How Class Works

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The first State University of New York (SUNY) at Stony Brook conference on working-class studies was the best structured, most enjoyable semi-academic meeting I have ever been to. Without being claustrophobic, organizers effectively matched the content of individual panels with plenary presentations in service of the subject: "How does class work?" Often conference themes get only the most nominal attention. Here, organizers apparently stuck to their guns when accepting proposals for panels and papers, and presenters largely stuck to the program. Attendees broke up into individual panels and repeatedly came together as a group throughout the day for plenaries. This worked on an informal basis as well. Plenary sessions always started off with a buzz as folks reintroduced each other in the mornings or, later in the day, compared notes on the panels they had just been to. Stony Brook is launching a working-class studies program, and its semi-yearly conference is to be the social science version of the Youngstown State University conference on class (they will alternate years). My sense is that the conferences will feed each other. Many people who had been to Youngstown also came to Stony Brook. And while at Stony Brook, they recruited for Youngstown.

In a word, Stony Brook worked. It worked as a recruitment tool for working-class studies and related fields. It worked as a means of bringing together experts on issues of class. It worked as a primer on a diverse range of approaches to the subject. It was a testament to the hard, thoughtful work of conference organizers and to the energy of participants committed to investigating the question at hand. And it was a testament to the high quality of Stony Brook faculty. Stony Brook faculty from English, Geography, History, Political Science, and Economics departments brought their expertise, as well as a refreshing air of hometown familiarity, intellectual coherence, and a bantering comfort to the proceedings. The commentatorless panels worked well because participants and audience members took their responsibilities seriously and even kept their egos in check. The conference offered a wide range of papers from well-known authors and commentators, as well as social activists, professors, graduate students, and a few undergraduates. While their approaches were eclectic, all had in common a fascination with how to make class work as a category of description and analysis and a commitment to doing so. The collegial spirit—the refreshing energy of the conference—helped to make attendance a pleasure.

And yes, "semi-academic" serves as an accurate description of the conference, I think. The sessions and plenaries included a nice mix of academics, activists, students, and people who fell in-between. As an unexpected bonus, a number of presenters reworked their presentations in mid-stream in order to

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match the tenor of the meeting and the expectations of their audience. They put aside their prepared papers and offered more informal presentations that tended to facilitate discussion. For example, in the panel on "Issues in Class Alliances," historians Robert Alan Harris and David Zonderman made deliberate effort, as Harris put it, to avoid academic shorthand and to link their talks on nineteenth-century labor history explicitly to current issues. Another way to put this point, of course, is that the friendly spirit of the conference encouraged open participation over solo performance.

If there was a geographical focus to the conference, it was the nearby post–World War Two housing development of Levittown. In this conference, Levittown served as destination, symbol, and launching pad. It became an easy reference point for understanding post–World War Two America, a standard signpost of the line between working and middle class appealed to in several different sessions.

For example, in one plenary, Rosalynn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen from the American Studies department at SUNY, Old Westbury placed the issue of middle-class home ownership after World War Two into historical context. Was homeownership like that at Levittown—a single unattached home—an obvious untapped wish of Americans at this time? No. It was a commonplace that a prudent person would rent in this period of economic uncertainty. Moreover, apartments were obviously cheaper and more efficient to erect and more familiar. Single-family home ownership was a concept that had to be sold and subsidized.

In a panel discussion on class and pedagogy, Michael Schwartz from the Sociology department at SUNY, Stony Brook showed how he uses the impact of home ownership to introduce the idea of social class to his students. To make the crucial point that middle-class status often reflects more than individual merit, he pulls his students away from their own present-day lived experience and back into the ways that experience was made possible in the past. Consider, he asks, what government-subsidized, GI-bill homeownership (as at Levittown) did for white workers and their descendents after World War Two. Homeownership eventually created equity to secure loans for college or small businesses, the security of owning a place to live in old age, and perhaps something to hand down to another generation. Subsidized homeownership became a way of accumulating and safeguarding middle-class status, and it was mainly available to whites. Homeownership was one of the best predictors of a parent's ability to pass on a professional, middle-class existence to their children. Now consider if none of those links between whiteness and middle-class status had existed. Would you have been in this middle-class high school? Would you have been looking towards college at all? What of your parents?

Indeed Schwartz's example hit on a chief thematic focus of the conference: How can we talk about class to audiences who deny the very existence of the phenomenon? In particular, how can we communicate the existence of class to our students? The difficulty of talking about class in the classroom motivated several panels. There was a sense that the subject of class has become so fraught, so suspicious to students, that it has become only approachable through other

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lenses such as race, gender, musical taste, cultural ways of solving human problems, and neighborhood. As Randi Storch from the History department at SUNY, Cortland pointed out, despite the triumphs of labor history over the past decades, working-class students too often do not see that history as having anything to do with them. Labor remains a non-sequitor in our survey classes. She suggested a curriculum that integrated labor as a standard perspective in survey courses, along with politics, economics, race, and gender. In this way, she argued, the lens of class can help students name their own lived experience and personal history and encourage broader critical thinking about history in general. Karen Pastorello from the History department at Tompkins Cortland Community College built on this idea by suggesting a biographical approach. She used her work on garment worker and union leader Bessie Abramovich Hillman to help her students, many of whom were the descendants of textile workers in the area, to imagine themselves into that particular world of working-class history. As she pointed out, the average college student today is a woman working full time. This is the norm. Working-class biographical perspective ought to be an obvious, easy avenue into the lives of our students. In the same way that studying race, ethnicity, religion, and gender can be motivating subjects for students, studying the working class ought to be exciting for working-class students because it will help them to explain themselves. (On this topic, perhaps it might be appropriate for conference organizers to offer daycare services or in other ways make it easier for presenters with small children to participate.)

One panel included a report on "the transformative impact of class talk for college students." Rachel Rybaczuk and Oona Mia Coy, graduates of Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts explained how they structured a curriculum to help students to confront these hidden issues of class in their own lives. How, they asked, do students already explain themselves in class terms, and how can we get them to realize it? Here, the very point of the course was to get students to start seeing class in their everyday lives and in the larger society. Even though ours is a classed society, the existence of class is often invisible. Whether the students come from a poorer, middle-class, or more privileged background, they still come with custom-fitted blindfolds.

This is not to suggest that the conference was dedicated only to class issues in the classroom. As one speaker quipped, it could have been called the "World Economic Forum," but the title, if not the subject, had already been appropriated by another group. Several speakers made connections between class and national policy, as in Frances Fox Piven's frank discussion of the links between new welfare policy and a larger pattern of intensifying market discipline on workers through a variety of means, including educational reform, an emphasis on incarceration, and privatization of social programs. Katie Quan of the University of California Institute of Industrial Relations noted the worldwide use of piecework to make of sweatshop workers "both slaves and slave drivers." And as Jacqueline Smith from the Sociology department at SUNY, Stony Brook pointed out, class categories may be used to classify nations as well as individuals.

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There was only one area where the conference fell somewhat flat. Though arrival on campus reminded many of their first days in college many (many!) years ago, participants had to fight to find social spaces outside of individual sessions. Most conferences held in hotels or in cities have nearby watering holes and easy places to meet, sit, and talk with people whom you just met. If activism and academia have one thing in common, it is the importance of this sort of social interaction: the informal conference that happens after the scheduled conference ends. And to those without cars, Stony Brook was a big, isolated campus, wrapped in a long perimeter road, shrouded by trees, and doused by rain. The closest social space was a long wet walk away, across the railroad tracks and up the road.

At one formal social occasion put together by conference organizers, a dinner held Friday evening, Danny Schechter "The News Dissector" at *www.mediachannel.org* extended the conference focus to the question of how class has worked in the commercial news media outlets and what can be done about it. He examined the erasure of sophisticated questions, in particular, the evasion of class in mainstream media. In this era, when "out of the mainstream" serves as an effective dismissal for anyone seeking access to media outlets, Schecter effectively made plain a theme repeated throughout the conference: sometimes the mainstream is wrong.

It bears repetition. I look forward to future editions of this conference. Michael Zweig of Stony Brook and his co-conspirators did a wonderful job; they created an important new resource for us, admirably multi-disciplinary, energetic and energizing, and valuable to anyone who wishes to engage with questions of class.

The next conference, "Working Class Studies: Intersections with Race, Gender, and Sexuality at Youngstown," will take place on the Youngstown, Ohio campus from May 14 to 17, 2003. The website is *http://www.as.ysul.edu/~cwcs*.

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