Working-Class Studies: Memory, Community, and Activism

Ian Roberts
University of Durham

It may seem strange to some people that I and several others travelled from England to the USA for a conference on social class and more especially the working-class. After all, we practically invented social class in England, where the industrial proletariat was born. However, very shortly after arriving at the Center for Working Class studies it became apparent that something rather different and exciting is currently happening to the study of social class and the working-class in the United States. The conference included a truly impressive collection of offerings from a wide variety of academic papers, through performance art and poetry readings to an inspirational session of readings from a new book written and read by steelworkers; *The Heat: Steelworker Lives and Legends,* (Cedar Hill Publications, Arkansas, 2001). If you haven't read this book yet I would advise you to dash out and buy it now!

The wide variety of substantive material presented in the sessions included work from within most of the disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. The one thing that the overwhelming number of papers had in common was their stress upon presenting and underlining the agency of working-class people. Without in any way lapsing into romanticism, most accounts sought to portray aspects of working class life that are usually neglected within the academy. The exciting thing about such work is that while remaining substantively focused it becomes of necessity a simultaneous critique of the academy and wider society. In a climate in my own country where much that once stood as critical theory has become staid, conformist, and elitist it is very refreshing to find an area of work with a vibrancy and excitement that is reminiscent of the early years of the feminist movement. A further parallel with that movement is the controversies that rage over the theoretical frame that best fits the further development of the area. One such theme that ran across a number of sessions was the relationship of working-class studies to Marxism. The case made eloquently by Barbara Foley (Rutgers University) was well presented and supported by a minority of people, it argued that working-class studies can best be accommodated within a Marxist framework. A response to this position was provided by, among others, Jack Metzgar (Roosevelt University) and Michael Zweig (SUNY Stony Brook). They argued quite convincingly that while working-class studies needs to recognise the immense analytical value of some of the main concepts of Marxism it is nevertheless the case that to merely reduce working class studies to Marxism would impose too much of a conceptual straightjacket. For Metzgar and Zweig the important thing about working-class studies

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as it is presently being developed in the United States is that the approach to the working class is a one that can unite conceptions of class as a relationship and as an identity in a way that is rather more creative than is captured in notions of "class in itself" and "class for itself." Zweig, in particular, argued that there must be space to study class as "lived experience;" the agency of working-class people must be recognized as a way of challenging the objectifying tendencies of much academic work, including some varieties of Marxism.

These themes were present in some of the other sessions although they were often implicit within the substantive accounts rather than being highlighted as a central theoretical object to be addressed. Thus the plenary session given by Alessandro Portelli (University of Rome La Sapienza) was a lively advocacy of the potential of oral history techniques to represent the often-silenced voices of working-class people. Such approaches not only "tell the stories" but they also "name the names." In the face of much academic practice that is objectifying in its approach to working class people, oral history follows the accounts that are constructed by people themselves as active agents. Oral history forces us to realise that there is a lot more to the working class than just the working life. This approach produces problems, or more correctly challenges, for existing theoretical traditions and in a comment that prefigured the debate on the relationship with Marxism, Portelli was of the opinion that oral history approaches would ultimately contribute to the creation of a "more complex Marxism." Any accounts of working-class life that can't and don't engage with issues such as respect and other feelings were seen to be lacking in some fundamental ways. In conclusion Portelli produced a refreshing inversion of much that is currently taken as read about working-class life, he argued that one of the main messages of the work that he has undertaken is that there exists a "thin layer of the artificial—of T.V., of shopping malls" beyond which more fundamental issues of life, death, of survival, both in literal and in cultural terms, remains alive and accessible to those who will listen.

Many of the presentations at the conference shared with the Portelli account an iconoclastic interrogation of what stands as accepted wisdom about the nature of the working class. This is possible because of the reflexive nature of much of the research being undertaken. One of the real strengths of working-class studies as witnessed at Youngstown is that the work being undertaken is not just of academic interest to detached researchers. Rather the practice of working-class studies involves a commitment not only to rigorous research but also simultaneously to a critical pedagogy that recognizes the often-classed nature of the formal process of education itself. The ability and willingness of researchers to situate themselves in relation to the class-based processes involved in the education system with its conventions and proclivities, its preoccupations and silences is truly refreshing and stands in stark contrast to the objectivist positions that seem the only accepted standpoints in relation to the study of social class in England. This more reflexive approach is further strengthened by the interdisciplinary nature of working-class studies that was so apparent in most of the sessions. Panels saw sociologists sitting alongside scholars of English litera-

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ture or American studies, geographers together with economists and philosophers and importantly the focus upon the overriding substantive importance of working-class studies ensured that those from such different disciplines could effectively communicate with each other. In the sessions I attended I didn't witness any of the disciplinary imperialism that is sometimes a feature of more specialist conferences.

As you can probably tell by now I was well impressed by this conference in fact I consider it to be the best conference that I have ever attended in the twenty-three years that I have been involved in higher education! There is one further reason why I rate this conference so highly, and Michael Zweig drew attention to this in one of the plenary sessions where he praised the "generosity of spirit" that was evident in the interactions between participants. This quality cannot be explained in terms of the structure of the conference but may have something to do with the substance, unveiling the silencing of people can make us pause and reflect upon our own willingness to listen. More specifically however in the case of Youngstown the co-directors of the center, Sherry Linkon and John Russo have created something very special which is imbued with such a generosity and I am grateful to them that for the duration of the conference this appears to be catching. This conference with its intellectually stimulating material, its interdisciplinary format and its generosity of spirit is what I came into academia for. I am already eagerly looking forward to returning to Youngstown in 2003 for the next conference. The website of the Center for Working Class Studies can be found at http://www.as.ysu.edu/~cwcs/

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