

# Rethinking Class and Contemporary Working Class Studies

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## Abstract

The field of working class studies is forming in the context of dramatic changes in the labor process and crises in capitalist economies. Workers have historically been slow to adjust to such changes with new organizing strategies. As we seek our bearings among the changes in order to develop the field in ways that enhance the organizational and intellectual capacity of working people, we should hold onto a key point of continuity: whatever the new labor processes or changes in the economy, the working class continues to exist in capitalist societies, within capitalist class dynamics, in which the organization of production underlies material, cultural, and political experience. Race and class continue to be mutually determined. While each is distinct, neither can be properly understood or challenged in isolation from the other.

## Keywords

Working class, labor organizing, union participation, capitalism, racism, labor process, labor history, populism, Bernie Sanders

Without doubt, the working class in the United States is undergoing dramatic structural changes. Since the 1990s these have involved, most importantly, the spread of contingent labor in its many forms and the growth of global supply chains. Each development has fragmented the labor force compared with earlier, more coherent organization within single employers, most of whom afforded long-term employment to a largely full-time workforce.

These changes have unfolded as the neo-liberal economic agenda, enforced by the U.S. and its G7 allies, has come to dominate the United States and much of the rest of the world. In the process, the working classes in most countries have undergone significant structural transformations. In the developing world of ‘emerging markets,’ these have reflected the dynamics Marx long ago identified as the process of primitive accumulation.

In the U.S. and most of the industrialized world, these changes have been accompanied by the weakening of unions, labor and socialist parties, and other forms of collective working class power. The result has been a long-term decline in working class living standards and a sharp increase in economic inequality, now so widely recognized around the world. All in all, the working class has suffered for decades as the balance of class forces has swung decisively in favor of capital.

Working people have been slow to develop forms and methods of organizing that meet the new conditions. But this is not surprising. There is a long history of profound changes in the capitalist labor process accompanied by lags in effective working class response to the new ways capital organizes labor. It takes time to understand what is happening as structures slowly change and old habits hold their grip. To understand the challenges of the current turmoil in labor relations, it is useful to review that historical pattern.

In the United States, after the take-off of the industrial revolution in the Civil War era, it took at least a quarter century before the American Federation of Labor (AFL) consolidated around a new model of worker organization: unions based in skilled trades. Earlier attempts such as the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor failed as one or another form of attempted class-wide response to industrialization. Samuel Gompers and other AFL founders were finally able to structure a lasting organized labor response. They chartered craft-specific unions to defend the authority and livelihoods of artisan labor which had traditionally been exercised by independent craftsmen. The new unions protected them as they were being drawn into wage-labor employment.

However, this form of organization, appropriate as it was to the dominant capitalist labor process at the time, consolidated a form of labor organization that lent itself to exclusion and narrow focus. Even though Gompers was a socialist, the inherent logic of AFL trade union organization encouraged racism, male chauvinism, and nativism – all elements of workers’ attempts to bolster their bargaining power by limiting their numbers; trends that Gompers and other AFL leaders did nothing to challenge but much to promote.

These characteristics of AFL unions made it impossible for them to respond to further changes in the U.S. labor process that capitalism imposed on workers as mass production got underway in the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The workers drawn into these new mass-production processes were largely immigrant and often unskilled, or semi-skilled at best. Once again, working people were delayed in fashioning an organizing model that could defend workers within a new set of work relations.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, was the most important early attempt to break through the narrowness of the AFL. Its leaders championed ‘one big union’ for the entire working class - men and women, skilled and unskilled, of all races and nationalities. But this class-based approach to labor organizing couldn’t survive government suppression after World War I. During the 1920s, in addition to the virtual destruction of the IWW, the percent of workers in AFL unions fell by nearly a third (Putnam: 2001, 81) as employers rescinded a degree of union acceptance (and desire for ‘labor peace’) prevalent during the War and resorted to their traditional hostility to all unions. Workers still had no government protection for union activity.

It wasn’t until the 1930s that workers finally managed to consolidate a new form of labor organizing appropriate to the labor process of mass production that had begun forty years before. The industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), prefigured by industry-wide union organizing among immigrants in garment

shops and textile mills, finally achieved an approach to the new forms of work that could accomplish for industrial workers what the AFL unions could not. But that occurred a full twenty years after Henry Ford's introduction of the assembly line in 1915.

Compared with the mid-1900s, current global supply chains and contingent labor have again changed the structure, culture, and experiences of the working class profoundly,<sup>3</sup> and the historic lag in workers' effective response to changes in the labor process is again with us. For at least twenty years, workers and the labor movement have been trying, so far with limited success, to invent new strategies appropriate to the consequences of global supply chains and contingent employment. Existing unions have experimented with union-community coalitions to address worker concerns outside the workplace. Worker Centers and labor organizations not engaged in collective bargaining have joined unions in central labor councils and at higher levels of the AFL-CIO. Meanwhile, despite these forays, the now-traditional forms of union organization are battered and atrophied, shrunken in size, diminished in respect from their members as well as in political capacity. We live in the resulting world of capitalism triumphant, and the recently ascendant right-wing populism that it has engendered, especially in the United States and Europe.

Capitalism takes many forms across countries at a given time, and in any particular country over time. In their economic institutions, political structures, and technical capacities, the United States, Austria, Brazil, South Korea, and India are quite different from one another, yet they are all capitalist countries. The United States today is radically different, in a host of economic, political, technological, and cultural ways from what it was in 1880. Yet in both eras the U.S. has had a capitalist economy. Throughout its history, capitalism has produced crises that have profoundly transformed countries' economies and political systems, yet these crises have not ended capitalism (Heilbroner: 1985).

The field of working class studies has arisen in such an environment of crisis: it is the context in which the Working Class Studies Association was formed in 2004. We are in an extended period of economic, political, and social instability in which old economic and political norms, born in the New Deal response to the Depression and labor's ascendancy in the immediate post-WWII period, are unraveling into an uncertain future. Instability generates fear and confusion. The crisis of an old order usually leads to a crisis in understanding, to intellectual confusion. But while trying to sort through the forces at play in a new phase, we should be careful not to deny the continuing relevance of old understandings.

As working class studies unfolds in coming years, we will be struggling to understand the new arrangements of labor and capital. Yet as we do this it will be critical to hold onto the basic understanding, born of the entire history of the industrial revolution

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca: Cornell University ILR Press, 2006) ; Eric Hatton, *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); Harry Katz, et al., *Labor Relations in a Globalizing World* (Ithaca: Cornell University ILR Press, 2015); Angela Hale and Jane Willis, *Threads of Labour: Garment Industry Supply Chains from the Workers' Perspective* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

and capitalist development, that, whatever changes in the experience of working people, they still constitute the working class in an economic order that is still capitalism. Whatever form the labor process takes, in whatever geographic reach, governed by whatever political arrangements, we will still be experiencing and witnessing the working class in relation to, and in conflict with, the capitalist class. Class will continue to be a question of power, a relationship that emerges in the dynamic conflict of labor and capital (Zweig 2012).

As it changes shape and composition in a dynamically changing labor process, the working class is not disappearing. It is not becoming a thing of the past. Labor precarity and global supply chains do not represent fundamentally new class relations. For working class studies, a central task is to identify, describe, and analyze these new elements in the labor process while deepening our understanding of the underlying continuity of capitalist class dynamics.

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The field of working class studies encompasses two broad areas of investigation: the organization and deployment of economic power in the labor process and in the military and political arenas; and the creation and operation of culture and identity. Our field addresses each area in its contemporary as well as historical forms of development, and within specific countries as well as internationally. Working class studies is such an extraordinarily rich field because class dynamics permeate all aspects of society.

These two broad areas of society, economic power and culture, are intimately linked. Each operates in its own realm, but also in connection with and conditioning the other. As we develop the field in one particular aspect or another, it will be important to at least be aware of the broader contexts of power and culture in which our particular subject operates.

In areas of cultural studies, for example, I think our basic question is: How does culture, in its myriad forms, reflect and reproduce, and how does it challenge, class dynamics in the economic sphere? In its reciprocal form the question becomes: How do the dominant forms of economic relations shape the means and content of cultural expression? These questions suggest a materialist approach in which the pluralism of identities and interests people express is grounded in the complex dynamics of economic production and social reproduction. Barbara Jensen has taken this approach as she locates differences in working class and middle class cultures in the material experiences of working class people, as distinct from those of the professional middle class (Jensen: 2012). Sociologist G. William Domhoff similarly grounds the culture and identity of the ruling class in the material circumstances and social roles of that class of people (Domhoff: 2013).

The interactions among culture, identity, and class are perhaps nowhere more complicated or more socially consequential than in the area of race, especially in the United States. We know that the experience of the U.S. working class is deeply divided by race; what white workers experience, as workers, is profoundly different from what black workers experience, as workers. Yet black and white workers alike experience class subordination to capital. There are common cross-racial experiences

that tend to unite the class at the same time as there are uniquely racial experiences that tend to divide it.

Similarly, there is no uniform experience of race. For black as well as white (and for Asians and Native Americans, and within ethnic communities, genders, and populations of different sexual orientations), experiences are common in certain regards, but distinct in others associated with class. The histories of black freedom struggles and battles for women's rights must take into account the different and sometimes contradictory roles in these movements of participants from different class positions within the respective communities.

Central to the agenda of working class studies must be the analysis of these complex entanglements of class with race, gender, and other identities and cultural groups. To guide these investigations, I suggest a couple of points of departure and frames of thought.

First, the field of working class studies should develop its intellectual content broadly, in the context of social movements of working people. Just as black studies emerged in the era of intense civil rights campaigns, and modern women's studies emerged in the context of Second Wave feminist campaigns, so we who are developing working class studies should associate ourselves with the challenges working people face. Overall, our intellectual work should be grounded in the lived experience of working people, now, in history, in the United States and across the globe. But that experience is dynamically changing and consistently in conflict with capital. In this context, recalling Bob Dylan's song 'You Gotta Serve Somebody' and Florence Reece's labor anthem 'Which Side Are You On?', working class studies should develop in ways that advance the organizational and intellectual capacity of the working class.

This, then, has immediate implications for our definition of class and our approach to race and other aspects of working class identity and culture. I focus here on issues of race because racism is such a powerful and continuing destructive force in American life, but parallel observations are in order for questions of gender, ethnicities, and so forth.

The definition of class within sociology, economics, cultural studies, and other fields engaged in working class studies begins with categories as diverse as education, prestige, income, wealth, property ownership, lifestyle, values, culture, and power. Each has its legitimacy and many are correlated. One way to choose among them is to consider implications of the choice for its ability to support interesting or important further study. In this regard, only a definition of class based on power relationships grounded in economic structures can point working people and their social allies in the direction required to challenge the basic conditions of their lives. If we are to develop our studies in ways that enhance the intellectual and organizational capacity of working people, we need to start with the economic structure and dynamics of capitalism and, as Jensen, Domhoff, and others do, ground political, cultural, and other dimensions of class experience ultimately in those dynamics.

This approach also opens the door to observing and understanding connections among class, race, and gender. Race and gender are widely accepted as matters of power in an intellectual framework that emerged from close investigation of the lived

experience of black people and women in their oppression and their resistance. Basing our fundamental understanding of class in terms of power allows us to investigate directly the interactions among class, race, and gender through this common factor.

Grounding class in structures of economic power is the key to organizing the political processes required to overcome racial divisions that have bedeviled American political and social life for 400 years. Racial slavery was introduced to the Colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a means to divide the population of indentured laborers, the European from the African, who had shown signs of militant united action in opposition to the ruling British authorities (Allen: 2012). The agenda of working class studies needs to include careful investigations of the legacy of this division as it has continued, to the present, to poison working class political, cultural, and trade union activities. In the U.S., class and race have been and continue to be mutually determined. Each, while distinct from the other, cannot be understood or challenged in isolation from the other.

Addressing racism by stressing cultural and ethnic ‘diversity’ is inadequate at best, counterproductive at worst. Racism is not simply a matter of personal preferences or prejudices that can be overcome by moral persuasion. If one champions respect for difference outside the historical context of race and white supremacy in their material economic role, championing difference can too easily reinforce racial divisions and open the door to the white nationalism we have seen come into the U.S. political mainstream in Donald Trump’s election. If we have black history month, why not white history month? The only answer lies in the recognition that black and white are not “differences” but categories of class oppression that have been central to capitalist economic domination over labor for centuries. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka made exactly this point when addressing the international convention of the United Steelworkers in 2008, challenging racism in his call for workers to vote for Barack Obama.<sup>4</sup> Racial and cultural identities in the U.S. are embedded in the historical power dynamics of labor and capital and need to be analyzed as such.

Bringing class questions to the fore should never be a recipe for ignoring racial, gender, and ethnic claims for justice and equality. Contextualizing these identities, cultures, and historical experiences in class dynamics deepens our understanding of them. It leads us to acknowledge and confront these oppressive structures and attitudes in ways that suggest the united force required to challenge them, and the system they support, as they operate today. ‘White’ is not a guilt trip. It is an historical construct that has to be understood by white people for the role it has played, in the course of which anti-racist politics will come more easily and naturally to white people.

This is different from traditional class-based left politics that have sought to submerge race issues completely into class issues. Bernie Sanders, particularly in the first months of his campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 2015, tended in this direction. He stressed his challenge to the ‘billionaire class’ on behalf

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Trumka, address to the United Steelworkers, July 1, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QIGJTHdH50>, accessed December 4, 2016

of working people – *all* working people, evidently thinking that that was enough to explain that black people would benefit from his policies, as would whites and all working people. But in a society with deeply engrained structural racism, a rising tide does not lift all boats.

Realizing this, many of his supporters in the labor movement kept stressing to the campaign that Bernie needed to address structural racism as such, in its current manifestations in voter suppression, police violence, and mass incarceration. It took many months, and Black Lives Matter movement confrontations with him, before Bernie began to articulate a message of racial justice distinct from but in the context of the class politics he put forth.

Yet even towards the end of the 2016 primary season, Bernie neglected race while emphasizing class in relation to the basic question of democracy. He correctly condemned the threat to democracy coming from the billionaire class, their money freely and secretly flowing after the Citizens United decision.<sup>5</sup> But he did not pair this with a challenge to the more profound threat to democracy coming from voter suppression laws that followed the Supreme Court's 2013 decision that crippled the federal voting rights act (Liptak: 2013). Sanders' relative lack of connection with the African-American community was instrumental in his loss to Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary race. The suppression of the black vote was arguably more important than dark political money in bringing to power a unified Republican government implacably hostile to the entire working class, and to women and people of color.

Donald Trump won on a wave of so-called right-wing 'populism'. But right-wing 'populism' of the contemporary variety is not properly populism in the traditional sense (Lilla: 2010). Historical populism of the late 1800s, the Progressive Era, and the New Deal period were all movements that called for government intervention in defense of the livelihood of workers, farmers, and small business owners by limiting the power of big business in the form of railroads, banks, and manufacturing trusts. These were genuine popular movements that resulted in meaningful limits on the power of capital through the creation of regulatory bodies like the Food and Drug Administration, Securities and Exchange Commission, and National Labor Relations Board. Donald Trump's 'populist' movement is the opposite: a nativist mobilization manipulated by capital to undermine government defenses of working people in such areas as public education, housing, and health care; his 'populism' also promises to put the federal government on the side of big business through less regulation, lower taxes, and weakened labor rights.

In a political environment lacking class understanding, decades of identity politics finally brought forth white identity politics as a major force, echoing the outright racist politics of the Jim Crow era, and slavery times before that. The traditional cross-class alliance that constitutes whiteness has again hijacked populist sentiment, just as populist movements in the past have foundered on racial division. Trump's so-called 'populism' again jettisoned the needs and interests of women and people of color. It has brought to power the most reactionary and dangerous set of plutocrats to

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<sup>5</sup> For details on the Citizens United case see, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/08-205.ZX.html>, accessed December 4, 2016

run the United States in at least a century, if not in its history. While the majority of white people who voted for Trump were not out-and-out militant white supremacists, they were willing to overlook the racism, misogyny, and nativism that characterized his campaign. That willingness to overlook, that silence in the presence of reactionary forces, is what working class studies must educate against.

We cannot now know how the new constellation of forces brought to power by Trump's victory and his administration will affect the labor process, although it is likely that labor precarity and global supply chains will persist. But it is clear that working people will suffer great harm as capital runs rampant. It is certain that public as well as private sector unions will be subject to more intense attacks and further weakening, before working people can create the next forms of organization appropriate to the projection of working class power. At some point, perhaps sooner, perhaps later, a vibrant working class movement will again challenge the powers that control the country. In this context, if we are to advance the organizational and intellectual capacity of working people, it will be essential to ground working class studies in the clear recognition that it is capitalism we are dealing with. And as we make sure that working class studies develops in ways that explain and help to reverse the divisions in the working class that capital has fomented, we need to contextualize racism and white supremacy in class dynamics. This won't be easy for anybody.

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