the local with the global. Much of the most interesting and innovative work in the field examines how class works in particular places and times, suggesting the importance of paying attention to how working-class culture is shaped by location. Class identity and solidarity are closely tied to place, because the forms and structures of work, the way class intersects with ethnicity and race, and the language of class are shaped by the industries that tend to dominate particular places. Thus, Jeff Crump's study of the relationship between class, race, and community in midwestern towns where

Mexican workers were brought in to work in packinghouses highlights different tensions than those identified by Mary Romero in her study of Chicana domestic workers in the Southwest. Studies of deindustrialization have identified common threads about the undermining of class identity when industries close, yet the local situation examined by Kathryn Marie Dudley in *The End of the Line* differs in significant ways from what we found in our *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown*.<sup>23</sup>

It may seem ironic, but this attention to how class is geographically grounded is closely associated with a growing interest in cross-cultural and global analyses. Yet given the connection between the movement of work and a number of key tensions in working-class culture and experience, this should not surprise us. Not only do commonalities of class connect the varied local experiences that new working-class studies explores, as Alessandro Portelli argues here, but local communities are all being affected, albeit differently, by a global change in economic and political structures. More concretely, the loss of jobs that challenges working-class culture in one place may be directly related to the growth of manufacturing, often in the form of sweatshops, elsewhere. One of the most interesting trends in new working-class studies is the development of studies that view the working class as both local and global. For example, Jefferson Cowie's *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* follows one company's movement of its production across the United States and finally to Mexico, identifying significant commonalities, including the way women workers in all four communities resisted being seen as simply "cheap labor."<sup>24</sup> As this kind of work suggests, place and locality matter, in part because communities are connected in ways that may not at first be obvious. Understanding these intersections and issues is especially important today, as the United States and the world face a period of massive social and economic disruption, increasing class stratification, and political uncertainty. Identity seems more fluid than ever; community is fragmenting; national cultures are being challenged; and globalism is growing in ways that are often troubling. Perhaps more than ever before, we must come to understand the connection between race, class, gender, and sexuality and the root causes of social, economic, political, and educational problems.

What is new about new working-class studies, then, is its approach: a clear focus on the lived experience and voices of working-class people; critical engagement with the complex intersections that link class with race, gender, ethnicity, and place; attention to how class is shaped by place and how the local is connected to the global. Rather than embracing any single view of class, new working-class studies is committed to ongoing debates about what class is and how it works. New working-class studies is multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary; it provides a site for conversation and opportunities for collaboration among scholars, artists, activists, and workers representing a wide range of approaches. New working-class studies is about working-class people, but it also in-

volves working-class people as full participants. Ultimately, new working-class studies is not just an academic exercise. Rather, we strive to advance the struggle for social and economic justice for working-class people. Put differently, those active in new working-class studies constantly ask ourselves two questions: For whom are we engaged in this work? What does it mean to be a socially responsible academic? As many others have said before us, our role must be not merely to interpret the world but to change it.

## P A R T O N E

### NEW WORKING-CLASS STUDIES AT THE INTERSECTIONS

Working-class life and experience is shaped by the complex interactions among class, race, gender, place, and other categories. Defining clearly how class, race, and gender intersect and pursuing scholarship that examines multiple aspects of identity and power is challenging, difficult work. As David Roediger points out in his essay, “‘More Than Two Things’: The State of the Art of Labor History,” exploring more than two categories at one time requires creative approaches to research and writing. As the four essays in this section suggest, expanding our scholarly assumptions by considering new kinds of evidence and rethinking some core ideas can help us meet this challenge.

Elizabeth Faue, in her essay “Gender, Class, and History,” argues that the study of working-class history should emphasize the relationship between cultural identity and work. Faue traces the ways that labor historians have engaged with working-class culture and consciousness, suggesting a logical connection between the social history of the 1960s and New Working-Class Studies. Yet, she notes, the field has lost touch with class, as some scholars focus greater attention on race and gender while others focus on the institutional history of unions. Faue calls for a return to a more interdisciplinary, intersectional approach to labor history, and she suggests that studying the lives of working women, through biographies and memoirs, offers a rich opportunity to make such a move.

Roediger examines the difficulties of juggling more than two categories of cultural identity in any single project, and he suggests that doing so requires inter-

disciplinary work. He sees opportunities for enriching historical analysis by using literary texts, which can capture effectively the complexity of working-class experience. Roediger illustrates his argument by discussing the poetry of Sterling Brown, whose poems tell stories that show clearly how class, race, and gender operate together and in tension with each other.

In her essay, “‘All I Wanted Was a Steady Job’: The State and African American Workers,” Kimberley Phillips argues that expanding the definition of work to include public sector employment, especially in the military, can help scholars gain a deeper understanding of how class has worked for African American men in the twentieth century. Phillips positions her analysis in the context of existing scholarship on African American labor, and she shows that we can gain new insights into how class and race intersect by viewing familiar history differently.

Alessandro Portelli advocates cross-cultural analysis as a tool for understanding both the common experience and the cultural differences of working-class culture internationally. Equally important, he argues for the centrality of workers’ voices as a tool for understanding how class works. He shows how listening to the stories of laid-off industrial workers in Ypsilanti, Michigan, and Terni, Italy, provides insight into how class is shaped by place as well as by global economic forces. In all four of these essays, scholars work with sources outside of their home disciplines, and they ask critical questions about how to define the subject of working-class life and culture.

# 1

## Gender, Class, and History

Elizabeth Faue

**S**ince the new social history revived the questions of class mobility and collective action in the 1960s, labor and working-class historians have integrated a range of innovative approaches, social and cultural theories, and research methods.<sup>1</sup> Cultural Marxism and engagement with labor struggles inspired many historians of the working class to break with the intellectual legacy of the Wisconsin school of labor history. The goal was to explore the working-class past beyond the institutional labor movement, the formal labor market, and electoral politics. Historians of the working class moved from the study of labor leaders and institutions toward history written “from the bottom up.” They probed the impact of industrialization on families, explored the changing forms of working-class protest and working-class community, analyzed the shifting strategies of labor unions, and revealed the past of unorganized and nonunion workers as well. Work became paired with society and culture, politics with ethnicity and religion. If working-class culture mattered, so too did the workplace, which remained for many the birthplace and touchstone of American class consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

The labor struggles of the 1960s and 1970s were not, however, the only political movements that shaped the new working-class history. The civil rights movement and the women’s movement stimulated new scholarly research. Addressing the silences of mainstream accounts and the new social and labor history, women’s and African American historians raised questions about gender and racial politics for labor and the working classes. The issue was not only about sex

and racial discrimination but also how labor historians consistently neglected or underplayed race and gender as analytical categories. As late as the 1990s, many labor and working-class historians remained committed to an understanding of class consciousness and class politics that was public, production-centered, and predominantly white and male. Faced with feminist analysis and critical race theory, some labor historians reasserted the importance of the state and workplace struggles.<sup>3</sup> Others charged that feminist scholarship, with its emphasis on language and identity, was responsible for the declining significance of class in historical research. Ill at ease with subjective and cultural understandings of class, many saw gender analysis, cultural history, and postmodern theory as being subversive of class politics. Turning their sights to labor, law, and politics, they trumpeted neoinstitutionalism as a solution for the perceived woes of labor history.<sup>4</sup>

Turning away from cultural history meant that labor historians neglected the new initiatives in working-class studies that emerged in the 1990s, but this was not the only retreat. Studies of class mobility, family structure, community, and industrialization—which had sparked the new labor history—declined in favor of a renewed institutional focus. Sociologists, on the other hand, redirected their attention to working-class politics and experience. They revitalized the study of social movements and the process of bureaucratization, explored deindustrialization and working-class family life, and probed questions of class identity.<sup>5</sup> While literary scholars explored the “laboring of American culture,”<sup>6</sup> labor historians examined, instead, union politics and the state. The exception remained in the areas of race and gender history, where proliferating studies of working-class whiteness and masculinity developed alongside the new institutionalism.

These developments left labor and working-class history at a disadvantage when working-class studies emerged fully as a field. Using literary and ethnographic means to explore the working-class past, not historical methods, working-class studies surfaced not as a flowering of the social and cultural history of workers—as one might have predicted in 1975—but in studies of working-class literature, sociology, and anthropology. Its epicenter, the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University, focused much of its energy on the cultural and political expressions of class in studies modeled more closely on American studies and women’s studies than on social history. Until recently, labor historians have shown little interest in the center’s conferences. This essay seeks to redress that absence.

### **The New Labor History**

The past forty years has seen a revival of labor and working-class history and a reorientation from its roots in institutional economics toward a more social and cultural history of labor. Inspired by cultural histories of British labor (especially

the work of E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm) and the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz, working-class historians in the United States set out to unearth the meaning of working-class ritual and protest, to study working-class communities, and to record working-class political history. Foremost among its practitioners were David Montgomery, Herbert Gutman, David Brody, and Alice Kessler-Harris.<sup>7</sup> As a generation of new labor historians, they were collectively committed to studying history at the grassroots, a move inspired by historical sociology, the French *Annales* school, and a revitalized vision of progressive history. At the outset, the new labor and working-class history adopted a focus on local and community history as a means of accessing the working-class past. Further, following Thompson and Hobsbawm, it tapped the interdisciplinary font of historical sources, including folk songs and hymns, folklore and local ritual, oral histories, city directories, and census returns.

In the new labor history, race and ethnicity played important but contradictory roles in the formation of an American working class.<sup>8</sup> Ethnic and racial communities bound together workers in ways that made possible the labor struggles of the past two hundred years. Before the Civil War, slave communities also provided support for informal resistance and open rebellion against the slave regime. While some workers had abolitionist instincts, the possibility of slave labor replacing free labor caused many workers and farmers to oppose the employment even of free blacks. Slavery served both black and white workers as the great trope of oppression. Labor republicanism and successive labor movements saw unfree labor not only as a legal condition of servitude but also as dependence on the wage system.<sup>9</sup>

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, waves of immigrants entered the wage labor market in ways that renewed the experience of and resistance to industrialization. Their ethnic loyalties were the source of collective strength and also division. While immigrant communities often harbored oppositional politics, ethnic conflict undermined interethnic working-class solidarity. The tight ethnic bonds among both native-born and foreign-born workers precluded unified protest. Skilled workers, who successfully organized labor and fraternal unions, assumed that low-skilled foreign-born workers stood as obstacles to the labor movement's ends. Craft fraternity, not class solidarity, was the key to staving off the symbolic and the real threat of dependence.<sup>10</sup>

Only in the twentieth century, as workers came to share common cultures and unions in mass production industries developed new strategies, did ethnic divisions cease to undermine class consciousness. After the defeat of mass working-class protests during and after World War I, militant trade unionists and radicals recognized the role that ethnic and racial division had played in strikebreaking and union decline. The racially inclusive (and even, to an extent, gender egalitarian) ideology of the CIO and leftist politics gave rise to the massive union movement of the 1930s and further union gains during World War II. Even so, the



legacy and practice of racial hostility remained a chief obstacle to working-class unity. By the 1960s, with the resurgent civil rights struggle, the rise of the women's movement, and significant shifts in the labor force and industry, the labor movement was faced with new challenges. Much of the hostility toward minority and women workers remained, but so too did renewed employer resistance and restrictive labor laws. Labor historians, from Stanley Aronowitz to the new generation of women historians discussed below, explored how race, ethnicity, and gender disrupted and complicated the simple story of industrial union success that was the hallmark of institutional labor history.<sup>11</sup>

### **Women, Gender, and Labor**

The last thirty years have been a time for discovering and recovering women's working-class past. Early in the century, the Wisconsin school of labor history implicitly argued that women in the labor force were a problem to be solved. Either women workers would be incorporated into the labor movement through participation (parallel to their integration into the polity through suffrage) or they and the labor movement would be the losers. Unorganized women workers threatened to undermine the industrial democracy that progressives sought to build. Women had to be encouraged to join labor unions and discouraged from doing dangerous, poorly paid, or physically depleting work. As women entered the labor force in ever-greater numbers in the 1960s and broke down gender barriers to full participation in society, they represented the best hope and greatest obstacle to labor movement stability and growth. In many ways, the influx of women into government employment, clerical and service work, and unionized occupations during the twentieth century fulfilled that hope. The feminist movement, which created a new politics of work for women, also gave rise to a new feminist labor history.

During the 1960s, as social history began to take center stage, studies of women workers and women of the working classes played a new and important role in revitalizing labor history. First, some labor historians who had their origins in the Old Left brought to bear a historical interest in "the woman question" to women's history. Marxist historian Philip Foner, a pioneer of the new women's and new labor histories, brought out his comprehensive institutional labor history of women in the United States in 1979. Other labor historians published important overviews of women and work and women and the labor movement. These surveys helped to bring together older economic studies of women and work, revealed significant events and trends in working women's history, and began the exploration of sex discrimination and gender conflict in the labor movement and in the workplace. In *Out to Work*, to use the best-known example, Alice Kessler-Harris wove a strong narrative of women's struggle against low wages and poor working conditions at the workplace against the background of

legal, cultural, and familial constraints on women's ability to work and their right to waged employment.<sup>12</sup>

The next wave of studies addressed the white and male bias of labor and working-class history by exploring the labor movement's long-standing exclusion of women workers. These studies probed the racial, ethnic, and sex-based policies of the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, the Industrial Workers of the World, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, and other national as well as local unions. Historically, women's participation and treatment in labor and working-class organizations hinged on the social and political context of class. The proportion of women in the labor force and their employment in critical industries; the economic interests of employers and labor unions; the role that community played in labor organizing and the presence of supporting working-class political institutions; and the level of ideological and political commitment to equality—all served to either expand or limit the opportunity for working women to join the labor movement, protest, and engage in collective bargaining.

These studies paid scant attention to questions of class subjectivity and to the linguistic and symbolic systems that underwrote and rationalized discrimination against women and their secondary place in working class political and social organizations. Still, they raised issues about domestic ideology and its impact on class politics, analyzed the sex segregation of the labor force and sex typing of occupations, and located gender conflict in workplace competition and occupational practice. If working women's history in the 1970s and early 1980s shared the institutional bent of much labor history, there was a telling difference. For feminist scholars, exploring the identity, values, and prejudices of working-class communities and organizations demanded attention to the subjective and gendered dimensions of working-class culture. Women's labor historians considered the private as well as the public, the informal as well as the formal, and the community as well as the workplace as appropriate domains for their research. They revealed the character of male-female relations, the strengths and limitations of working-class family solidarity, and the outlines of class identity for women, particularly in connection to ethnic, racial, religious and political allegiances.<sup>13</sup>

Influenced by the new social history, women's labor historians used another approach to get at the gendered character of class solidarity and protest. Using the community study as a platform to address the division of labor and the basis of class solidarity, historians explored the underpinnings of gender segregation and sex discrimination in the workplace, sexual hostility at work, and women's exclusion from and secondary citizenship in labor unions and working-class political organizations.<sup>14</sup> Community studies provided historians with the advantages of in-depth detailed analysis and perspective on long-term trends. At the same time, community studies, whether of an important national conflict or a revealing local history, allowed historians to tell stories, uncover the lost working-class past, and populate the historical landscape with gendered class subjects.

One of the important contributions of community studies was asking how class and gender were together embedded in social and cultural life. In writing about the local arrangements of class, it was necessary to integrate workers, whether women or men, into their cultural and political contexts in ways that institutional studies often avoided. Further, writers of working-women's history had to document the past of working-class men as well as women, because local histories were often either nonexistent or poorly documented. This practice drove home the lesson that gender was a relational category and that women's history had to be written in relation to men's, just as men's history requires knowing women's.

Family, the crucible of class consciousness and of gender identity proved to be a contested arena for and complicated source of class politics. Exploring the bases of women's collective action, women's labor historians found that families and households shaped the conditions under which both women and men mounted protests and called strikes. Scholars further noted differences by industry, division of labor, work organization, and community. Asking what constituted loyalty and allegiance, solidarity and community, within the working class, they found that in workplace and community, "solidarity," "working class," "politics," and "struggle" often were perceived as masculine, a definition that sometimes served as an obstacle to more inclusive class action.<sup>15</sup>

This point was driven home by the concurrent development of studies of women's occupations and the gendering of work culture. Building on the argument that class identities were rooted in the workplace, women's historians looked at occupations, crafts, and skills that were in part defined by the sexual division of labor. First, in women's occupations such as nursing and clerical and sales work, they found a remarkable similarity between traditional ideas about women and the rationalization of work in female terms. In clerical occupations, which had once been the domain of young men seeking to make it in business, the demand for workers and the mechanization of labor (through the typewriter, for example) transformed office work. It stratified job categories along sex lines (accountants were male, bookkeepers female; office managers often male, secretaries, typists, and file clerks female) and created new management rationales for keeping clerical wages low and creating barriers to advancement and promotion for women workers. Sales work similarly created gender-specific positions and work cultures that reinforced gender ideals. Nursing, like elementary school teaching, was defined as a women's profession. Responding to new demands for hospital nursing care and to cultural ideas about women's nature, professional nurses viewed the assignment of tasks, the pay scale, and the professional horizons through the lens of conservative gender ideology. Second, in sex-segregated service and manufacturing work, women's work culture often provided an outlet for excluded workers. It sometimes also gave rise to women's independent unionism, as it did in waitressing. In cigar making, a once male-dominated and skilled craft, women were relegated to industrialized and low-skill work, which made

them the target of skilled workers' hostility and excluded women from full participation in unions.<sup>16</sup>

Cultural studies of work and gender among women led to parallel developments in the understanding of men and labor. The issue had first arisen in historian David Montgomery's studies of workers' control, which focused on the male occupations of ironworker and machinist. He argued that the ideal of manly work drove skilled workers' politics and culture. Their identity as masculine craft workers sparked an alternative and oppositional stance toward employers and emphasized the role of skill. Taking manliness at face value meant, however, that the subjective and gendered understandings of the links between manliness and class politics remained unexplored. Moreover, Montgomery did not consider the corrosive impact of the skilled crafts identifying work with masculinity and defining class solidarity as a set of fraternal—explicitly male and white—bonds.<sup>17</sup> The new gendered labor history did.

In a series of discrete but related studies, women's labor historians examined how craft union practice and bureaucratic unionism excluded women in express and subconscious ways. In working-class struggles where both men and women had a stake in the outcome of bargaining, women's protest and demands were seen as less central, necessary, or worthy. Working-class voices were male, even as they relied on women and children to rationalize men's wages in terms of family need. Workingmen often argued that women's demands were the territory of individual and private luxury (pin money); workingmen's demands, on the other hand, were legitimated as class protest. Ironically, the study of family budgets suggested that men automatically claimed the lion's share of discretionary income. Women were much less likely to claim extra food and clothing, spending money, or small luxuries such as tobacco and reading material. These case studies underwrote how looking at women and gender could change and deepen our historical understanding of class, but at the same time there was a central tendency to downplay, devalue, and undermine women's needs compared to men's.<sup>18</sup>

In its initial phases, women's labor history addressed how working women's experience differed by race as well as how racial division and competition affected the female labor force and unionization. In documentary histories and historical surveys of race, gender, and work, women's historians sought to find the patterns of racial difference among women, trace the combined effects of sex and racial discrimination, and find the structural and cultural underpinnings of women's social inequality.<sup>19</sup> A major subject was domestic service, in which over one-third of all women workers were employed in the nineteenth century. Foreign-born women were specifically recruited as servants in northern cities, at least until the 1920s; African Americans in the South and Latinas in the West and Southwest dominated regional labor markets in domestic service. In each case, the tensions between women employers and women workers surfaced as an important component of working-class life and labor. Women of all races competed