Where's the Beef?

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Abstract

Responding to the triumph of the right during the 1980s, Eley and Nield conclude that traditional concepts of class are no longer workable and need a major overhauling. Unfortunately, they mischaracterize the literature, offer little that could refine the debates, and ignore the important role of capitalism in the last two decades.

The first twenty-four pages of Geoff Eley's and Keith Nield's essay offer a generous, if not uncritical, summary of diverse critics of class and social history. The authors believe that postmodernism, feminism, state theory, culturalism, and the linguistic turn have dealt serious, if not mortal, blows to the concept class. Because the traditional "conceptions of class are no longer workable," the rest of the essay attempts to rehabilitate class as a category of analysis. Yet it is a rehabilitation shaped by words, as in "we must study race, class, and gender," not analysis.

Eley and Nield reveal the logic of their project only at the end of the essay: Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan changed postwar politics and with it the central role of labor. Taking the current decomposition of class institutions as our point of departure, we can write different histories of class and its vicissitudes. Revising accounts written when traditional class explanations held sway among historians and society and discovering the silences that historians ignored will not simply produce better histories. They will also produce a usable past because "the reconfiguring of identities and the shifting terms of political affiliation . . . [are] the inescapable starting point for thinking about politics at the end of the twentieth century." In the end, Eley and Nield ground their critique in politics, not theory.

Let us assume for the moment that their description of the contemporary world is correct and we want a usable past. If class institutions have collapsed, what value, other than antiquarian, would different histories of the pre-Thatcherite era offer? The decentering of class would be politically relevant only if those different histories explained the rise of Thatcher and Reagan. One might make that case, but the authors do not, although I think their historiographical preferences lead to such a conclusion. Instead, they state that the two leaders reordered language and meanings, producing a hegemonic "imaginary." Thatcher and Reagan took a social reality and reconfigured it linguistically.

But if Thatcher and Reagan's political reconfiguration did not rest upon "verbal virtuosity," then Eley's and Nield's prescription lacks a rationale. If the

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two leaders actually altered material reality—encouraging some economic sectors, discouraging others—we would need different medicine. New Labour was able to expunge the blue-collar working-class Britain from its political imagination because Thatcher, like Reagan, did a pretty good job of expunging actual blue-collar workers. How that happened is the problem that needs explanation. And it is a story that does not necessarily depend upon the composition of the working class.

The rise of Thatcher and Reagan might reflect the flawed responses of the Labour party in Britain and the Democratic party in the United States to the economic crises of the 1970s. If Eley and Nield are true to their word and believe that politics is a creative project, not a literal translation of social reality, then historians would have plenty of work, although such a project would not require postmodernism and so forth. The problem of many historiographical responses to the era of Reagan and Thatcher is that as they dispose of the notion of a working class, the capitalist class vanishes with it. The virtue of class as an analytic category is that it begins with the notion of accumulation as a driving force of change. In an era when there has been a massive reorganization and deployment of capital, historians should take notice. And, contrary to Eley and Nield, the Left has not posited a "class-located conspiracy" to explain the rise of the Right. Robert Brenner and I, for instance, have made related but different arguments about how the Right came to power.[1] It was not the silences and exclusions of class analysis, but the dynamics of the capitalist class and the responses of political leaders that created the new era.

The problem of social history may not be its alleged privileging of the working class, but its disinterest in the history of capitalism. During the golden age of social history in the 1960s and 1970s when capitalist growth seemed inevitable and open to working-class interventions, the internal history of the working class flourished. But during the 1980s, this kind of history seemed incomplete. One response was postmodernism, which in this context was simply a variation of the internal history of the working class. Capitalism entered the picture as a background, an unchanging given. Eley and Nield make capitalism a *fait accompli:* "We're challenged by the condition of postmodernity, and accept many of the arguments about contemporary transformations of capitalism articulated around globalization, transnationalism, and the post-Fordist transition." The reference, meaning, and implications of this trinity are not self-evident. Recent globalization has a history that needs telling.

Instead, Eley and Nield propose injecting poststructuralist and identity theory into the notion of class. In the abstract, there is nothing wrong with such a project. Labor history has been exploring issues of race and gender for the last twenty years. Arguing for its novelty requires creating a series of straw men.

Let us examine the work of David Montgomery, perhaps the American historian most identified with class analysis. At the beginning of his *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York, 1987), Montgomery warned: "Instead of listening for the 'voice of the working class,' therefore, we must be attuned to many different voices

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sometimes in harmony, but often in conflict with one another."[2] From the US Civil War to the 1920s, the class experiences of workers did not achieve durable institutional and political expression. Indeed, that working class was probably more heterogeneous and divided than today's. People sported many identities, although Montgomery usually grounds them in material reality. Thus, ethnic and racial identities flourished among common laborers because they were useful means to obtain work. For Montgomery, human beings are complex and ethnicity, race, and class are not competing elements.

Nevertheless, Montgomery argued that class remained the essential prism to understand the diverse behavior of all wage earners. How different is his work from that of Kathleen Canning, whom Eley and Nield admire? They praise Canning's depiction of the working class as a "partial, historically situated, and contingent formation, whose institutions and subcultures, its solidarities and divisions, offered powerful but exclusionary ways of organizing the social world—some of the most crucial of which were structured around gender. . . . Working-class formation was a never-finished and unstable ensemble of possible histories in that sense." I do not think Montgomery would use so many clauses, and he does not privilege gender. He acknowledges exclusions, but does not see them as determined by labor's large project. His work is replete with labor's tentative institutional forms and experiences. The working class and its institutions are inherently unstable because capitalism is ever-changing.

Montgomery's workers and their leaders also live in a world that includes other classes and the state. Some critics have challenged his view of the state or choice of key groups of workers. Others would have preferred greater emphasis on particular groups of workers. Social historians have produced numerous studies of women, African Americans, and other groups. While these studies have enriched our understanding of the working class, they have not challenged Montgomery's overarching themes, nor the usefulness of class as an analytic category. Eley and Nield suggest that "we might examine how past practices and institutions encouraged or hindered definite constructions of working-class interest." Montgomery and others have done just this. The authors add, "As a discursive field, working-class interests aren't reducible to any single contradiction." Sure, at any given time this may be true. But the devil is in the details. And Eley and Nield, following Patrick Joyce, offer little intellectual guidance or discussion of sources that could help.

One might say that my use of *The Fall of the House of Labor* is perverse. Although Montgomery writes about multiple sites of class experience, he privileges the workplace as the primary site of class conflict and is not cited by Eley and Nield. Let us examine the body of work they prefer. I will continue with American history, which I know best. Moreover, because Eley and Nield believe that historians of the United States have done better than those of Europe, it seems appropriate to examine this literature.

The authors assume that race and gender studies are efforts to present a richer narrative or to recover silenced voices, while "traditional" labor history is crippled by a normative political agenda that must exclude. That is a naïve as-

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sessment. First, engendering and racializing history do not produce uniformities. We are beyond a simple feminist or racial critique of class. The debate between Theda Skocpol and Linda Gordon on maternalist politics in the Progressive Era cannot be shoehorned into such a framework.[3] Skocpol and Gordon employ class and gender as well as the state, but disagree about the meaning and significance of all three. Both agree that the traditional working-class agenda was gendered. But after that they differ about almost everything else. For Gordon, Skocpol's celebration of the power of middle-class women to appropriate the gender division for reform is wrong-headed. She concludes that Skocpol's *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 1992) ignores the economic and ideological context in which middle-class women carved out a beachhead that turned out to be quicksand. Responding, Skocpol defends her book on the grounds of its telling "some startlingly new stories about the history of social policy."[4] Hers is a traditional defense of much of the new discursive history. But how would these new stories alter our understanding of the contemporary world? Skocpol's lesson for today is not maternalism nor even gender-based provision, but the need for professionals to connect with local community groups to work together.[5] In the end, we have a richer narrative, but one that does not fundamentally alter our understanding of Progressive Era social provision or contemporary politics.

The project of hearing subaltern strata is not without its problems. The search for voices often ends only in a series of stories, the relevance of which is not questioned or examined.[6] Preeminent among the "silenced" voices in American history are those of African Americans. Yet it is social history that has discovered new voices. Tera W. Hunter's *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), a study of black washerwomen after the Civil War, did not require postmodern theory, but simply the old-fashioned work of tracking down these women. And Hunter was trained by David Montgomery. While race may be a new idea for British historians, it is not for American historians, for obvious reasons. Thus, the idea of silence is too crude a category to describe the relationship between African-American and labor history. First adopted in American literature, the concept of exclusion was useful in a discipline that possessed a canon and examined a limited number of (white male) texts. But in American history, even in the unenlightened years of the early twentieth century, African Africans were not ignored, only misinterpreted. And since the 1960s, African-American history has been one of the most dynamic fields of study in the United States.

Like the history of women or the concept of gender, African-American history raises as many questions for postmodernists as for the profession. Eley and Nield cite the work of Robin D. G. Kelley and David Roediger as examples of the virtues of racializing history and employing a more discursive view of class. Kelley's work offers a vision of liberation in which subaltern strata either lead or singly transform the contemporary world. The virtue of the Alabama Communist party of the 1930s, in his view, was not its ability to deliver for blacks, but to nurture a racial subculture.[7] This preference explains Kelley's diffident treat-

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ment of the success of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in unionizing the state's steel, coal, and iron workers. The objection is not that these unions did not end all racial discrimination in the workplace, which of course they did not. Rather, by their very nature they were interracial and could not nurture the subculture that Kelley prefers but that Alabama's black workers rejected. (Mark Naison's study of Communists in Harlem during the Great Depression offered the more common view that the party became a vehicle of empowerment, using a traditional material calculation.[8]) But Kelley does not discard the notion of class. Indeed, he more than many has sharpened its salience within African-American history.

Conversely, David Roediger does not abandon the concept of class, but in an old tradition wants the working class to do battle with appropriate attitudes on race. For Roediger, studies on the construction of whiteness, not racism, are needed at time when traditional barriers of racism have fallen, yet blacks are still unequal. The racial views of nineteenth-century white workers, he argues, were self-generated, not imposed from the outside by the Democratic party, the Catholic Church, or the broader culture.[9] But much of Roediger's evidence for the nineteenth century comes from labor leaders, travelers, and novelists, not the workers themselves, a source problem for any thesis of self-generation. Ironically, his conception of class is a lot more sturdy than that of Eley and Nield, as well as other students of the antebellum era who find workers intractably divided by skill, gender, ethnicity, religion, and region.

The question of persistent whiteness becomes problematic after the US Civil War. Roediger's argument rested upon the notion of artisan decline in an era of industrialization. He adds the notion of the "psychological wage," which becomes an all-purpose explanation, intriguing but unverified. In Roediger's hands, the white working class has virtual total agency, and all other groups and institutions fade into insignificance. He is uninterested in the analytic task of connecting working-class "whiteness" to the rest of American society. Roediger's whiteness agenda, however, threatens other parts of the discursive school of class. He himself fears that his own "research on white racial identity and male gender identity [may become] yet another way to arrogate to white men the center stage in an untextured labor history."[10] But if Roediger is right and working-class whiteness is *the* historical issue, the telling of black stories is beside the point. Finally, Roediger's notion of internal working-class whiteness undercuts Eley's and Nield's preference for viewing politics as the creator of identity. Thus, their admiration for Roediger is puzzling. Their ideas fit better with the traditional explanation of the racism of some Northern white workers: the Democratic party, broader culture, job competition, and so forth.

Kelley and Roediger's are not the only views on race matters. Eric Arnesen and Daniel Letwin bring in race too, but with very different conclusions.[11] Both counter the trend of viewing blacks merely as a subaltern class, which by definition must be silent. By demonstrating that even in the era of Jim Crow, black and white workers, despite mutual suspicions, could struggle together and in the case

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of Arnesen's longshoremen succeed for an extended period of time, brings race in, but with conclusions different from those of Kelley and Roediger. For both historians, the labor union is a terrain of struggle, a mediating institution, and ultimately an instrument of emancipation. The boundaries of race and class are dynamic and not mutually exclusive. It is significant that Eley and Nield highlight Kelley and Roediger and ignore Arnesen and Letwin. But that is the problem of injunctions to bring in race. In itself, it answers no important question.

The diversity of African-American history raises other questions. Eley and Nield offer a model of history where social historians do the grunt work and the theorists do the thinking—albeit they call it a pragmatism of the moment. But Kelley, Roediger, Arnesen, and Letwin are all social historians; they also treat class as a discursive field and spend a great deal of time defining interests—in short, do all the things Eley and Nield suggest. They still come up with different conclusions. There must be something else going on here for which Eley and Nield's analysis cannot account. Their preference for Kelley and Roediger, when in fact their own notion of variability better fits the work of Letwin and Arnesen, requires explanation. Their discussion of "silencings, exclusions, and neglect" may be rooted in ontology, not history. But if that is the case, there is no need for history.

Eley and Nield want to free politics from the alleged determinism of social history. But again we have a straw man. No American historian operates on the assumption that social history or class translates directly into politics. Nevertheless, their idea of politics as a constructive enterprise, if not original, is a sensible one. Black farmers are both blacks and farmers. Which is more salient is not a given but often the function of politics. Eley and Nield note that social history still has a political problem, but they have misidentified it. It is not that social historians uncritically translate social into political power. It is that their favorite sources cannot address the legal changes and reorganization of the state/society relations that any significant social movement will produce.

Thus, Lizabeth Cohen's fine *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York, 1990), demonstrates popular support of the new welfare state, but ignores the specific agenda of that state. Cohen deftly explores the common ground of workers in the 1930s and the CIO's culture of unity, but social history cannot answer the questions she raises about the politics of the CIO, the bonds between the CIO and the state, the relationship of national unions to the rank and file, and the links between the labor movement and other sectors of society. Because her discussion of working-class politics consists mainly of recording the growth of the Democratic party and positive attitudes (mostly from relief recipients) to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, working-class Chicagoans seem politically immature. Cohen puts it differently, arguing that in essence they put their faith in a party that was unworthy of their support. But because she does not seriously discuss national or local politics, the way workers viewed the limits of the New Deal and their future options are unaddressed. Cohen reverts to corporate liberal interpretations, which so much of her book

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undercuts. In short, social history cannot answer every question that we need to ask. Although there is a politics in everyday life, it is not the only and possibly not the most important politics.

Eley and Nield's critique of social history is a different one. They argue that the class-based politics of the twentieth century "necessarily required silences, demarcations, and exclusions for its solidarities to strengthen and grow." This observation seems to collapse the free space that they allot to politics. Like Cohen, they conclude that social movements lead to politics. But where she concludes that the labor movement empowered submerged voices, they see silences. Here and in their embrace of Kelley and Roediger, Eley and Nield seem to be offering an interpretation of the last quarter of a century. Thus, the failure of traditional class-based identities to include all the others "provided openings for contrary labors of persuasion and affiliation to occur, coming from state, political rivals, churches, commercial entertainment, and so on." Once again it is interesting that among the openings, capitalists are nowhere to be found. Politics seems to be simply a labor of persuasion, not power.

Eley and Nield's analysis of the Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair regimes come very close to a linguistic view of power where ideas and language alone create dominance: "New Labour amounts to a discursive maneuver to create a new center precisely on the ruins of its own past." If this is true, one could argue that we need a heavy dose of material reality, not a counterwar of words. Instead, Eley and Nield illustrate discourse theory's tendency toward philosophical idealism, arguing that ideas and language precede and shape all human action. The connections between texts and concrete social and political power, between individuals and discursive or social structures, and between language and action are assumed, not explored. Similarly, they yield the terrain of "policy, policing, legislation, and force." Thus, history can teach us that "power can be resisted in its multiple, microphysical forms." In essence, Eley and Nield end up in Michel Foucault's camp. By implicitly yielding the state, silencing capital, and seeking inspiration and guidance from unnamed resistances, they seem to say that not much is possible. That is certainly a point of view, but it should be stated as such without pretending that this is a new blueprint for historians or the working class, however defined.

NOTES

1. Robert Brenner, "The Economics of Global Turbulence," *New Left Review* 229 (1998):1–265; Judith Stein, *Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy and the Decline of Liberalism* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

2. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York, 1987), 1.

3. See Theda Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers: Gendered Identities in Early U.S. Social Policy," and Linda Gordon, "Response to Theda Skocpol," *Contention* 2 (1993):141–189.

4. Skocpol, "Soldiers, Workers, and Mothers," 157.

5. Ibid., 179.

6. See, for instance, Robin D. G. Kelley's problematic "'We Are Not What We Seem': Re-

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thinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80 (1993):75–112.

7. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

8. Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Great Depression* (Urbana, 1983).

9. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991).

10. Roediger, *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994), 76.

11. Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923* (New York, 1991); Daniel Letwin, *Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Minters, 1978–1921* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

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