The "Class" We Have Lost

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Abstract

Geoff Eley's and Keith Nield's essay is marked by a tension between a desire to update the old social history by detaching it from its materialist assumptions on the one hand and a commitment to continue writing narratives of working-class political agency on the other. By insisting that class is still the best way of analyzing inequality and mobilizing resistance to it, the authors foreclose other possibilities for thinking about contemporary politics and for writing critical history. They do not ask the questions that need to be asked, which are, What are the operative political categories capable of moving masses of people into agency? and, What terms might be used to represent inequalities of distribution? These questions don't exclude class but they don't require it either; they also allow for a more open and probing approach than is offered by Eley and Nield.

"Farewell to the Working Class?" by Geoff Eley and Keith Nield is cogently argued and elegantly presented. It will surely become an indispensable assignment in introductory graduate courses because it is synthetic in many senses: a summing up, an integration of previously opposed positions, and an opening to new conversations about the future of social history in general and the history of the working class in particular. Eley and Nield are reluctant to let the social history of the working class become a relic of the past because they see an ongoing need for it both as history and as inspiration for contemporary politics. For this reason they are willing to accommodate all manner of deviations from the materialist analyses that once were the hallmark of class studies, especially what some have dubbed "the linguistic turn." "Class emerged historically as a set of discursive claims about the social world," they say at one point. And again, "class *discursively* understood, we would argue, is a better starting point for the study of class formation than the classical ones of economics and social structure." Were this forum less serious in tone, the authors or editors might have punned wildly and titled the Eley/Nield essay, "Assent to Discourse."

But accommodations, even ones as generous as this one, always have their limits and these bear some scrutiny. The Eley/Nield essay sets clear boundaries, even as it opens its arms to feminism (or some feminists) and to Michel Foucault. Leaving aside the dubious business of naming the bad guys and the good girls (Patrick Joyce has been expelled from the fold and Kathleen Canning is now at its center), some topics have been ignored, and some serious difficulties (such as marrying Foucault, feminism, and Antonio Gramsci) downplayed. Overall, there's a tension between Eley and Nield's desires to update the old social his-

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 57, Spring 2000, pp. 69–75
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900212726 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tory by detaching it from its materialist assumptions, on the one hand, and to keep writing narratives of worker political agency, on the other.

One of the lines drawn by Eley and Nield is between sex and gender. There's lots of talk about gender and women in this essay, but no mention of sex, homo- or heterosexuality, and sexual difference. Indeed, the essay seems to offer an example of the way in which gender can protect its users from having to consider complicated psychological issues along with theories of social causation. Eley and Nield repeatedly acknowledge the importance of language for the articulation of political identity but not the ways in which these are identities of *sexed* subjects invested in the maintenance of gender hierarchies. There's a difference, after all, between simply adding women to historical accounts as a compensatory gesture and analyzing the terms of their previous exclusion, the ways in which, for example, the identities of worker, trade unionist, and citizen did not simply refer to men, but conferred masculinity. It was no accident that calls for unionization often portrayed bosses seducing or raping laborers' wives and daughters; these were not only metaphors for capitalist exploitation, but graphic appeals to men to collectively defend their sexual rights—the rights to women and children that signified men's status as sovereign individuals (defined in liberal political theory as those who possessed property in themselves). Getting at the interconnections between sex and class is not only a matter, as Eley and Nield imply, of "trying to complicate the everydayness of class relations, in social histories of the workplace, neighborhood, and home" by including new information about women workers. Instead, it involves rereading this information with new questions in mind, questions about how gendered subjectivity is constructed rather than about how roles are allocated according to sex. These questions necessarily move the historian's focus from exemplifying agency to analyzing the ways in which it is produced. This shift is one that Eley and Nield, for all their openness to discourse, are reluctant to make.

As they endorse gender and ignore sex, so the authors emphasize the contemporary political relevance of social history while neglecting the question—disturbingly posed by Jacques Rancière in the pages of *International Labor and Working-Class History*—of the nature of the politics involved. Rancière pointed out that in France "the idea of 'skilled workers' socialism'"—an idea many of us were busy documenting in those richly detailed local studies so nostalgically evoked by Eley and Nield—was "a politically motivated concept." "Those who have been the most intent upon showing the labor movement as an outgrowth of the workers' own culture and professional milieu have most often done so in order to subordinate this movement to a particular political point of view."[1] That point of view was associated with the corporatist movement, Radical republicans, and the reformist and, later, socialist and anticommunist wings of the trade-union movement. "It pursued its quest for a 'true' labor movement to hold up in contrast to the noisy revolutionary demagoguery around it, and in turn exaggerated the tradition of working-class humanism and 'artisanal socialism.'"[2] Rancière maintained that it was precisely as those movements waned after World War Two that their themes were taken up by historians. "We know

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900212726 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that those who are defeated on the battleground often get their revenge by imposing their views on historians."[3] Rancière argued that historians needed to develop more complex notions of workers' values and practices than were permitted by the syndicalist/socialist historiography on which they drew. His own substantive contribution, *La Nuit des Prolétaires,* demonstrated that professional competence was not the only or even the most important aspect of workers' identity; sometimes antipathy to wage labor and the aspiration to be creative writers formed the ground for militant collective action.[4] Rancière's larger aim was to restore heterogeneity to the historical record in direct opposition to those political movements intent on producing a homogeneous working class. His emphasis on the specificity of concepts such as politics and resistance provides an important corrective to Eley and Nield, who seem to assume that stories of past labor struggles, whatever their slant, will inspire resistance to power and that this resistance, whatever its form or content, will constitute a desirable type of political action.

Eley and Nield admit the limits of "the unproblematized materialism of social explanation commonly assumed by social historians" and stress the importance of thinking about "class politics as a distinctive and historically located repertoire of languages for organizing the social world." Yet they can't quite accept the alteration of focus that the turn to language entails. They want to define class as an effect of discourse but also as "a structural attribute of societies" as if those two were contradictory. To posit them as contradictory is to misunderstand Foucault's ideas about discourse and the production of knowledge. For Foucault, discourse organizes knowledge: It identifies objects for study and explanation, it establishes concepts and facts, and it designates structures and identities. Structures come into being through discourse: Class is one way of naming, understanding, and organizing certain forms of social inequality. The Foucauldian perspective pushes historians to study how class is realized rather than to document the "everydayness of class relations." It does not, however, mean giving up "rich and detailed" local studies. Although polemicists have posed the choices in terms of the reality of structure versus the immateriality of discourse, I think they have missed the point in their rush to defend their versions of materialism. Eley and Nield unwittingly ally themselves with the very polemics they hope to transcend by suggesting that the linguistic turn has necessarily meant the abandonment of archives and of "rich and detailed" social histories.

> We propose a pragmatics of good faith. On the one hand, the defenders of class might acknowledge . . . the . . . difficulties . . . of analyzing working-class politics as the expressive outcome of an economically located class interest and social-structural position. On the other hand, the advocates of 'postmodernism' . . . might affirm the usefulness of social historians continuing to do their work.

The question here is what is meant by "continuing to do their work?" Does so-called postmodernism necessarily entail the abandonment of the archives or only a different way of dealing with the documents we find there? And why do

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Eley and Nield repeatedly conflate the two? I suspect the answer lies in their anxiety that the change of focus entailed by the linguistic turn (from workers to the concept of class) will undermine political agency in the past and in the present as well. That is why the final section of this otherwise nuanced and compelling argument is so tentative, so abstract, and finally so disappointing: Stories about past resistance to power afford, they say, "a potential node of opposition," an inspiration to politics by showing that "it can be different." It would seem to follow that not only is the historian's analytic frame irrelevant, but that old-fashioned social history, the social history of the 1970s, will do the job best. This, I submit, contradicts the previous discussion of the importance of the linguistic turn.

Eley and Nield want to protect those old histories of the working class not only because they're inspiring, not only because they document resistance to power, but because they think and hope that class can continue to provide a way of both analyzing current inequalities and mobilizing resistance to them. They ask, What possible meanings remain for class as an operative political category capable of moving masses of people into agency? and, How might class still be approached as a structural attribute of societies and an essential means of grasping inequalities of distribution? I don't think the answers to those questions lie in the social history of the working class as it has been written so far, or, for that matter, in any history, although I can imagine histories being written with those questions in mind. But they aren't the questions I would pose in the current political/economic climate. Rather, I'd ask, What *are* the operative political categories capable of moving masses of people into agency? and, What terms might be used to represent inequalities of distribution? These questions don't exclude class, but they don't require it either. They instead ask us to analyze contemporary discourses for points of contradiction—those points where resistance is produced. Resistance is not external to power, something forged outside or in opposition; it is, rather, (and this is Foucault's point) constituted as contradiction within specific discourses. If we want to know where, how, and in what terms opposition to the inequalities of global capitalism will emerge, we have to know something about the discourses (the concepts as they are theorized and implemented in practices and institutions) that constitute it. Writing history aimed at understanding resistance as discursive contradiction can hone our skills for reading the present (and, to the extent that it deals with concrete instances of resistance, it may also provide some of the inspiration Eley and Nield attribute to social history's narratives), but it won't furnish the terms we need for organizing current politics. And it shouldn't, since that would be to remove conceptual language from its historical context and so to read the present in terms of the past.

Eley and Nield's deft reading of Blairism and the politics of New Labour in Britain provides a demonstration of what I have in mind but it stops short of locating potential points of resistance. Where might those emerge? Among the welfare mothers and asylum seekers written out of the "virtuous community?" Among the laborers who no longer exist as the constituency for the party that bears their name? And where is class in all this? Who uses the term and for what ends?

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In the United States a few years ago, as the opponents of affirmative action whipped up their campaign, they offered class as an alternative to race, ethnicity, and gender as the ground for preferential treatment in college admissions. Since economic disadvantages were taken to be temporary and education was touted as the means to overcome the disabilities of poverty, ideologues of meritocracy and individualism took up class analysis as a weapon against multiculturalism. For them, class was a way of talking about social mobility rather than the structural inequities of capitalism. The point was that class enabled resistance not to capitalism but to other movements of resistance to entrenched structures of power. (In the pages of the *Nation,* one could track the left-wing version of this rally to class as an antidote to multiculturalism in the columns of Eric Alterman.) As for the US labor movement itself, the word *class* is not prominent in the rhetorical arsenal of organizers of service workers and graduate students, though it may still resonate among some immigrant wage-earning populations. And there's serious question about whether class in the age of global capitalism can provide the kind of imagined community it did in the heyday of worker internationalism. Does the discourse of human rights offer another frame within which points of resistance can emerge? Can rights—understood as an attribute of individuals—mobilize masses to collective action? Or is the idea of mass mobilization one of those historical fictions that turned temporary strategic and contingent alliances into enduring political formations? If that history served an important and specific political end in its day, what end do we want our history to serve now?

The authors of "Farewell to the Working Class?" don't answer this question with anything like the clarity or specificity of a Rancière or a Foucault. For Eley and Nield, history serves not the critical function of interrogating the accepted categories of the present but rather the function of loosely inspiring resistance to power ("if only by showing that it need not be like this. It can be different"). Leaving aside the matter of the political efficacy of such inspiration, it is not the unique product of social history. Biography and old-fashioned political history can perform the same motivational function. Why then do Eley and Nield hold fast to social history? Perhaps because they think that in order to arrest "the decomposition of class in the present" we need to see how things were different in the past, or perhaps because they want to explain the present as an outcome of the past. Perhaps it's simple nostalgia. But what can be the political end of such an enterprise, aside from the one that constitutes the historian's firm commitment to the enduring importance of the analytic category of class (and thus to a recognizably leftist political stance)? It is a measure of the poverty of their political imagination that Eley and Nield opt for this construction of the politics of history. It's as if the political mission of historians on the Left has become the preservation of the worlds (of social history, working class movements, and class analysis) we have lost. Far more radical would be a history of the present as Foucault imagined it: What are the reigning truths that need to be historicized in order to challenge their aura of naturalness or inevitability? Where are the points of contradiction in representations of the market, the nature of work, and the grounds for unequal distribution of resources?

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How might historical studies expose those contradictions? What would those studies look like?

Some of these studies might well resemble the social history Eley and Nield want to hold on to, at least to the extent that they are richly textured, contextualized case histories. But they will be organized by different questions and so inevitably tell different stories from the ones that established (by taking for granted) the social reality of class. It's not at all certain that the lives of working people won't continue to preoccupy some of these histories, even if we bid farewell to 1970s-style social histories of the working class. It is not the substance or the categories of history but the questions we ask of them that establish their political relevance. And the questions we have to ask now are necessarily different from those we asked in the 1970s.

When I first read Eley's and Nield's essay, it struck me as an obituary notice in the guise of a marriage announcement. The proposed union between discourse and the old social history was admittedly pragmatic, and it seemed to fly in the face of the evidence of their incompatibility. In fact, most of the essay could be read as a commentary on the exhausted paradigms of 1970s labor history and as an argument for the new perspectives and conceptualizations brought about by the linguistic turn. The authors advise us to move on to new challenges, and they begin to define acceptable and unacceptable responses to those challenges: "We have the chance to rethink what class entails or allows, *both* as a category of social analysis *and* as a basis for political mobilization." Farewell, in other words, to the working class as we have known it. At the same time, they are reluctant to abandon "the hard-won ground of social history" with its "materialist analytic of social relations and means of production" and its stories of heroic working-class political agency because they have nothing to offer in its place—nothing that seems to have the political resonance of the old social history. There's a kind of mourning going on here, a refusal to let go of what is gone, an inability to replace it with something new, a deeply held wish to resurrect class combined with a recognition that it is not working politically anymore—enormous ambivalence and no clear answer, finally, to the question posed by the title of the essay. It may or may not be the case that we can look forward to a "new politics of class," but it seems to me we ought not to limit ourselves to that hope. Indeed, as long as we insist that class is the best or the only answer, we foreclose other possibilities for mobilizing political action and for writing innovative and politically relevant history. History becomes the dead weight of the past rather than a critical engagement with the present and the future, and the historian, ironically, becomes an impediment to rather than a herald of change.

NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, "The Myth of the Artisan: Critical Reflections on a Category of Social History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 24 (1983):11. For the full text of Rancière's article and responses to it, see *International Labor and Working-Class History* 24 (1983):1–25 and 25 (1984):37–46.

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2. Rancière, "The Myth of the Artisan," 13.
3. Ibid., 13.
4. Jacques Rancière, *La Nuit des Prolétaires: Archives du rêve ouvrier,* (Paris, 1981), translated by John Drury as *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1989).

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