Where Do New Ideas (About Class) Come From?

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Abstract

In my comment I raise two main questions about the Eley/Nield essay. First, I express some doubts about whether the issues discussed in their essay can be unproblematically transposed to historiographical debates in areas beyond Western Europe and North America. Certain themes, such as the need to reemphasize the political, are hardly pressing given the continual emphasis on politics and the state in Latin American labor history. Closely related to this, I question whether the state of gender studies within labor history can be used, in the way these authors seem to be doing, as a barometer of the sophistication and vitality of labor and working-class history. Despite recognizing the tremendous contribution of gendered approaches to labor history, I express doubts about its ability to help us rethink the category of class, and even express some concern that it might occlude careful consideration of class identities. Instead, pointing to two pathbreaking works in Latin American labor history, I argue that the types of questions we ask about class, and primarily about class, can provide the key to innovative scholarship about workers even if questions such as gender or ethnicity go unexamined. Finally, I point out that class will only be a vital category of analysis if it is recognized not simply as "useful," but as forming a basis for genuinely creative and innovative historical studies.

Commenting on an essay such as this one is unusually difficult for me. The ideal object for such a comment is an essay with which one sharply disagrees or which noticeably omits some crucial elements. So it was with some dismay that I found myself agreeing with almost every one of the authors' arguments. I particularly consider their "conciliatory" tone with regard to the divergences between social history and the new cultural or poststructuralist turn to be both appropriate and salutary. As for their coverage of all the important themes, the emphasis on gender studies and its impact on the historiography of the working class is quite welcome. Race, ethnicity, and imperialism get somewhat shorter shrift, but Eley and Nield are careful to mention these issues at crucial junctures in their essay. To criticize them for not devoting an equal number of words to race as to gender would hardly advance the discussion in any useful way.

However, since it is clearly not acceptable within the conventions of this discipline for me simply to say "Yes, I agree," and be done with it, I must set aside my largely uncritical response for the moment and focus on the admittedly tangential objections that I have to the authors' arguments.

My first objection involves a predictable retreat to my historiographic home (or "primary specialism," as Nield and Eley put it)—Latin America generally

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and Brazil more specifically. In the text of the essay, the authors treat their almost complete focus on Western Europe, modulated by an occasional nod to the United States, as unproblematic. They do mention in the "Acknowledgments" that there are other regions of the world that have produced historiographies of the working class but are not, for sensible reasons, included in this essay.[1] This doesn't impinge in any way on their arguments, they claim, because "the discussion could easily be carried into African, Latin-American, and South Asian contexts." To be sure, the authors cannot be expected to survey every regional or national labor historiography and I certainly agree that many of the issues raised in this essay for European and North American scholars are of considerable relevance to the Latin American context. Five years ago, when I taught a graduate research seminar on "Laboring Peoples of Latin America," I dutifully assigned, along with several innovative texts specifically on Latin American workers, essays by scholars such as Joan Scott and Patrick Joyce. Indeed, one of the attractions of studying labor history and working-class culture has been the lively circulation of ideas and arguments across regional and national borders (although, given the dominance of the British and US historiography in the field, "trickle down" might be a more accurate image than circulation). Even so, I am not sure just how "easily" we can transpose these questions and arguments, generated for the most part by British and US historians, to the Latin American context.

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Eley and Nield's remarks cannot be applied to Latin American historiography is the irrelevance of their insistence on the need to link the social and the cultural with the political. This is simply not a significant worry for most Latin Americanists. Indeed, Latin American labor history has produced very few of the richly detailed social histories that have characterized much of the literature on the United States and Western Europe; politics has always maintained the pride of place.[2] Indeed, given how central national political conflicts have been to the construction of working-class identity in Latin America, it is difficult even to imagine a regional working-class historiography that would leave politics out, whether it focused on the conventional political sphere or on the political struggles at the level of workplace and community.

The narrative thread developed in Eley and Nield's essay—on the decline of social history and the rise of cultural history, on how gender studies and the linguistic turn refashioned our approaches to class in general and working-class history in particular—is also not very illuminating for students of Latin American labor history. This is not because these same methods and questions have not infused themselves into Latin American historiography. Historians in Brazil, for example, took up the ideas elaborated by Michel Foucault long before they became common currency in US academia and there have been parallel discussions of the key distinctions between social and cultural history. Rather it is because Latin Americanists have not engaged in the controversies and dramas that the shift from the social to the cultural has produced elsewhere.[3] Instead, it was the long and difficult disengagement from Marxist-structuralist paradigms (which only came to something like a conclusion in the 1980s following the trau-

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matic encounters with brutal dictatorships and the collapse of the Cuban Revolution's utopian promise) that marked the current cohort of Latin American labor historians.[4] Having managed to shake off the dead but very heavy hand of deterministic/structuralist approaches (including dependency theory and the like), historians of the Latin American working class have not had nearly so much trouble finessing the shift from the social to the cultural. At the same time, the relatively small number of detailed social histories in the cramped space between the death of structuralism and the triumph of the linguistic turn has made it more difficult for Latin Americanists to rethink issues of race and gender in the context of working-class history. Eley and Nield might respond by assuring us lagging Latin Americanists that we can simply follow the lead of such innovative historians of class and gender as Kathleen Canning or Sonya Rose, but I always get a little uncomfortable when scholars studying one region of the world adopt innovative studies focused elsewhere as a template for their own work.

For one thing, such an agenda almost always runs up against the frustrating paucity of documentation in Latin America that could facilitate analogous studies of race, class, and gender. Not surprisingly, those Latin Americanists who are trying to deal with such questions have either sought to study labor relations in US companies based in Latin America or resorted to oral history as their major source. This dependence on oral sources has meant that many historians have not had the luxury of separating the social from the cultural. Interviews have to supply something like a baseline narrative and the details of everyday life at the same time that they provide textual material for analysis of discursive strategies.[5] Eley and Nield, accustomed to bountiful archives and literate workers, needn't dwell on such issues, but Latin American labor historians know that their research will require considerable creativity just to accumulate an adequate base of evidence whether they're studying the social or the cultural.

Beyond this practical consideration, as I read Eley and Nield's essay it became ever clearer to me how difficult it is to avoid constructing normative cases and linear narratives of progress, no matter how well-intentioned and postmodern one may be in this regard. In rereading my foregoing discussion of the Latin American historiography, I find myself coming perilously close to reproducing the image of a lagging historiography—one, for example, that has been late to embrace the most innovative approaches to race and gender—despite my certainty that most Latin Americanists (whether based in the United States or from Latin America) are similarly engaged with theory and new categories of analysis. Are we nonetheless fated to be in the position Eley and Nield attribute to the labor historians who study the former Soviet Union? That is, do we suffer from a "developmental lag, with empirical research running behind the consciousness of the field"? Are we, like our Soviet historian counterparts, to be grateful for the "theoretical sophistication" allowed us by the "preceding historiographies (of North America, Britain, France, Germany, and elsewhere)"? Should our ascent to the levels of sophistication exemplified by historians of the "developed" world be gauged (as Eley and Nield seem to suggest) by the amount of attention we give to gender, race, or sexual orientation?

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I hesitate to put it in this somewhat snide way, since these are all categories of analysis that I genuinely do believe need to be integrated more thoroughly into the historiography of Latin American workers. But I also cannot quite shake the uneasy feeling I get whenever historians of the (academically) developed world assure me and my colleagues that we simply need to follow their lead. Moreover, I am not sure whether the term "lag," aside from its unflattering implications, is entirely accurate. Perhaps it would be more illuminating to think of a certain intellectual and political "resistance" within the Latin American field to trends developed elsewhere. This resistance, or if one prefers a milder term, reticence, could have its origins in some rather unpleasant but persistent features of the more orthodox Latin American Left, with its longstanding insistence that feminism or racially based movements simply serve to divide the working class. But it may also reflect scholars' legitimate concerns about the wholesale importation of "foreign" paradigms or the need to formulate a different set of questions.[6] To put it more bluntly, just because German and British labor historians are now focusing on gender, does that automatically mean that Latin Americanists should not only follow suit, but that gender analysis should serve as a barometer of our intellectual sophistication? And even if it should, can we simply go about it the same way?

Perhaps the best way to clarify my point is to focus on a two Latin American studies that have appeared since the late 1980s that I regard as pathbreaking and innovative works that address historical problems that most scholars would find both pressing and extremely challenging. Neither study pays extensive attention to gender or race and neither requires us to make a sharp distinction between the social and the cultural. One is Daniel James's monograph *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (New York, 1988). Taking on decades of research about populism in general, and Peronism in particular, that emphasized either worker manipulation and false consciousness or rational-materialist calculations, James cogently demonstrated the way in which Peronist discourse arose in response to working-class culture and aspirations and the way it, in turn, (re)made the Argentine working class. James approached populism as a discursive strategy and a political movement rather than the product of a particular set of economic and social structures with predictable (negative) implications for class-based politics. I would argue that *Resistance and Integration* almost single-handedly forced several generations of Latin Americanists to rethink the problem of populism and its relationship to class formation and class conflict. To be sure, James's study reflected his engagement with new theoretical trends, especially Ernesto Laclau on populism and ideology and Pierre Bourdieu on private experience and public discourse. However, what made it a profoundly important work for Latin Americanists was his richly detailed re-creation of the political and social struggles of Argentine workers as well as his sophisticated interpretation of oral and written materials, both of which contributed to his very persuasive argument that Peronism, far from being incompatible with class consciousness, was a major constitutive element in that consciousness.[7]

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Whereas Daniel James had the quite difficult task of challenging deeply entrenched assumptions about populism in Latin America, Deborah Levenson-Estrada confronted the even more daunting prospect of explaining the capacity of workers to mount effective resistance in the face of extremely brutal repression. Moreover, she carried out the research for her book, *Trade Unionists Against Terror: Guatemala City, 1954–1985* (Chapel Hill, 1994), in the midst of that very repression. In exploring the roots of a worker identity strong enough to empower employees of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company to mount several strikes and plant occupations despite the assassinations of numerous friends and colleagues, Levenson-Estrada systematically rejected all the familiar explanations for the formation of class consciousness. Within the unusually violent context of post-1954 Guatemala, sustained contact between workers and an organized left was unlikely. Continual involvement in unions was also improbable, given the many mechanisms available to the state and private interests for dismantling unionization drives (including ensuring a shortage of prounion votes through murder). And even more startling, Levenson-Estrada argued that the workers she studied could not draw upon anything historians would easily identify as a community or collective organization. Indeed, she claimed that the poor neighborhoods of Guatemala City boasted none of the networks of solidarity and sociability that many social historians have seen as crucial to working-class mobilization.

Instead, Levenson-Estrada mounted an interpretation that one reviewer aptly termed "existential labor history." In the realm of "ideological" influences and discursive strategies, she cites the crucial role of the "Young Catholic Worker" (JOC)—an organization, with its emphasis on individual effort and self-discipline, that labor historians in the 1960s and 1970s would have regarded as the very antithesis of working-class consciousness. But Levenson-Estrada contends that within the Guatemalan context, JOC's injunction to "See, Judge, Act" had a very different meaning and impact than it might have had elsewhere. Even more significant is her argument about the role of everyday life in the construction of workers' identity. Levenson-Estrada boldly claims that, in the face of a state that is indifferent at best and murderous at worst, and a city where even the most elemental features of daily existence involve danger and struggle, Guatemalan workers have developed a sense of personal sacrifice and collective solidarity that does not depend upon preexisting ties of workplace, community, or ethnicity. In other words, Levenson-Estrada did a "social" history of workers in Guatemala City that discarded virtually every element that constitutes the social in the classic works of 1960s labor history.

Returning to my broader point, what I would like to emphasize is that neither of these works would register very high on Eley and Nield's theoretical sophistication meter. Levenson-Estrada has some interesting things to say about women and trade unions, but her book is certainly not heavily concerned with gender and, as already noted, she minimizes the significance of race/ethnicity as a category for analyzing working-class life in Guatemala City. Similarly, James's book only tangentially touches upon issues of race/ethnicity and is completely

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innocent of anything that could be called gender analysis (though James has compensated for this silence over the last ten years by dedicating much of his time to a path-breaking life history of a woman who was a meat packer and Peronist activist).[8] I want to be as clear as possible about this, since my questioning of Eley and Nield's enthusiasm for gender studies feels a bit like I'm advocating child abuse. I do believe that Latin American labor history has to engage much more actively and thoroughly with the categories of gender and race/ethnicity. And these categories are certainly an important source of innovation in the field, as evidenced by such imaginative recent works as Thomas Miller Klubock's *Contested Communities: Class, Gender, and Politics in Chile's El Teniente Copper Mine, 1904–1951* (Durham, NC, 1998), with its fascinating exploration of gender roles and working-class masculinities among the Chilean copper miners. But the obligatory and automatic application of these categories (rather than the formulation of interesting and challenging questions) so as to validate the continued use of class as a category of analysis and to demonstrate that we Latin Americanists are as theoretically sophisticated as anyone else is likely to have a homogenizing effect on the field that will dampen, not inspire, innovative analysis. The leap from template to boilerplate can be a remarkably short one.

I have one other brief objection I would like to raise. The general tone of the essay is one of guarded optimism. In effect the authors assure us that by reconceptualizing class as a discursive category (a position with which I'm in complete agreement) and being attentive to its articulation with constructions of race and gender, we can continue to use it as a legitimate category of analysis despite the fragmentation of identities in our postmodern age. The authors even put in a good word for the ongoing value of social history (though I suspect few social historians will eagerly adopt the role of handmaiden to the cultural history crowd that Eley and Nield indicate as a possible source of their salvation). However, theirs is primarily an epistemological argument; it asserts the ongoing legitimacy of class analysis from an intellectual perspective. But is that argument sufficiently compelling to encourage innovative and ambitious young scholars to pursue topics in working-class history? It has become a truism of the historical profession that scholars are always doing the history of the present. In that light, is the current state of working-class politics and culture likely to stimulate interest in labor or working-class history? For certain parts of Latin America, and especially Brazil, I would confidently answer in the affirmative, but I would be much more hesitant to say yes for the scholarly milieux that are Eley and Nield's main points of reference. And then there is the simple but inescapable question of academic fashion. Working-class history does not strike me as the thematic field that an imaginative young scholar eager to make a splash in the profession would choose. Furthermore, while considerations of gender, race, imperialism, and so forth may have the effect of revitalizing class analysis, they could also operate in such a way as to make class a category that scholars merely have to acknowledge but not engage in creative ways. After all, it's easy for me to envision a current critique of a scholarly work that takes it to task for insufficient attention to race or gender, but rarely these days does one find a scholar fretting about

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inadequate discussion of class identity. To put it bluntly, it is not just a matter of determining whether class is a "useful category of analysis" (to employ Joan Scott's now famous phrase), but rather whether it remains an attractive and provocative category of analysis.

NOTES

1. For an essay that does adopt a more global approach to innovations in working-class history, see Ian Christopher Fletcher, "Rethinking the History of Working People: Class, Gender and Identities in an Age of Industry and Empire," *Radical History Review* 56 (1993):85–98.

2. For example, John D. French's important study of workers and populism in Brazil, *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, 1992), would have been primarily (and less influentially) a community study in a different geographic context, but French opted instead to emphasize links between local organizing and national politics. For an exceptional case (in this context) of a work of social history with little explicit engagement with politics, see Sidney Chalhoub, *Trabalho, Lar e Botequim: O Cotidiano dos Trabalhadores no Rio de Janeiro da Belle Epoque* (São Paulo, 1986).

3. Although not for lack of trying. See the brief discussion by Sidney Chalhoub and Leonardo Affonso de M. Pereira, eds., *A História Contada: Capítulos de História Social da Literatura no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro, 1998), 7–12.

4. See an earlier scholarly controversy in this journal. Emilia Viotti da Costa, "Experience vs. Structures: New Tendencies in the History of Labor—What Do We Gain? What Do We Lose?," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 36 (1989):3–24, as well as comments by myself and Perry Anderson.

5. For an excellent discussion of the role of oral history in gendered studies of workers in Latin America, see John D. French and Daniel James, "Oral History, Identity Formation, and Working-Class Mobilization," in *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers,* ed. John D. French and Daniel James (Durham, 1997), 297–313. One of the most innovative and interesting historical studies of the Brazilian working class relies almost entirely on oral sources: José Sérgio Leite Lopes, *A Tecelagem dos Conflitos de Classe na "Cidade de Chaminés"* (São Paulo, 1988).

6. One of the more problematic books published in the 1990s on workers in Latin America is Joel Wolfe's *Working Women, Working Men: São Paulo and the Rise of Brazil's Industrial Working Class, 1900–1955* (Durham, 1993), which suffers precisely from the author's heavy-handed attempt to construct a radically new narrative of Brazilian labor history simply by introducing gender as a major category of analysis.

7. If space permitted, it would be interesting to compare Daniel James's *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (New York, 1988) to Patrick Joyce's much celebrated study, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (New York, 1991), as a way of illuminating how different historiographical (as well as chronological) contexts alter the questions one asks in the process of trying to rethink ideas that have become a form of orthodoxy. To put it in overly simplified terms, whereas James seeks to show that populism was constitutive of class identity in mid-twentieth-century Argentina, Joyce seeks to show that the nineteenth-century English version of populism delayed the formation of class identity.

8. Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Storytelling, Personal Identity, and Community Narratives* (Durham, NC, forthcoming 2000).

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