

Twenty Years of Working-Class Studies: Tensions, Values, and Core Questions

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Abstract

From the beginning Working-Class Studies has been a balancing act – between academic and activist work, among class and other analytic and social categories, among ways of defining and studying class. Twenty years in, we have not resolved the tensions among the disparate approaches to and elements of this field. And that, we would argue, is one of our strengths. Working-Class Studies is a dynamic and contested terrain of multiple methodologies and academic disciplines. While this means we sometimes repeat old debates, because we haven't resolved them and because new people join the fray, as a field we benefit from the complexity and open-endedness around a few core issues.

Keywords

Class, working-class studies, interdisciplinarity, interality

As early leaders of Working-Class Studies, we are often asked to look back at the work of the past two decades. Readers who want to know about the history of Working-Class Studies or about our personal histories with the field can find those stories in several places: the introductions to two of our books, *Teaching Working Class* (Linkon, 1999) and *New Working-Class Studies* (Russo and Linkon, 2005); in an interview published in the *Minnesota Review* (Cohen, 2005), and in our article “Border Crossing: Interdisciplinarity in Working-Class Studies” for *Labor History* (Russo and Linkon, 2012). In this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*, we instead want to look forward, by mapping out some of the central tensions that have animated this field and by considering how they are developing in the current economic, political, and academic context.

We see four central questions shaping Working-Class Studies, which – of course – connect with each other and suggest additional issues. Like any academic field, Working-Class Studies is complex but also defined by its debates. These debates reflect definitions, theories, methods, scope, and purpose. Most important, in our view, these tensions reflect on-going concerns. They have been at the heart of this field all along, though the details and contexts of the debates change over time. We can think of these issues as a set of enduring and unresolvable questions. Every practitioner in Working-Class Studies must wrestle with at least some of these, and

many of us have, over time, answered these questions in different, even contrasting ways. We expect to continue to do so. Even more important, we believe that asking these questions and debating the answers are defining elements of Working-Class Studies.

What do we mean by ‘class’?

As we wrote in 2005 in *New Working-Class Studies* (and as we have explained to countless students, colleagues, and journalists), Working-Class Studies embraces this question but refuses to provide a simple answer. In part, what we mean by class changes depending on the situation in which we are using it, but our varied answers to this question also reflect the varied interests and assumptions of members of our scholarly community. Nearly all of us begin with an understanding rooted in Marx but without privileging Marxist analysis over competing theories and practice. That is, class involves relations of power, based in economic positions that shape individuals, culture, history, and interests. Within the field, however, that fundamental definition leads in diverse directions. Sometimes, we use class as a category of analysis, a way of explaining and interpreting events, issues, and texts of all kinds. In this sense, class is a position, a relationship, a social force. When we focus on class as an analytic category, we trace the way the contrasting interests and power of people in different class positions play out within capitalism, sometimes by looking at specific cases but also by looking broadly at economic, social, and political conflicts and changes. On the other hand, Working-Class Studies is also interested in the varied conditions, perspectives, and lived experiences of working-class people. When we take this approach, we emphasize class as a social category and a culture, which we study by identifying the shared values and practices of working-class culture and by tracing how people express or enact that culture through actions and expressions.

Within Working-Class Studies, some individuals are firmly committed to one approach or the other, but some move between them and many see them as two sides of the same complex coin. Consider, for example, two key books in the field: Michael Zweig’s *The Working-Class Majority* (now in its second edition, 2000; 2012) and Barbara Jensen’s *Reading Classes: on Culture and Classism in America* (2012). Zweig examines class in terms of politics and power, while Jensen approaches class as culture, articulating the difference between working- and middle-class cultures. Both books offer significant, useful definitions of class, and even as they argue for different emphases, both acknowledge that their approach is not opposed to, or separate from, the other. Zweig demonstrates that to understand how power works we need to look not only at statistics and structures but also at how people experience and respond to them. To understand culture, Jensen shows, we must recognize that cultures emerge from (and contribute to) hierarchical structures of power. In part because these books engage with the debate about how to approach class, without insisting on a single correct approach, other scholars have found their concepts and vocabularies useful in framing new analyses.

The ongoing debate between class as a category of analysis and class as a culture means that none of us can take our approach to class for granted. It also means that, as a field, we demonstrate the capaciousness and significance of class as a concept (or perhaps more accurately as a set of concepts). Our work is better because we have to

stipulate what we mean by class and why. As we have often argued, Working-Class Studies should resist embracing any single definition of class.

How does class relate to race and other social categories?

Class cannot be separated from other social categories that work with and against class to shape power, relationships, social practices, and identities. But what does that mean in terms of how we study working-class life, culture, history, and politics? How do we articulate the significance of class as a central force – some would say as *the* central force – in social difference, inequality, and conflict? Here, it's harder to identify "sides" in a debate. Rather, the relationship between class and race – the dyad of difference that seems most problematic – presents a persistent, resistant knot whose strands can be stubbornly divided yet also hard to untie.

Working-Class Studies emphasizes class, which is the organizing principle, the shared interest, that defines this field. Yet Working-Class Studies has also always resisted the idea that class is more important than race or any other category. Across the field, we recognize that 'the working class' is not white (or male, or heterosexual), and we challenge approaches that ignore this complexity. From the beginning, much of our work has focused on particular intersections between class and other categories, most often gender, as in Paul Lauter's early essays on working-class women's writing (1990) or Janet Zandy's anthology *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings, an Anthology* (1993). Other work tackles intersectionality in more complex ways, as in Julie Bettie's *Women Without Class* (2002; 2014), a study of teenage girls that considers themes and variables of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Indeed, one of the challenges we face in Working-Class Studies is that we understand that 'the working class' is a broad and in many ways vague category. Working-Class Studies also includes research on how race has divided the working class, including how white working-class people have created and reinforced racial and ethnic boundaries within the working class, as in the work of labor historians Theodore W. Allen (1975; 2006) and David Roediger (2005; 2007).

Yet race, more than any other category, remains a problem for Working-Class Studies, not least because this field is, despite the good intentions and progressive politics of most of its members, predominantly white in both its scholarly focus and its membership. While we reject the critique that 'Working-Class Studies' really means 'white Working-Class Studies,' in practice a significant portion of the research in our field focuses on white people. This reflects a problematic truth of the field: we do want to create an academic space for talking about working-class whites – not because they're white but because they are marginalized and demonized on the basis of class. As we do that, we must wrestle with the way racial difference and racism have played out within the working class while also resisting the tendency – in the U.S. but also in the UK and elsewhere – for societies to assign racism as a social problem exclusive to the working class.

Further, crucially, Working-Class Studies must foster and support research on race and ethnicity, as well as other social categories. As recent Working Class Studies Association (WCSA) award winners make clear, emerging work in the field often focuses on working-class people of color, often incorporating gender, sexuality, immigration status, and other categories. Projects like Julie M. Weise's

book *Corazón de Dixie: Mexicans in the U.S. South Since 1910* (2015) or Gregory Rosenthal's dissertation on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hawaiian working-class migrant laborers (2015) not only expand the range of research in Working-Class Studies, they also model ways of digging into the intersections in ways that use class and race, often along with other categories, as overlapping, complementary analytical lenses. In his contribution to our collection, *New Working-Class Studies*, David Roediger acknowledged the difficulty of, as he put it, looking at 'more than two things at once' (2005: 32). A decade later, scholars whose work focuses on race and ethnicity are helping us learn how to do just that.

Still, like the work of defining class itself, we will not likely resolve the question of how class relates to race in any simple or final way. Working-Class Studies must continue to wrestle with this knot. We must more often turn our class lenses on the lives of working-class people of color, but we must also bring greater awareness of race, ethnicity, and sexuality to our studies of white working-class people. And as with the question of defining class, our work is better when we engage critically with the way class works with and against other categories, and our field is strengthened when that critical engagement yields a range of approaches.

How is class changing?

Working-Class Studies has always had a strong interest in the past. The history of labor and political activism, working-class literature, class formation, and work dominate the field. Working-Class Studies emerged in the 1990s, about a decade after deindustrialization, as economic restructuring began to undermine the structures and experiences of work that had played central roles in the formation of the working class. Some contend that the field is driven by nostalgia for the working-class agency and culture that was lost to deindustrialization. No doubt, many in this field have been drawn to the working class of the industrial era, and the half-life of deindustrialization has also been a central and important concern. But this is not a matter of simple nostalgia. Even if we set aside critical arguments about the multiple forms and potential productivity of nostalgia, as laid out by Working-Class Studies scholars like Tim Strangleman (2005; 2011), history matters, both for its own sake and as a source of insight into how class works.

At the same time, the conditions that have shaped working-class life are changing with economic restructuring, technology, and globalization in a few key ways. First, industrial labor has not disappeared. It has migrated and mutated, and discussions of working-class life, culture, and politics today ought to include attention to contemporary versions of manufacturing and mining labor as well as to service work. But, of course, it is not only work that has migrated. Workers, too, have become more mobile, sometimes as a matter of economic choice as people from less developed countries move to western Europe, Australia, Canada, and the U.S. in search of better opportunities, but also as a matter of political necessity and survival, as we see so dramatically in migrants from the Middle East and Africa who have fled violence in search of safety and stability. To say that the working class is global is nothing new, but as these movements remind us, it is global today in ways that it was not in the past. This opens a range of new possibilities and challenges for Working-Class Studies as a field. Imagine, for example, how we might read key works like Jack Metzgar's *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (2000) or Christine Walley's

Exit Zero: Family and Class in Postindustrial Chicago (2013), books that focus on family and community in the context of labor and the steel industry, alongside studies of Chinese migrants who leave their home villages behind to work in giant factories producing smart phones and computers. We can also see the future of Working-Class Studies in books like Sonali Perera's *No Country: Working-Class Writing in the Age of Globalization* (2014), which reads fiction from India, South Africa, and other colonized regions of the English-speaking world alongside the work of Tillie Olsen (1974). If nothing else, our increased awareness of the global working class should generate a more comparative, or at least a more contextualized, approach to the study of class.

Second, changes in work may require us to rethink our already contested definitions of class. Guy Standing argues that the emerging 'precariat' (2014) represents a new class and that its interests are not likely to be effectively addressed with the organizing models of the past. The contingency and low wages of contemporary work undermine the potential for solidarity and pride that workers of the past found in industrial labor. Meanwhile, stagnant wages, increasing student loan debt, and more widespread use of contract and freelance labor have muddied the boundaries between working- and middle-class lives. Where fifty or sixty years ago many working-class people, at least in the U.S., began to acquire the elements of middle-class lives – sending their children to college, moving to the suburbs, buying homes, cars, and boats – today, middle-class people increasingly find themselves living paycheck to paycheck, with college degrees and student loans but without steady employment or comfortable earnings.

It is not surprising that a recent Pew Research Center¹ study found that younger Americans are more likely to identify themselves as working class these days or that the latest round of the General Social Survey finds more Americans self-identifying as working class (Malik et al, 2016: online). As economic structures change, our definitions of class and our ways of studying class will shift. We see this already in studies like Jennifer Silva's *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (2013), which challenges long-standing ideas about the centrality of belonging and solidarity in working-class culture. We might also consider how a novel like Hari Kunsru's *Transmission* (2005), which follows a young computer programmer from India to Silicon Valley and then to Seattle, revealing how his dream of success in America is dashed by exploitative contract labor, reflects but also revises the classic American working-class immigrant tales of the early part of the twentieth century.

As we can see, asking questions about how class is changing also necessarily invites us to consider the relationship within Working-Class Studies between the specific and local, on the one hand, and the shared and global on the other. Working-Class Studies has long been dominated by Americans, in part simply because the field began in the U.S. Building an international organization is, of course, challenging in many practical ways, not least the time and cost of travel. It may be that paying more attention to transnational commonalities and global shifts, including the specific

¹ The Pew Research Center is an independent think tank based in the U.S., <http://www.pewresearch.org/>

experiences and interests of working-class people in particular places, will help us become a more truly international field.

Working-Class Studies for whom?

Working-Class Studies began at the series of conferences we and our colleagues organized at Youngstown State University, starting in 1995. We might have stopped after one conference, of course, but we were inspired by a number of people who told us during the first conference that they had felt like orphans, isolated and hungry for opportunities to talk with colleagues, across the disciplines, who shared their interest in working-class history, culture, and politics. We wanted to create a community that would support these academics (many, but not all from working-class backgrounds).

Yet from the beginning, we also worried that Working-Class Studies would become too focused on serving the needs of its participants rather than looking outward to create change for working-class people. We saw the value of anthologies like *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, edited by C.L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (1995), in which working-class academics described and reflected on the challenges they had faced in navigating the middle-class (and often elite) institutions of higher education. Yet, as Sherry wrote in the Introduction to her 1999 anthology *Teaching Working Class*, relatively few of the students we teach would go on to academic careers. Surely Working-Class Studies should have something to offer them? John had a similar sense from his experience of teaching in local union halls. Working-Class Studies ought to make a difference for the steelworkers, autoworkers, nurses, and government employees he taught.

When we asked attendees at the first Youngstown conference what a Center for Working-Class Studies ought to do, the answers ranged from ‘start the revolution’ to ‘provide a good education for the children of steelworkers.’ Relatively few of the responses focused on purely academic work. The idea that Working-Class Studies should serve the interests of working-class people is written into the mission of the WCSA, which includes the goal of ‘creating partnerships that link scholarship with activism in labor, community, and other working-class social justice organizations.’ We do this in a variety of ways, from teaching in community settings and marching on picket lines to writing for public audiences or making films to advocating for worker justice within our own profession. Some of us also do research on advocacy and activism beyond the labor movement. Betsy Leondar-Wright models both the scholarly and hands-on activism of the field, through her work with Class Matters and United for a Fair Economy, as well as in her book, *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures* (2014).

Because we recognize the importance of crossing the academic/activist border, questions of audience and purpose should always drive our work. Part of what makes books like Zweig’s, Jensen’s, and Metzgar’s so important, and part of why Walley’s translation of her (already quite accessible) autoethnography into a film² is so significant is that these texts exemplify the potential for Working-Class Studies to reach broad audiences. As a field, we must continue to ask questions that matter and

² The film version of Walley’s 2013 book is also titled *Exit Zero*. More information on the film can be found here: <http://www.exitzeroproject.org/>

to write about them in ways that can engage multiple audiences, including academics outside of our areas of specialty. This does not mean ‘dumbing down’ our writing. As a field, we have already demonstrated that it is possible to write about specialized knowledge in ways that will engage diverse readers. If we keep asking for whom we are doing this work, we can produce more research that makes a real difference. And as we know from the experience of editing the *Working-Class Perspectives* blog (workingclasstudies.wordpress.com), this sometimes means that we must break out of traditional academic modes.

We also need to maintain our commitment to teaching. WCSA conferences always include multiple panels on working-class students and working-class pedagogy, as many of us teach courses on work, class, inequality, organized labor, and social movements. Early on, collections in the field, such as Janet Zandy’s *What We Hold in Common* (compiled in 2001), included essays about teaching, as did our 2005 anthology *New Working-Class Studies*. As more working-class students attend college, and as discussions of higher education draw more attention to economic diversity in higher education, we need to update our shared body of knowledge about class in education. We also need to connect more fully with colleagues in primary and secondary education and those who train future teachers.

In the end, if Working-Class Studies is going to matter, for workers, for communities, for our students, or for us, we must recognize that we cannot focus too narrowly on ‘our’ work. We cannot work only within academic settings. We need to continue to connect our research and teaching with emerging forms of activism and struggle among working people. To make a difference beyond the academy and to ensure the sustainability of the field, we need to be organizers. We know from recent projects like Alison L. Hurst and Sandi Kawecka Nenga’s recent collection *Working in Class: Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work* (2016) that twenty years after that first Youngstown conference, we still have colleagues who feel like orphans. We need to reach out within our institutions and across disciplines, to follow the example of Lisa Kirby at the Texas Center for Working-Class Studies (iws.collin.edu/lkirby) and find those who share our interest in the working class. We need to work together to establish more academic programs, build closer ongoing relationships across academic disciplines, organize more conferences, edit more collections, and develop more partnerships. If we do the organizing, Working-Class Studies can be a vibrant and sustainable academic field and a significant ally and partner for working-class movements.

We see great promise for Working-Class Studies, in part because so many of us remain actively, critically engaged with these questions. Through these debates, the field is deepening and sharpening its work, and new scholars continue to join the discussion. We are excited to see younger people taking on leadership roles and contributing smart, creative new research, pedagogical strategies, and models for collaborating with working-class activists and movements. This journal, too, represents an important step as we move from the field-building era to working on sustaining, expanding, and promoting our work more widely.

Author Bios

Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo co-directed the Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University for 17 years. Together, they wrote two books, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (University Press of Kansas, 2002), now in its eighth printing, and *Reading Work: An Online Resource on Critical Reading and the Meaning of Work* (on-line textbook, 2012). They also co-edited a collection of essays, *New Working-Class Studies* (Cornell University Press, 2005). Their most recent joint publication is the article, "Contested Memories: Representing Work in *The Wire*," written with Alexander Russo, Associate Professor of Media Studies, Catholic University, which appears in *The Wire: Race, Class, and Genre* (University of Michigan Press, 2012).

Sherry is a Professor of English and Director of the Writing Program at Georgetown University. Along with her collaborations with John, she edited three collections, including one on teaching working-class students and working-class studies. She is currently working on a book analyzing contemporary American literature that addresses the long-range effects of deindustrialization. She served as the founding president of the Working-Class Studies Association. She has also been active in the growing field of scholarship of teaching and learning. In 2003, she was named Ohio Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Her most recent book is *Literary Learning: Teaching the English Major* (Indiana, 2011).

John is a visiting scholar at the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor. He is professor emeritus at Youngstown State University where he served as the Coordinator of the Labor Studies Program in the Warren P. Williamson College of Business Administration. He has written widely on labor and social issues and is recognized as a national expert on labor unions and working-class issues. At YSU, John is one of just two professors ever to have won distinguished professor awards in all four categories: scholarship, teaching, university service, and community service. He has received the Working-Class Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award and also served on the Board of Directors of the Mahoning Valley Organizing Collaborative.

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