



## Strathprints Institutional Repository

**Mclvor, Arthur (2016) Le travail en Grande-Bretagne : une étude historiographique. In: Travail et Ouvriers d'Europe au XX Siècle. Histoires . Editions Universitaires de Dijon, Dijon, France, pp. 13-28. ISBN 9782364411852 ,**

This version is available at <http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/59442/>

**Strathprints** is designed to allow users to access the research output of the University of Strathclyde. Unless otherwise explicitly stated on the manuscript, Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Please check the manuscript for details of any other licences that may have been applied. You may not engage in further distribution of the material for any profitmaking activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute both the url (<http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/>) and the content of this paper for research or private study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge.

Any correspondence concerning this service should be sent to Strathprints administrator: [strathprints@strath.ac.uk](mailto:strathprints@strath.ac.uk)

## **Work in Britain: An Historiographical Survey**

**Arthur McIvor**

Work lies at the very centre of human activity and historians have struggled for a long time to understand its significance in people's lives. The development of the discipline of labour history in Britain from around 1960 led to a renewed focus on the social history of work and particularly of histories of marginalised and oppressed groups of workers. Social class was seen as central to understanding the meaning of work in this scholarship and the underlying theoretical framework of this early period was undoubtedly Marxist, with Edward P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm the key influential figures. This developed over time into a vibrant, intellectually stimulating and deeply contested terrain of different interpretations and historiographies of work. In part this was a product of the shifting politics of the post-war era, with a watershed around 1980. The later twentieth century challenge of post-modernism and the 'linguistic turn' led to intellectual questioning of the significance of class and the assumption of inherent conflict in workplace relations, with the concomitant emerging recognition of the importance of other identities associated with gender, ethnicity, race, and, latterly, disability. This brief essay aims to survey and critically reflect on some of the key landmarks in the historiography of work in Britain over the past fifty years or so.

### **Marx and the history of the workplace**

Marxist influenced interpretations of the history of work dynamically challenged the prevailing 'Whiggish' assumptions of a benign state and an unproblematic almost linear trend towards improvement in work conditions. Starting with the Webbs,

Hammonds and G.D.H Cole, histories of work emphasised the deleterious impacts of industrialisation – proletarianisation; loss of autonomy and health-sapping mistreatment of workers – as well as the inherently exploitative relationship between employers and workers. Hence Thompson’s nuanced and monumental *Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and Hobsbawm’s work, incorporating his explanation of the failure of socialist revolution in the infamous ‘labour aristocracy’ thesis (first mooted in 1954) – recently revisited by another of the prominent Marxist labour historians of the era, John Foster.<sup>1</sup> Whilst there were transgressors, in the 1960s and 1970s I think it’s fair to argue that Marxist interpretations dominated the historiographical landscape of work and that certain assumptions pervaded this intellectual current. Fundamental were the centrality of social class and the notion of class conflict in the workplace with subordinated, exploited and alienated workers struggling against a powerful, almost omnipotent industrial bourgeoisie. Competition and the profit motive were the key drivers of an thinly regulated capitalism, with government co-opted to support private enterprise and the notion that employers had the inalienable ‘right to manage’ as they thought fit without ‘interference’ in the market from third parties like the state and the emerging trade unions. John Foster’s *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (1974) (the book that inspired me to go on to postgraduate study in labour history) and Richard Price’s, *Masters, Unions and Men* (1980) perhaps epitomise this strand of the historiography.

With some exceptions, the historiography in this period was very male-centred, with focus on the ‘big battalions’ of workers in sectors like coal mining, the docks, heavy

---

<sup>1</sup> John Foster, ‘The Labour Aristocracy and Working Class Consciousness Revisited’, *Labour History Review*, 75, 3, December 2010, pp. 245-62; Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (1964); Eric Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour* (1984).

engineering and shipbuilding, printing, building (though to some extent studies of textiles provided an alternative mixed-gender perspective). Heavy dependence on the documentary archives of trade unions and other institutions (such as mainstream political parties) also meant a rather narrow focus on organised workers and a neglect of the majority of workers who did not carry a membership card.

Nonetheless, this rich flowing of detailed workplace studies, which included the influential work of James Hinton with his seminal study of the first shop stewards movement in World War One (1973) and Holton's analysis of syndicalism (1976) did much to reconstruct the world of marginalised workers, their work and political cultures and the roles of workplace activists, the fundamental inequalities and injustices of work linked to an unequal power relationship and the role of the state in supporting and perpetuating capitalist domination.<sup>2</sup> For most, at least beyond the privileged elite of craft artisanal workers, work meant drudgery, exploitation and control over lives. Crucially, the labour process and the workplace were represented as sites of conflict where working class consciousness was forged, indicated in growing recourse to the strike weapon and other forms of radical protest. Hence a key focus of labour historians was on waves of workplace organisation and strikes, such as that of the 'new unionism', 1888-1890, the labour unrest, 1910-14, and the General Strike, 1926.<sup>3</sup> A distinct strand of literature interpreted the majority of workers' trade unions in this period as 'selling out', representing them as bureaucratic reformists holding back a more radical, class-conscious even potentially revolutionary 'rank and file', the latter led increasingly by socialists of one hue or another.

---

<sup>2</sup> James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards Movement* (1973); Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900-1914* (1976).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Margaret Morris, *The General Strike* (1976), G.A. Phillips, *The General Strike* (1976).

The changing nature and significance of the labour process has been a pivotal area of debate in the historiography of work in the UK, as elsewhere. A key piece of scholarship that influenced the direction of workplace studies in this phase was Harry Braverman's, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). Braverman further developed Marxist labour process theory, arguing that real subordination of labour through the deskilling of work came in the twentieth century with the spread of Taylorism and scientific management and that this was ubiquitous across manual and non-manual labour. The outcome was the 'degradation' of work within capitalist countries.

Workplace histories in the 1970s such as those of coal miners, engineering workers and car workers provided empirical confirmation of the deskilling dynamic within British industry.<sup>4</sup> The latter included Hugh Beynon's deeply evocative *Working for Ford* (1973). This triggered a wide debate on the nature of skill and the impact on work and workers of technological, managerial and organisational change, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, associated with the related developments of mechanisation, the factory system, 'scientific management' and Fordism. The growing popularity of Gramsci and the ideas of hegemony and workers' agency were influential in this scholarship, informing studies of work and workplace culture – for example Stedman Jones, Holford, Joyce and Price.<sup>5</sup>

### **Challenging Marxist interpretations**

There always co-existed a wide church of opinions and interpretations within the historiography of work and whilst Marxist-influenced approaches dominated they were challenged by right-of-centre labour historians, such as Albert Musson and

---

<sup>4</sup> See Theo Nichols (ed), *Capital and Labour* (1980).

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (1984); John Holford, *Reshaping Labour: Organisation, Work and Politics* (1988); Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics* (1980); Richard Price, *Labour in British Society* (1986).

John Ward and, to some extent, by feminists frustrated at the male and class-centredness of much of Marxist-influenced studies of work and labour. Famously, Hobsbawm was trenchantly criticised by socialist-feminists for his relative gender blindness in the *History Workshop Journal*, which soon after changed its sub-title from 'a journal for socialist historians' to 'a journal for socialist and feminist historians'.<sup>6</sup> From around 1980 the change in government with Thatcher's rise to power, combined with the shifting intellectual currents of neo-liberalism, post-modernism and cultural studies, contributed to an escalating challenge to Marxist paradigms and to a proliferation of approaches and interpretations. In this post-structuralist assault on established ideas the veracity of any overarching theoretical frameworks (notably Marxism) was debated, the centrality of class and conflictual social relations was questioned, the deskilling thesis debunked and the co-existence of a diverse range of identities established, with race, ethnicity, place and gender all important, as well as class, in explaining the lived experience, culture and behaviour of workers in the past. The scholarship increasingly focused on the heterogeneous and complex nature of capitalism, the diversity in workplace culture and the internal divisions within the working class characterised by wide variation in occupational, political and cultural identities.<sup>7</sup>

Whilst affirmed in some studies – such as those of Hinton and Burgess<sup>8</sup> - a plethora of 'revisionist' histories of work, labour and the working class have criticised Marxist labour process theory and Braverman's degradation of work thesis. Amongst the critics, Patrick Joyce argued that conflictual industrial relations were much

---

<sup>6</sup> Sally Alexander, Anna Davidoff and Eve Hostettler, 'Labouring Women', *History Workshop Journal*, 17, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, John Benson, *The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939* (1989).

<sup>8</sup> Keith Burgess, *The Origins of British Industrial Relations* (1975); Keith Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour* (1980).

exaggerated and episodic and in reality relations between the bosses and the workers were as much characterised by consent and collaboration, oiled by paternalist company policies in regions like the North of England.<sup>9</sup> Joyce went on to become one of Britain's most vocal proponents of post-modernism in the labour history field.<sup>10</sup> Similarly Alistair Reid argued against the deskilling thesis and posited that social relations were more complex and fluid and for long periods relatively stable.<sup>11</sup> In specific industries such as engineering and shipbuilding, scholars such as Tolliday, Zeitlin, More, Reid and Penn weighed in to argue that in Britain skill remained significant, adapted and survived the challenges of Taylorism and Fordism.<sup>12</sup> In part this was linked to product markets and the dependence upon bespoke production that continued to place an onus on traditional craft skill. At best, as Wightman has argued, there was 'an uneven degree of deskilling'.<sup>13</sup> Other scholars – Littler for example - emphasised the agency of workers and their trade unions and their varying capacity to mediate the process of deskilling.<sup>14</sup> Another angle of attack was to focus on the concurrent process of reskilling and 'upgrading' and wider macro developments in labour markets with Gallie, amongst others, arguing using ten-yearly census data that jobs were becoming more and not less skilled with the rising proportion of technical, managerial, creative and professional

---

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics* (1980).

<sup>10</sup> See Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People* (1993).

<sup>11</sup> Alistair Reid, *Social Classes and Social Relations in Britain, 1850-1914* (1992).

<sup>12</sup> Steve Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *The Power to Manage?* (1991); Charles More, *Skill and the English Working Class* (1980); R. Penn, *Skilled Manual Workers in the Class Structure* (1985).

<sup>13</sup> Clare Wightman, *More than Munitions: Women, Work and the Engineering Industries, 1900-1950* (1999), p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> Craig Littler, *The Development of the Labour Process in Capitalist Societies* (1982).

jobs from the 1930s on.<sup>15</sup> The labour process debate rumbles on – a recent iteration being the edited collection by Richardson and Nicholls.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst the degradation of work thesis was being challenged from the point of view of the diverse experience and the agency of workers, the notion of united, omnipotent and class-conscious employers and management was also subject to reappraisal. Studies of management and employers revised the concept of all-powerful bosses, identifying schisms of interest, divisions and fractures, with a wide range of behaviour and ‘strategic choices’ and a disunited employers’ movement.<sup>17</sup> Some argue that British employers were characterised historically by their weakness, indicated by their inability to consistently stand up to the trade unions (as in the USA) and prevent the growth of unions and their rise to the powerful position they held within British society in their heyday from the 1940s to the 1970s. McKinlay has recently reflected on this debate in a provocative piece on the ‘paradoxes of British employers’ organisation’.<sup>18</sup> A wide spectrum of labour management strategies was identified in this scholarship, from ‘corporatist’ employers willing to accept and work with trade unions, through paternalist and welfarist bosses controlling labour through inculcating loyalty and attachment to the company to more authoritarian, anti-union companies intent on retaining their prerogative to manage and keeping unions out of the workplace.<sup>19</sup> Work on managers and foremen has also led to a more nuanced

---

<sup>15</sup> Duncan Gallie, ‘The Labour Force’ in A.H. Halsey and J. Webb (eds), *Twentieth Century British Social Trends* (2000).

<sup>16</sup> Mike Richardson and Peter Nicholls (eds), *A Business and Labour History of Britain* (2011).

<sup>17</sup> Steve Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds), *The Power to Manage?* (1991); Howard Gospel, *Markets, Firms and the Management of Labour in Modern Britain* (1992); Arthur Mclvor, *Organised Capital* (1996).

<sup>18</sup> Alan McKinlay, ‘The Paradoxes of British Employers’ Organisation’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 2011, pp 89-113.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Joseph Melling, ‘Scottish Industrialists and the Changing Character of Class Relations in the Clyde Region, c1880-1918’, in A. Dickson (ed), *Capital and Class in Scotland* (1982).



understanding of the role of what one historian has called ‘the NCOs of industry’.<sup>20</sup> These were not necessarily the pawns of employers and could act as independent agents, as, for example, the work of Andrew Perchard has indicated, in recent studies of coal mining (2007) and the aluminium sector (2012).<sup>21</sup>

New studies of the history of work focused on drilling down to provide more in-depth investigations of particular occupational groups, or of local and regional work and political identities – some of which confirmed and others refuted the veracity of traditional Marxist interpretations. The historiography of coal miners provides an example. Page Arnot’s classic Marxist depiction of the archetypal proletarian and ‘militant miner’ at odds with his employers was challenged, for example by the work of Benson, Campbell, Church and Outram.<sup>22</sup> Research uncovered wide differences in work cultures and levels of protest across different coalfields and in local community capacities to organise, strike and develop socialist politics, as with the work of Campbell for Scotland up to 1939 and the recent nuanced account of the 1984-5 miners’ strike in Scotland by Jim Phillips.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the work of Zeitlin on engineering and more recently Reid on shipbuilding (cite latest book here) have critiqued the concept of deskilling and identified wide divergences in workplace cultures across the country (for example between Tyneside and Clydeside).<sup>24</sup> A

---

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Melling, ‘“Non-Commissioned Officers”: British Employers and Their Supervisory Workers, 1880-1920’, *Social History*, 5, 1980.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Perchard, *The Mine Management Professions in the Twentieth Century Scottish Coal Mining Industry* (2007); Andrew Perchard, *Aluminiumville* (Lancaster, 2011). See also Melling, J. and Booth, A. (eds), *Managing the Modern Workplace: Productivity, Politics and Workplace Culture in Postwar Britain* (2008).

<sup>22</sup> Robin Page-Arnot, *The Miners: Years of Struggle* (1954); Robin Page-Arnot, *The Miners in Crisis and War* (1961); John Benson, *British Coalminers in the Nineteenth Century* (1980); Alan Campbell, *The Scottish Miners, 1874-1939: Vol 1 Industry, Work and Community* (2000); Roy Church and Quinton Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain, 1880-1966* (1998).

<sup>23</sup> Jim Phillips, *Collieries, Communities and the Miners’ Strike in Scotland, 1984-85* (2012).

<sup>24</sup> Alistair J. Reid, *The Tide of Democracy: Shipyard Workers and Social Relations in Britain, 1870-1950* (2010).

synthesis of this empirical, 'revisionist' approach to work is provided in the edited collection by Crafts, et. al., *Work and Pay in Twentieth Century Britain* (2007).

The radical political cities and areas in Britain – the so-called 'little Moscows' identified in Marxist labour histories<sup>25</sup> - were also subject to wider scholarly scrutiny, with part of the spotlight falling on the alienating role of work and the deskilling and intensification of labour processes in incubating radicalism. 'Red Clydeside' provides perhaps the best example here. Traditionally Glasgow and the surrounding industrial conurbation developed the reputation of being Britain's foremost socialist city and labour historians drew upon evidence of a radical workplace culture in the early twentieth century, not least the lurid autobiographies of labour activists such as the communist Willie Gallagher.<sup>26</sup> 'Revisionist' accounts challenged the depth and breadth of radical workplace culture on Clydeside, arguing that workers were more divided and that the skilled artisans were pursuing sectional rather than class interests. Iain McLean's *Legend of Red Clydeside* (1983) epitomised this attack. Subsequent scholarship has divided on debunking 'Red Clydeside' or defending the notion of a distinctive socialist mentality rooted in the workplace, for example in the work of John Foster (perhaps Scotland's most well-known Marxist labour historian) and Kenefick and McIvor (1996), who traced the roots of Red Clydeside back in the pre-First World War period.<sup>27</sup> The issue became one of the fiercest historiographical debates in Scottish social and labour history. The outcome was a systematic debunking of the idea of a city that was ripe for a workers' revolution (with more stability in workplace industrial relations than was once imagined), with a consensus

---

<sup>25</sup> Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows* (1980).

<sup>26</sup> William Gallagher, *Revolt on the Clyde* (1935).

<sup>27</sup> John Foster, 'Strike Action and Working Class Politics on Clydeside, 1914-1919, *International Review of Social History*, 35, 1990; William Kenefick and Arthur McIvor (eds), *The Roots of Red Clydeside, 1910-1914?* (1996)

that Glasgow was (and remains) a *relatively* militant city, politically to the left, more akin, perhaps, to interwar Vienna than Moscow.

### **Gendered, racial and intersecting identities**

The historiography was also increasingly focused on the gendering of work, starting with a clutch of ‘rediscovery’ and ‘reconstruction’ studies of women at work, in trade unions and in strikes. Feminists brought alternative theoretical frameworks into this arena, with a focus on patriarchy – such as Sylvia Walby’s path-breaking *Patriarchy at Work* (1986). Socialist-feminists such as Veronica Beechey trenchantly argued that the deskilling and degradation of work thesis did not fit the experience of most working women.<sup>28</sup> The latter were as much oppressed by working class men and their institutions, including the trade unions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with their commitment to the prevailing ‘separate spheres’ ideology that consigned women to low-paid and low status largely sex segregated jobs and failed to challenge the marriage bar. In the seminal *Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (1997) Anna Clarke provided an alternative vision to Edward P. Thompson, looking at work and social relations from a female perspective, arguing that gender shaped work and identities in this period as much as class. Other feminist labour historians explored the hidden history of female work experience and cultures. A significant strand utilised oral testimonies and other autobiographical source material (such as Mass Observation). Examples include the work of Elizabeth Roberts on traditional Northern textile communities, Mirium Glucksmann on the Midlands and London new ‘sunrise’ manufacturing plants and

---

<sup>28</sup> Veronica Beechey, ‘The Sexual Division of Labour and the Labour Process: A Critical Assessment of Braverman’, in S. Wood (ed), *The Degradation of Work?* (1982).

Penny Summerfield's seminal study of women workers in the Second World War.<sup>29</sup> Others turned their attention to the neglected history of women's participation in trade unions, strikes and industrial protest. Two outstanding examples here from Scotland are Eleanor Gordon's *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850-1914* (1991) and Annemarie Hughes, *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, 1919-1939* (2010). Noteworthy here is also Delap's forensic study of the working lives of domestic servants, informed by utilising a wide range of oral evidence and with a focus on the personal and emotional history of work.<sup>30</sup> Much of this research examines work through the personal lens of those who experienced it, implicitly critiquing Marxist scholarship for a failure to adequately account for workers' agency or probe the lived experience of work and the complexity of work identities. As Martin Caunce recently put it: 'Marxism has made so little overt connection with ordinary life at work in Britain'.<sup>31</sup>

The gendering of work emerged as a key theme in the literature in the 1990s and 2000s, with attention shifting towards relationships between men and women in the workplace and a refocus on masculinity at work. Some work challenged the feminist view of a patriarchal workplace where men (and the male dominated unions) were opposed to women as workers and determined to subordinate them. The work of Myra Baillie (on Clydeside, 1910s) and Clare Wightman (on engineering, 1900-50) are examples where social class (and other factors) are reinstated as explanatory

---

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place* (1984); Mirium Glucksmann, *Women Assemble* (1990); Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (1998).

<sup>30</sup> Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth Century Britain* (2011)

<sup>31</sup> Cited in *Labour History Review*, 78, 2 (2013), 241.

frameworks and gender antagonisms downplayed.<sup>32</sup> Influenced by the theorising of Connell, labour historians in Britain also turned their attention to the construction and operation of male identities in the workplace.<sup>33</sup> A strand of research focused on the exploration of masculinity or masculinities in employment; the existence of a deeply masculinised and to some extent macho work culture in the male dominated (invariably risky and dangerous) heavy industries such as coal mining, shipbuilding, dock work and iron and steel.<sup>34</sup> Again, there was a tendency in this literature to draw more heavily upon personal accounts, including autobiographies and oral interview testimonies to explore the emotional world of male workers. Exposure to risk and exhausting work and the 'sacrifice' that this entailed could also be used to justify the empowerment of men within the home. A special issue of *Labour History Review* on masculinities edited by Eileen Yeo in 2004 was a significant landmark in this area of the historiography of work.

What is evident from this scholarship is that work forged both gender identities and class consciousness and that the nature of work and impacts of workplace encounters could be complex and contradictory. Recent scholarship is grappling with the complexity of intersectionality, the interplay of power relations within capitalism and the dynamics of gender and class within this contested environment.<sup>35</sup> In

---

<sup>32</sup> Myra Baillie, 'A New View of Dilution: Women Munitions Workers and Red Clydeside', *Scottish Labour History*, 39, 2004; Clare Wightman, *More than Munitions: Women, Work and the Engineering Industries, 1900-1950* (1999).

<sup>33</sup> R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (2000); R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (2005). See also L. Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (1997).

<sup>34</sup> Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (1991); Michael Roper, *Masculinity and the British Organisation Man since 1945* (1994); Johnston, R. and McIvor, A., 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c1930-1970s', in Yeo, E. (ed), *Working Class Masculinities in Britain, 1850 to the Present*, special edition, *Labour History Review*, 69, 2 (Aug 2004), 135-52; David Walker, 'Danger was Something you were Brought up With: Workers' Narratives on Occupational Health and Safety in the Workplace', *Scottish Labour History*, 46, 2011, pp. 54-70.

<sup>35</sup> For an early example see Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures* (1994)

syntheses there are also signs that gender is being integrated more extensively in discussions around the nature of work, class and workers' collective organisation. Examples would be Alistair Reid's survey of the history of trade unions (2004) and McIvor's *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (2013). Also see Mary Davis (ed.), *Class and Gender in British Labour History: Renewing the Debate (or Starting it?)* (2011) for an overview of these conversations and a strong argument for labour history having neglected gender history (hence partly explaining its declining popularity).

The work experience of other neglected and marginalised groups in the past have also increasingly received attention from historians, including immigrants, racial and ethnic minority groups. These studies identified the latent racial prejudices and discriminatory behaviour of much of the white working class in Britain in the past as well as the failures of the trade union movement to embrace workers of colour in the early years of mass immigration in the 1940s and 50s.<sup>36</sup> Recent case studies such as those of Searle (2010) of Muslims working in the Sheffield steel industry provide valuable insights into the intersection of class and race, the attitudes of the host community, and the persistence of what he calls 'the racial division of labour', or a colour bar in modern British society.<sup>37</sup> Studies of sectarianism in the workplace (notably in relation to discrimination against Irish Catholics), and attitudes towards

---

<sup>36</sup> P. Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (1984); Lunn, K., 'Complex Encounters: Trade Unions, Immigration and Racism', in J. McIlroy, N. Fishman and A. Campbell (eds), *British Trade Unionism and Industrial Politics, vol 2, The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (1999), 70-92; Phizacklea, A, and Miles, R., *Labour and Racism* (1980).

<sup>37</sup> Searle, K., *From Farms to Foundries: An Arab Community in Industrial Britain* (2010).

'alien' workers such as the European Volunteer Workers have also deepened our understanding of other rifts and divisions within the working class.<sup>38</sup>

### **The embodiment and meaning of work**

Other areas of focus in the more recent historiography of work that I think are worth a brief comment are the meaning of work, exploration of the interactions between the body and work (both positive and negative) and rewriting in the experience of marginalised bodies in the workplace, notably the disabled.

Whilst discussions about the meaning of work have long been a feature of the historiography of work – going back for example to the post-Second World War studies of Lockwood and Goldthorpe - contemporary discussions about the 'collapse of work' with the shift from secure 9-5 'lifetime' careers to more short-term, temporary, part-time and insecure contract work has fuelled scholarly work on what work signified in the past. The latter was stimulated by sociologists, notably Ulrich Beck (1992; 2000) who developed the concept of a 'Risk Society'. One strand of this historiography has been preoccupied with whether the work ethic has atrophied and the extent to which paid employment has been of central importance in people's lives in the past.<sup>39</sup> Kirk and Wall (2012) have recently used an oral history methodology to argue that a strong identity with work has persisted over time in a case study of railway workers, bank workers and teachers.<sup>40</sup> Their work provides an effective riposte to the 'end of work' thesis. Other research has focused on the central issue of

---

<sup>38</sup> Boyle, M., *Metropolitan Anxieties: On the Meaning of the Irish Catholic Adventure in Scotland* (Farnham, 2011); Phillips, S, Hallett, C, and Abendstern, M., ' "If we depart from these conditions..." . Trade Union Reactions to European Immigrant Workers in the Textile Industry, c1946-1952', *Labour History Review*, 72, 2 (Aug 2007), 135-54.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives* (2013).

<sup>40</sup> John Kirk and Christine Wall, *Work and Identity* (2010).

dignity in work and the extent to which recent developments since c1980 – Thatcherism; the growth of new-Liberalism; the collapse of trade unions – have eroded the capacity of workers to maintain dignity in employment.<sup>41</sup> Tim Strangleman’s nuanced and evocative analyses of the work culture of railway workers and the impact on their lives of privatisation, closures and redundancies, informed by oral testimonies of workers, has made a major contribution here.<sup>42</sup> This chimes with other influential oral history based scholarship in other countries on the impact of deindustrialisation which richly informs the meanings of work, such as Steve High’s *Industrial Sunset* (2003) and Alessandro Portelli’s *They Say in Harlan County* (2011).

This intellectual current exploring the mutating meaning of work over time has also drawn scholars of the workplace into a renewed interest in and sharper focus on the relationship between work and the body. In part this has been stimulated by Wellcome Trust funding for the history of medicine generally and the history of occupational health specifically. The historiography of occupational health has mirrored shifts in labour history generally and is a deeply contested terrain, as Carol Wolkowitz’s recent study, *Bodies at Work* (2006), illustrates. For example, on asbestos there are fundamental divergences in the pro-company approach of Peter Bartrip and that of Geoff Tweedale, who has provided perhaps the best British example of a forensic critical examination of corporate crime in his analysis of the major asbestos multi-national Turner and Newall.<sup>43</sup> Labour historians such as Joseph Melling and Arthur McIvor shifted into this field, which has produced

---

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, R. Hodson, *Dignity at Work* (2001).

<sup>42</sup> Strangleman, T., *Work Identity at the End of the Line? Privatisation and Culture Change in the UK Rail Industry* (2004).

<sup>43</sup> Peter Bartrip, *The Way From Dusty Death* (2000); Geoff Tweedale, *Magic Mineral to Killer Dust* (2001).



significant studies of anthrax, silicosis, asbestos-related disease, byssinosis, and coal miners' respiratory diseases, as well as the workmen's compensation system (for injuries and disease) as it evolved in the UK.<sup>44</sup> Johnston and McIvor pioneered the application of an oral history methodology to the study of occupational health, working through the Scottish Oral History Centre on two oral history based studies on the asbestos tragedy (2000) and miners' lung (2007).<sup>45</sup> Whilst recognising the primary culpability of private and nationalised work regimes that put profit and production before health, the latter have tried to bring the agency of workers (and their unique eye witness testimonies and voices) into this mix, exploring, for example, masculinity and the body - the peer pressure to act as men and the process of acculturation and socialisation into risky, health-threatening behaviour in the workplace.

The historiography of occupational health has also morphed into critical examination of the historical role of the trade unions. Here again there is a healthy ongoing debate in the literature between those who argue that the trade unions were preoccupied with the key aims of maintaining wages, protecting jobs and failed to prioritise health and safety<sup>46</sup> and other scholars who argue strongly that the trade unions were more pro-active and played a key role in protecting workers bodies in relation to both prevention and compensation.<sup>47</sup> Vicky Long's recent stimulating study of the UK Trades Union Congress, *The Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory:*

---

<sup>44</sup> A particular recommendation is the forthcoming book by Joseph Melling on Silicosis.

<sup>45</sup> Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor, *Lethal Work* (2000); Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' Lung* (2007).

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, John L Williams, *Accidents and Ill-Health at Work* (1960); Paul Weindling (ed), *The Social History of Occupational Health* (1985).

<sup>47</sup> For a recent contribution to this debate see Arthur McIvor, 'Germs at Work: Establishing Tuberculosis as an Occupational Disease in Britain, c1900-1951', *Social History of Medicine*, 25 (4), pp. 812-29.

*The Politics of Industrial Health, 1914-60* (2011) provides the most nuanced and balanced account and is an essential read for those interested in these debates.

The emergence of disability studies has also led to some (albeit limited) extent to a growing interest in the experience of this marginalised and under-researched group in employment. Anne Borsay (2005) has mapped the extent of discrimination against the disabled in the workplace and the relative ineffectiveness of British legislation and social policy since the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act of 1944.<sup>48</sup> Other work has focussed on the war disabled and their struggle to be integrated within the British workplace, such as Julie Anderson's seminal recent study, *War, Disability and Rehabilitation in Britain* (2011). And some oral testimony based work has begun to explore the meaning of work for the disabled from their own perspective as well as the mutations in identities that becoming disabled as a result of a work-related injury or chronic disease entails.<sup>49</sup> A major ongoing (2011-2016) Wellcome Trust funded research project on Disability and Industrial Society (which focuses on the coalfield communities in Britain) promises to significantly develop our understanding and add substantially to the historiography of this as yet chronically under-researched field (see [www.dis-ind-soc.org.uk/en/index.htm](http://www.dis-ind-soc.org.uk/en/index.htm)).

In the recent historiography of work there has also been a renewed interest in class and British labour historians have put up a strong rearguard action against the claims of some feminists and post-modernists that class is a linguistic fabrication and of little importance. Increasingly class is being articulated more dynamically and

---

<sup>48</sup> Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750: A History of Exclusion* (2005).

<sup>49</sup> For an early example see Steve Humphries and Pamela Gordon, *Out of Sight: The Experience of Disability, 1900-1950* (Plymouth, 1992). See also Arthur McIvor and Ronald Johnston, *Miners' Lung* (2007).

synergistically within a multiplicity of identities and relationships, and some labour historians have persuasively argued for its rehabilitation as a factor of pivotal importance in shaping people lives, in the past and right up to the present. The importance of the labour process and the lived experience of work in politicising individuals remains significant in the historiography, though now is more likely to be seen in perspective and tempered with a recognition that the connection is by no means automatic and that employment is not the only source of radicalisation and class consciousness (eg housing conditions and health). See Michael Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics* (1987), Savage and Andrew Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840-1940* (1994) and Neil Rafeek, *Communist Women in Scotland* (2008) for seminal contributions in this field. This conversation has been continued, for example in the work of Alistair Reid, Ross McKibbin, Neville Kirk and Geoffrey Field<sup>50</sup> and can be followed by reading editorials and review essays, including the fiftieth anniversary issue articles in the *Labour History Review* in 2010.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion, debate and sometimes heated controversies in the historiography of work have led the subject area in Britain into a more nuanced understanding of the nature, meaning and significance of work in the past. The basis of study has widened from focus on the largely male experience in the well-unionised traditional heavy industries to encompass the work of women, of ethnic minorities, of office and professional workers (see Kirk and Wall, 2010) and, though still only to a limited

---

<sup>50</sup> Alistair Reid, *Social Classes and Social Relations in Britain, 1850-1914* (1992); N. Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class* (1998); Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (2000); Geoffrey G. Field, *Blood, Sweat and Toil: Remaking the British Working Class, 1939-1945* (2011)

extent, the disabled. There has also been a notable shift in the historiography towards a refocus on the body at work, how work impacted on the body and the experience of another previously neglected and marginalised group - the disabled in employment. The primary sources utilised have also widened, from reliance upon the records of trade unions and labour institutions, newspapers and government papers to the greater quarrying of personal testimonies, from autobiographies to oral interview evidence. This gets us closer to what work signified to those who directly experienced it in the past. Interpretations continue to range healthily across quite a wide spectrum. The best of these studies are still sensitive to prevailing power relations in capitalist societies and the importance of social class as an explanatory framework, influencing job choices, careers and opportunities and levels of job satisfaction and life chances whilst also taking cognisance of other identities of individuals based on age, gender, race, ethnicity and disability and how these intersect with one another. Whilst it is important to recognise the enormous complexity of work, of identities and of employment relations in the past, it is equally vital not to lose sight of the undeniable fact that historically work has been the site of an ongoing power struggle and a contested terrain between employers and labour – and continues to be so.

### **Selected reading**

Ulrick Beck, *The Brave New World of Work* (2000)

Joanna Bourke, *Working Class Cultures* (1994)

Roy Church and Quinton Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity: Coalfield Conflict in Britain, 1880-1966* (1998)

Anna Clarke, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (1997)

Mary Davis (ed.), *Class and Gender in British Labour History: Renewing the Debate (or Starting it?)* (2011)

Nicholas Crafts, I. Gazeley, and A. Newall (eds), *Work and Pay in Twentieth Century Britain* (2007).

Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (1964)

Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics* (1980)

John Kirk and Christine Wall, *Work and Identity* (2010)

*Labour History Review* (I'd highlight the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Supplement: 'Making History', vol 75, April 2010)

Vicky Long, *The Rise and Fall of the Healthy Factory* (2011)

Arthur McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950* (2001)

Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (2013)

Alistair Reid, *United We Stand: A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (2004)

Tim Strangleman, *Work Identity at the End of the Line?* (2004)

Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives* (1998)

Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)

Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work* (1986)

Carol Wolkowitz, *Bodies at Work* (2006)

Eileen Yeo (ed), *Working Class Masculinities in Britain, 1850 to the Present*, Special Edition *Labour History Review*, 69, 2, August 2004.