

Barrett, James R. (2017) *History from the Bottom Up & the Inside Out: Ethnicity, Race, and Identity in Working-Class History*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC

Review by Lou Martin

In his new book, *History from the Bottom Up & the Inside Out*, James Barrett calls on working-class historians to examine the subjective lives of working-class individuals—their identity, personality, and personal relationships. Barrett argues that such studies will lead to clearer understandings of workers' motivations, underscore their humanity, enrich the study of current subjects, and embrace the emotional experience of class as much as its material or political aspects.

Barrett begins by analyzing himself in an autobiographical chapter that considers the role of class, race, ethnicity, relationships, and especially religion in his early life and career. He reflects on growing up in a working-class family in Chicago, noting the profound effect the Catholic Church had on his worldview and the space he found to form friendships across racial lines, support the Civil Rights Movement, and later embrace the new social history.

In the next two chapters, he considers the personal lives of communists and how they affected and were affected by the movement. His close reading of their autobiographies reveals that they tried to excise the personal from their own accounts. This was truer of male autobiographers, but they all emphasized experiences that brought them to the movement and their role in furthering it. A more detailed look at their life stories, especially William Z. Foster's, reveals that the personal was actually subsumed by their activism, as they often had poor skills to navigate relationships, marriage, and parenthood, compounding their suffering during repressive periods.

The next two chapters explore the intellectual lives of well-read and well-traveled segments of the working class. A chapter inspired by Barrett's older brother Tom suggests several types of blue-collar cosmopolitans such as the working-class reader, the Pullman porter, and the radical. The second of these chapters details a collaboration between Harvard grad Hutchins Hapgood and the self-taught radical Anton Johannsen. Hapgood embedded himself in Johannsen's life and used their conversations for his 1907 book, *The Spirit of Labor*. Barrett explores this meeting of minds as a foray into the interior lives of radical workers.

Chapters 6 and 7 are perhaps Barrett's most influential essays. The first, 'Americanization from the Bottom Up,' previously published in 1992, argues that historians had oversimplified the Americanization of new immigrants from the 1880s through the 1920s, missing the more complex and dynamic process as immigrant workers encountered not only employers but older immigrants, radicals, and union organizers who offered competing versions of Americanism. New immigrants were constructing identities in the workplace and meeting halls and fusing older patterns of thinking with the new.

In 'Inbetween Peoples,' first published in 1997, Barrett and co-author David Roediger argue that native-born and older immigrants often located Eastern and Southern Europeans above African and Asian Americans but below 'white' people. Their examination of laws, popular culture, slurs, union and employer strategies, and scholarship of the era reveal ambiguities and contradictions in the social construction of race and identity. One of the clearest messages new immigrants received was that it was highly desirable to be counted as 'white,' not a person of color. They variously identified with one or the other, but an attempt to determine which was more common would miss the multifaceted nature of their 'inbetween-ness.'

Next, Barrett discusses the transformation of Irish American stage entertainment from the minstrelsy of the mid-19th century to more realistic turn-of-century depictions of urban, working-class 'types,' which often helped audiences make sense of their new environments. Self-deprecating Irish humor made caricatures more acceptable, but as working-class Irish Americans came closer to respectability in the early 1900s, they became increasingly offended by the caricatures of Irish immigrants.

In a final essay, Barrett explores the intellectual and political context out of which E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* emerged and its influence on new labor historians in the U.S. Thompson's understanding of class formation, which emphasized workers' agency and their lived experiences, found a generation of historians eager for this very approach. Their efforts to apply Thompson's concept and methods to the American scene initially led them to similar time periods and workers, but further studies revealed American workers' tendencies toward fragmentation, the impossibility of separating the social construction of race and class, and the continual remaking of the working class. Thompson moved on to other subjects, but *The Making of the English Working Class* had put Barrett and his generation on a path to discover workers' agency and emotions amid their relationships to power.

History from the Bottom Up & Inside Out challenges labor and working-class historians to widen their lenses to include more room for identities, emotions, and personal lives for their own sake but also to incorporate those understandings into studies of movements, politics, and power. The essays attempt to model this approach, and the results vary. 'Americanization from the Bottom Up' and 'Inbetween Peoples' are brilliant. I see them as the fruits of some three decades of new labor history, and they—along with others—point the way to more studies of the social construction of identity, race, and ethnicity that embrace nuance and complexity.

The autobiographical essay as well as the contextualization of Thompson provide important insights into the evolution of the new social history. In particular, Barrett's thoughtful reflections on his own intellectual development from reading Catholic children's magazines to the University of Illinois Chicago campus to the Thompson seminar at Pitt are a wonderful model for others to consider how they came to their subjects, what they were searching for, and how their values and understandings in turn shape their fields.

The newer essays on the personal, emotional, and intellectual lives of the working class are first steps in a new approach and new subjects. His argument that historical studies should embrace these neglected topics is convincing, but I was not clear what I learned or what similar inquiries will yield in the future, especially given that these particular radicals marginalized the personal almost out of their lives. Yet, as an historian, it is exciting to begin reading an introduction and wonder, 'How is the author going to pull this off?' After reading *History from the Bottom Up & Inside Out*, I found myself asking, 'How are we going to pull this off?'

Reviewer Bio

Lou Martin is an associate professor of history at Chatham University, a founder and board member of the West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, and author of *Smokestacks in the Hills: Rural-Industrial Workers in West Virginia*, 2015.