

Classifying Culture

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Susan E. Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Crafts in Newark, 1800-1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1978).

Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1980).

John Cumbler, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1979).

Milton Cantor, ed., *American Workingclass Culture: Explorations in American Labor and Social History* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1979).

John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson, ed., *Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London: Hutchinson 1979).

AMONG WORKING-CLASS historians the concept of culture, its meaning and its historical importance, has come to occupy a terrain as contested as the past which they study. For some working-class culture remains, after impressive and pathbreaking work devoted to untangling or clarifying its contradictions and demonstrating its resiliency and potential (both historically, as practice, and heuristically as an interpretive device), but an epiphenomenon of marginal importance in comparison with more basic processes: capital accumulation, the division of labour, the infinite fragmentation of class, social democratic labour leadership. Such skeptics, who may take their stand as Marxists or "value free" social scientists, generally pride themselves on their realism and rigour. They point an accusatory finger at those who would speak of a North American working-class culture and claim, with some degree of authority, that the record has been one of such intense and often hostile division — between sexes, among racial, ethnic, and skill groupings, over politics — that any notion of a common working-class culture is an exercise in a flight of fantasy owing little to the surviving evidence and much to a romantic, fertile, if not politically committed (tainted?), imagination. In the face of such formidable attack, those who insist upon arguing the case for culture have been able to hold their ground

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through sensitive studies of specific communities, where workers' lives and conflicts reveal complex dimensions seldom unearthed in the standard histories of trade union growth and political action. But if this work insists upon the importance of culture, it has also been forced to acknowledge that culture itself must be examined materially, in the context of work and economic change, rooted in particular periods of development. Moreover, the weakness of North American cultural studies of the working-class experience has been the failure to confront the character of labour's political life.

This review examines a number of recent books on the American working class and a British collection of empirical and theoretical articles on class and culture. It attempts to use this material as a rallying point for a general discussion of the nature of working-class culture and of the kind of historical writing that can bring it to life.

Much of the work scrutinized here is among the best being produced in the United States today. Susan Hirsch's study of Newark, New Jersey craftsmen between 1800-1860 contains the most detailed quantitative analysis of specific groups of skilled workers that we have to date. A stimulating attempt to develop precise categories of working-class cultures is found in Bruce Laurie's *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850*, a book that builds upon two earlier articles by Alan Dawley and Paul Faler, now reproduced in Milton Cantor's edited collection, *American Working-class Culture*. So finely crafted and so impressively detailed is some of this work that we may mistake the argument, so clear, compelling, and convincing, for the history, which was always more chaotic and confused. As the intricately meshed analytical net is lowered over the collective head of the American working class, encasing particular categories of workers, forcing them into classifiable entities, we may think we have before our eyes a distinct set of working-class cultures. We may, however, have nothing more than ideal types. The classifications so arduously created may leap vividly before us, dancing in our heads as beautifully orchestrated silhouettes at the same time that they blurred together in the crowded ballroom of the past. Max Weber, who helped to bring the discipline of sociology into the world, kicking out blindly at the absence of its father, Karl Marx, would have enjoyed this intellectual undertaking. But is it what we need when studying class and culture?

Susan Hirsch's *The Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Crafts in Newark, 1800-1860* is a book haunted by Max Weber. While not explicitly concerned with culture, Hirsch sidesteps the problem by a Weberian reduction, claiming that the central analytical categories are those of class and status. She cites no less an authority than E.P. Thompson to buttress her contention that class "depends solely on . . . relationship to the means of production." Since Thompson has written reams in opposition to this kind of theoretical closure and shrinkage one can only open one's eyes wide in astonishment. To be sure, Hirsch has not totally

misread Thompson, for she is unambiguous in her assertion that "classes are not static entities" and that "consciousness of class arises from shared experience . . . also shaped by old traditions and institutions." But any appreciation of Thompson's essential understanding of class as the constrained or limited unfolding of human agency is missing, replaced by the *sole* determining primacy of changing economic structures. Indeed, this book is distressingly bereft of historical actors, their thoughts, values, and struggles.

Insistent that industrialization is a process "linking two ideal types, the traditional craft and the modern factory-based industry," Hirsch's study is inhibited by two vital flaws, one conceptual, the other a product of method. First, she pays scant attention to the co-existence of different forms of production within an industrializing economy, and her transitions from one ideal type to another provide little indication of the complexity of industrialization as a protracted process of economic change. Second, her painstaking reconstruction of the structural dimensions of Newark craftsmen's work, family, ethnic, and social experiences, while breaking new and important ground, is the very antithesis of an analysis premised upon an appreciation of process. Like most such studies which labour over census and other quantitative data, her actual evidence is severely restricted in time, catching but a fleeting moment of life and generational histories that are best examined, not over a decade, but over lives and generations themselves. Fully 26 of the 38 tables (roughly 68 per cent) in this small book refer to the period 1850-1860, and rare are the references to the early years. All of this — the Weberian insistence on status, the downplaying of the persistence of "archaic" productive forms, and the methodological inevitability of stopping the historical clock at an hour established by the surviving numerical evidence rather than the flow of the past — present problems for those who would read this book to gain an understanding of the roots of the American working class.

The problem is evident in the opening chapter, "The Artisan in Preindustrial Newark, 1800-1830," where we are introduced to an amazingly cohesive social structure; tensions of any sort are virtually non-existent. The level of generalization here is truly astonishing, while recourse to evidence is thin. There are important insights into craftsmen's pride and work satisfaction in these early pages, but there is little consideration of the developing national market, the accumulation of mercantile wealth, of federalist and republican political controversies, or of social differentiation and the breakdown of a paternalistic ethos that may have held sway in the previous century.¹ Instead, Hirsch tells us that this was as close to a one class society as

¹ These issues are touched upon in the following: Louis M. Hacker, *The Triumph of American Capitalism* (New York 1940); John R. Commons, "American Shoemakers, 1648-1895: A Sketch of Industrial Evolution," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 24 (November 1909), 39-84; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York 1976); Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New*

any historian outside of Peter Laslett's seventeenth-century England would want to come. "By the 1820's," argues Hirsch, "the central structure of local society, the source of values and ideology, was the artisan class." If this were the case, then why, their hegemony so secure, did craftsmen rally throughout the 1820s to oppose imprisonment for debt and excessive judicial fees? Why would one mechanic argue that "the farmer and the mechanic fought their way to equality and justice?" For, if the artisan class was indeed the repository of ideology and values, a fight should not have been necessary. Hirsch thus closes this introductory chapter on notes that make us question her brief and idealized view of pre-1830 Newark. One senses that a category — traditional society — has been imposed upon an experience that encompassed many more ambiguities and contradictions than her account reveals.

In her treatment of the 1830-1860 years, Hirsch sees the march of industrialization dominating social and economic life. This it no doubt did, and she presents excellent material on the transformation of her eight chosen crafts: carpentry, blacksmithing, shoemaking, saddle making, jewelry making, trunk making, leather making, and hatting. The core chapters of this book provide us with meticulously detailed depictions of the structural context of working-class life: the impersonal dimensions of family life and the ethnic makeup and demographic character of the craft sectors is presented, although tilted emphatically towards the 1850s. It was in this decade, as well, that she sees industrial capital reach into the very heart of the craft experience. She notes that the modern factory had not yet quite arrived, but claims that task differentiation and mechanization had done much to create the industrial city, "the home of a new working class and the graveyard of the artisan class."

While all of this is attractive in an abstract sense, Hirsch's failure to consider key aspects of industrial capital's development, and the impact on the specific craft sectors she is analyzing, is striking. There is no attention paid to the character of work, the nature of and changes in the labour process, or the paths by which one craftsman travelled the road to riches while another drifted down the social scale to debasement. Mechanization and task differentiation thus figure in this history as givens, with little exploration of their content and historical evolution; manufacturers, like their workers, are nameless and faceless.

A history that purports to be about the making of a class is therefore reduced to a teleological exercise. Those who see class as an historical process conditioned by the material context of struggle and antagonism, a relationship between contending groups, will find only the bare hints of this

here. Instead we are introduced to the episodic contours of structural transformation, as Hirsch uncovers the "regular sequence to the process of industrialization as it affected craftsmen, a sequence revealed by viewing industrialization as the transition between two ideal states." Class becomes lost in this sequence, and status gradations — based on wealth, respectability, religion, and associational networks — emerge as central in the experience of Newark's tradesmen.

This process worked itself out unevenly among the craft workers she has studied, with carpentry and blacksmithing remaining traditional trades and hatting, leather making, and trunk making more closely approximating fully industrialized work sectors. Stressing the trauma of the process of economic change, Hirsch is insufficiently attentive to the fact that at this early date the factory was far from established, and capital's control over the life of the labourer was more formal than real. As Raphael Samuel has noted in the case of Victorian England, hand technology and steam power co-existed easily in the period of so-called factory dominance.² This is even truer for the years Hirsch has studied; yet she sees the 1850s sounding the deathknell for craft skill, customary control over work, and artisan consciousness. This was far from the case and in the relatively small work settings she is concerned with restrictive and shop control mechanisms often thrived. David Montgomery has described these in general and David Harlan Bensman's exciting study of the hatters in the United States makes the case for a trade of specific interest to Hirsch.³ But to explore this phenomenon one must look carefully at the social relations of production, rather than simply at the logic of capital's expansion. It is this that Hirsch fails to do. It would seem that the industrialized craftsmen of this study, rather than being proletarianized tradesmen, were in fact artisans in the manufactory or the factory.⁴

This subtle interpretive difference is of great importance for it places Hirsch's discussion of the family in context. She argues that craftsmen utilized the structure of the family to lend coherence to their lives, holding

² Raphael Samuel, "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop Journal*, 3 (Spring 1977), 7-72.

³ See Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the history of work, technology, and labor struggles* (New York 1980); David Harlan Bensman, "Artisan Culture, Business Union: American Hat Finishers in the Nineteenth Century," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1977.

⁴ Frank Traver De Vyver, "The Organization of Labor in New Jersey Before 1860," Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1934, 349. Note, as well, the arguments on artisan persistence in John Herbert Cordulack, "The Artisan Confronts the Machine Age: Bureau County, Illinois, 1850-1880," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1975; and for the English northern factory milltowns, as thoroughly proletarianized an environment as one could hope to find, Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society, and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian England* (New Brunswick, New Jersey 1980).

on to a "measure of control . . . and a source of their own self-respect," and all trades — traditional and industrialized — struggled to keep women and children out of the workplace. Here continuity figured strongly and similarities among trade sectors seemed to outweigh differences. Forms and attachments conditioned in years before the onslaught of industrialization survived the initial years of manufacturing's expansion. There is thus a hint of significant continuities and shared attachments in the cultural sphere. It leads us to question Hirsch's argument that the experience of life and work was separated by Newark's craftsmen, especially given the possibility that she has idealized and overstated the extent of transformation at the workplace. At work, she contends, industrialization created a certain class unity, but in the community religious, and more importantly, ethnic divisions prevailed. If this separation between work and life was so pronounced, however, why did craftsmen adhere so uniformly to certain family forms and standards? And how could those drawn together in the workplace draw the line so firmly once they stepped through the shop door?

Hirsch's answer is a deceptively simple one, with much appeal to North American historians:

The major lines of division in Newark were between Protestants and Catholics, between Americans, Irish, and Germans. Most of the lodges, guard units, fire companies, and other social groups were the province not only of one wealth level, but also of one religion or birthplace. Journeymen sought to express their separate identities as native Americans, Irish, Germans, Protestants, or Catholics outside the workplace.

There is no doubt an element of truth in such a judgement, but in a book so heavily quantitative it is troubling to see such a stand backed up with argument that is based on assertion. For all the confidence with which she takes up such an interpretation, Hirsch fails to tell us the ethnic composition of the sports teams, militias, the volunteer fire companies, fraternal lodges, or factory guard units that were important to Newark workers. Her evidence on Protestant and Catholic conflict, as well as her case for ethnic antagonism/separation, turns out to be devoid of any concrete class identification: in its place we have references to some Germans, *classless* Orangemen, Newark's Protestant ministers, *pious young* Newarkers, and an American Protestant Association composed of *unidentifiable* supporters. This all serves to remind us that the 1840s and 1850s were indeed a highwater mark of American nativism, and society itself was divided bitterly and fractured along ethnic and religious axes. But it is unclear from a reading of all of this that ethnic-religious antagonism was especially marked *within* Newark's working class, as opposed to being centrally located in the dominant culture.⁵

⁵ On the nativist movement and American workers see Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844: A Study of Ethnic Conflict* (Westport, Connecticut 1975); David Montgomery, "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844," *Journal of Social History*, 5 (1972), 411-46.

Roots of the American Working Class concludes on this note of fragmentation, as Hirsch explores ethnic politics and craft unionism. In the 1850s she claims politics became the chosen area for cultural combat as status-conscious craft workers sought a slice of the political party pie; unionism emerged as the exclusive and economic terrain of the skilled. Here Hirsch again retreats into idealism, embracing a perversely ahistorical notion of class consciousness to argue that because Newark's workers failed to rally effectively to socialism (this before 1860) and an understanding of the unity of political and economic life (this before American capital was clearly hegemonic and the factory dominant), they never challenged the social order, their limited consciousness incapable of expanding to "a critique of society as a whole."⁶ No doubt, but a sensitive appraisal of events like the demonstration of 1,000 Irish, German, and native workers against unemployment in 1857-58 might have led her to more nuanced conclusions. It merits one line.

Hirsch then proceeds to offer a grandiose conclusion, sweeping over the American working-class experience with masterful strokes of a self-confident pen. "The first generation of industrial workers," she argues with vigour, "thus bequeathed to the American working class a legacy that centred the search for autonomy — primarily outside of work in the family, the social group, and the neighbourhood." On the job, American unions, like their Newark predecessors, "have continued to concentrate on securing high wages and leisure to enable their members to find satisfaction off the job rather than controlling working conditions or the means of production." The class, then and now, remains "unpoliticized." This is heady stuff. But it is hardly the whole story, as an examination of workers' struggles for the shorter work day in the 1860s, the great railway strikes of 1877, the labour upsurge — political and economic — of the 1880s, the syndicalism of the post-1905 period, the socialist strength of the Debs era, the militant drives of industrial unionists in the 1930s, the World War II wildcats, the blue collar blues of the 1960s and 1970s, and the social democratic revival of the 1970s and 1980s would indicate. This is apparently water under the bridge for Ms. Hirsch. It is odd but comforting, given this orientation, to note that her study finishes on a note of achievement, albeit one severely constrained: "In cities like Newark, skilled and unskilled workers, natives and immigrants, struggled to maintain their cultures and their independence and in the process created a life style and modes of action that shaped workers' lives

* Another recent study, also thoroughly idealist, lends itself to a similar view by examining politicians' perceptions of industrialization in Massachusetts (1815-80). This study concludes that respectability and ideological conformity to the industrial order characterized early class formation, but in approaching the problem through what was said about workers rather than through a reconstruction of what they did, it is obviously flawed. See Carl Siracusa, *A Mechanical People: Perceptions of the Industrial Order in Massachusetts, 1815-1880* (Middletown, Connecticut 1979).

for the next half century and influence the working class even today."

Bruce Laurie studies the world of the working people of Philadelphia from 1800-50. Like Hirsch, he centres on religion and ethnicity as central components of distinctive worker cultures, but he does so with more subtlety and sophistication, and is more attentive to the actual practice of his subjects. Keenly aware of the unevenness of industrial-capitalist development, he is concerned with the diversity of working-class cultures that he argues thrived in the midst of differentiated economic sectors. He examines the 1833-37 effort to overcome such divisions in the General Trades' Union, and the breakdown of class unity in the years dominated by depression (1837-43) and "the oppressive hand of capital" (1845-50). This is an extraordinary study of sensitivity and depth, but it too is cast in the mould of the ideal type, and for all the introductory caveats this analytical choice poses problems.

Laurie opens with a discussion of the sources of industrial diversity, introducing us to the significant changes in the market structure, the transportation system, the nature of work, and the urban landscape that altered life in pre-1850 Philadelphia. He provides an excellent introduction to the character of work, with snapshot depictions of specific work settings, which ranged from the fully developed factory to the artisan shop, and encompassed the docks and the home, where casual labour and outwork prevailed. It was in this context that Laurie posits the emergence of three distinct worker subcultures in Philadelphia, forged in the interaction of the backgrounds and work experiences of the city's wage earners.

The first grouping was the revivalists, the most deferential and individualistic of labouring people. Drawn to pietism by the religious apathy of the larger society and the rancor of Protestant denominationalism, the revivalists first surfaced as Charles Finney's protégé, Albert Barnes, brought the message of religious reform to the Quaker City late in the 1820s, infusing it with a commitment to temperance and education. Attached to upward mobility, revivalist workers were the advocates of the Protestant work ethic and respectability. Life revolved around church, home, and the quest for competency. This is a neat and tidy bunch, but whether it stands as a worker subculture is questionable. When one considers that Laurie's reconstruction of the revivalist milieu is dependent upon histories of religious institutions and minister's diaries and tracts, the problem becomes one of establishing the class character of revivalism. Laurie's occupational profile of the revivalists of the 1830s inspires little confidence in his analysis, for in a city that grew to 403,000 by 1850 he relies upon data from very slight Methodist and New School Presbyterian samples. To be sure, these samples reveal the presence of journeymen (62 per cent and 56 per cent respectively). But when we consider that Laurie is dealing with a total of 91 journeymen revivalists out of a sample of 151 we are justified in expressing skepticism at his argument that revivalists were a particular subculture

within the working class. Laurie's own admission that organized religion had a small following and that congregations were volatile reinforces such skepticism. This does not negate aspects of the argument that revivalism was a significant development within the working class that conditioned advancement to the status of master craftsman or small retailer, nor does it undercut the largely speculative but fascinating attempt to locate revivalists in the more advanced work settings, where work discipline reinforced the new Protestantism. We can thank Laurie for pushing us in such important analytic directions at the same time that we can reject revivalism as *a* culture created, not out of actual experience, but out of an imposed and ideal categorical type.⁷

Traditionalists figure as Laurie's second grouping, a subculture of the rough and the raucous. Pubdwellers given to honouring Saint Monday, brawling in the streets and on the docks (where their targets were often blacks who posed a threat to their work or moral reformers who aimed to cleanse their neighbourhoods and sterilize their leisure activities) or fighting fires with competitive zeal, traditionalists were attached to the country, old world customs, and the limited freedoms of outwork and casual labour. They were, for the most part, Irish and Catholic, and were predictably drawn to the emerging Democratic Party. But they were far from conservative and their antagonism to capitalistic disciplines, while lacking in a sustained critique of the new order, pitted them against employers. This is a rich and rewarding depiction of a part of the working class that has been ignored or dismissed for too long. Unlike the treatment of the revivalists it convinces (even in the absence of numerical evidence) because it develops out of sources that have the feel of authenticity and proximity to their subjects. But Laurie's closing remark that these traditionalists would follow the lead of his third cultural subgrouping, the radicals, raises the central question. Were these "toughs" *a* culture, unto themselves, or were they not a part of a class experience that knew few ideal types and embraced contradiction, ambiguity, and elasticity? Would it not be possible, for instance, for a traditionalist youth, attached to his neighbourhood gang, to gravitate towards revivalism or radicalism (or, indeed, some blending of the two) in his middle years?

The final subculture coalesced in the radical and rationalist debating clubs, lyceums, and discussion groups, where Tom Paine's progeny brought the critical inquiry of the Enlightenment to bear on the emerging question of class. Apparently rooted in a stratum of native-born American artisans, the radicals were avid readers, patronized the Society of Free Enquirers and the Universalist Church, defended the labour theory of value and other tenets of

⁷ The same difficulty intrudes in Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Factory Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York 1978), esp. 401-71, where workers are treated as mere shadows in the cross-class march to millennium.

classical political economy, and found their most effective spokesman in William Heighon. This English-born working-class activist and intellectual was a shoemaker who shifted radicalism from a purely political focus towards an understanding of the unity of political and economic life; he had his strongest appeal among the most literate mechanics. Laurie's discussion of the radicals is pioneering, and again it would be wrong to dismiss the impact of this important grouping. But, once more, we are led to question how separate these workers were from their fellow craftsmen and labourers. Laurie's social profile of this group in the late 1820s, like that of his revivalists, is stimulating but inadequate; 76 journeymen craftsmen, enrolled among the Free Thinkers and Universalist Churches, comprising almost 56 per cent of the total membership, are no doubt important but they are not a culture. While it is a difficult task to find materials relevant to important discussions like this, such small numbers in a city the size of Philadelphia cannot be allowed to stand as convincing evidence of a discrete subculture. This is all the more evident when we consider that these radicals claimed to speak, in the voice of a producer ideology, for the class *as a whole*, uniting with workers from other so-called subcultures in trade unions and their auxiliaries.

The moment of most pronounced unity was the mid-1830s, as Philadelphia's workers led a mass movement for the ten hour day and forged an impressive general trades' union that cast ethnic, religious, sexual, and skill divisions aside to proclaim, "We are all day labourers!" This impressive declaration of solidarity was undercut by the depression of 1837-44. Radicals succumbed to the allure of the Democratic Party, which was quick to incorporate their talents and run them for office, but which resisted their ideas and ideals doggedly. Revivalists turned inward, embraced the respectability of self-help, and courted harmonious relations with employers and alliances with middle-class evangelicals and nativists. Interestingly, given my skepticism about the hard-and-fast lines of these subcultures, Laurie concedes that one apparent revivalist response — the temperance-beneficial society — "cut across cultural lines within the working class." Among traditionalists a dual response apparently emerged: on the one hand, Irish Protestants and Catholics were driven into opposition to their own middle class and to black workers who seemed to threaten their precarious status; on the other hand, Catholics turned to politics and built careers out of defending the integrity of their culture against Protestant bigotry.

Such shifts marked a watershed in the cultural dimension of class formation in Philadelphia, and when the economy settled back into mild prosperity in the mid-1840s revivalists and traditionalists had retreated to the workplace, where they limited themselves to "bread and butter" issues. The old radicals attempted to resuscitate workers' combinations, but new strains of dissent were soon to appear. The cultural context was complicated by the arrival of two immigrant streams, English and German, that inundated

Philadelphia throughout the 1840s. These groups revived rationalist radicalism, abhorred nativism, espoused a militant producer ideology, and braced for conflict with employers in the factory and sweated work settings in which they toiled. But such old world dissidents were eclipsed by a new radicalism, the complex fusion of the producer ideology and revivalist morality. This, according to Laurie, was the dominant expression of American radicalism in the period, a radical revivalism. Rather than look to religion, these new radicals turned to the Republican Party. This complicated process of cultural formation set the stage for an artisanal upsurge in the early 1850s, culminating in the formation of an Assembly of Associated Mechanics and Workingmen. Old and new radicals in the trades and sweated crafts came together, reasserting the producer ideology, advocating cooperation, and striking a truce over the range of questions raised by nativists and moralists. But by 1853 this surface unity gave way to ethnic loyalties and party politics, just as Hirsch claims it did in Newark. Nativist resilience buried both the Republican Party and the mechanics' movement.

This, then, is the script played out in Philadelphia in the 1840s and 1850s. There is much in this discussion that is provocative, innovative, and challenging, features that historians should strive to infuse into their work. But there appears to be too much that is imposed upon an experience that likely knew little of the clarity of Laurie's categories and ideal types. He realizes this himself, for there are times when he must concede that revivalist, traditionalist, and radical shared an intellectual space or united in opposition to employers. Nowhere is he totally convincing about the cultural divides that he cultivates so well, and problems of evidence persistently inhibit his attempts to place this group there and that subculture somewhere else. The workplace, so nicely delineated in the opening chapter, recedes into the shadows of radical and non-radical postures. The 80 strikes that Laurie says erupted between 1843-53, while a significant decline from the numerous conflicts of the 1830s (there were 30 stoppages in 1836 alone), are nevertheless significant enough to merit scrutiny. They are barely touched upon. *Working People of Philadelphia* is thus an admirable study that remains, in the swirl of cultural ideal types, unconvincing. If Laurie has gone farthest in the direction of imparting to culture a precision and a materiality rooted in the world of work, he has robbed that very same culture of its ultimate historical content. For when culture is tidied up with too much precision, and marched through history along well defined trajectories, it has been stripped of its adaptability and staying power.

The complexity of working-class culture for the later years (1880-1930) is addressed in John Cumbler's comparative study of two Massachusetts factory towns, Lynn and Fall River. While lacking the empirical sophistication of Hirsch's study or the innovative challenges of Bruce Laurie's work on Philadelphia, Cumbler's *Working-Class Community in*

Industrial America attempts to clarify the relationship between work and culture. Much-studied Lynn was dominated by the production of shoes, a militant nineteenth-century working class, and a rich network of native American worker institutions and associations. Fall River developed as a paternalistic mill town, in which working-class activism was far less pronounced, the work force being predominantly immigrant and disproportionately female. In Lynn nineteenth-century shoe shops provided the cohesion around which a working-class culture in the city core coalesced; the twentieth-century demise of the shoe industry, and the emergence of the suburban General Electric plant, signalled the disintegration of this impressive associational network. Fall River's workers cultivated little of a cohesive culture, but the closing years of the nineteenth century were prosperous and a common condition of exploitation moved them to sustain a powerful union movement. By the 1920s, however, the textile industry was dead and the workers fought desperately for the few remaining jobs.

The very structure of Cumbler's discussion of Lynn provides a clue to the central ambiguity plaguing this study. In looking for an explanation for the striking solidarity of Lynn's workers he zeroes in on specific themes, outlined in discrete chapter discussions: community, union, struggle. Community is a rough equivalent for culture, and encompasses boarding houses, neighbourhood life, clubs, bistros, fraternal societies, and benefit associations. Union denotes labour organization while struggle, of course, outlines the unfolding class conflict in notable strikes and lockouts. There is in this conscious effort to delineate the character of collectivity and its origins a tendency to see culture as the motive force, a tendency obscured by literary and analytic waffling and imprecise argument, but there nonetheless. Although Cumbler is aware of the interpenetration of community, union, and struggle, he does imply that it was the culture of the workers' community, and the institutions within it, that was "the schoolroom within which class consciousness was learned." There is in such a perspective an inattention to work and its discontents that is distressing, and an avoidance of the centrality of the debasement of the shoe worker under the rise of monopoly capitalism that is surprising in a study so centrally located in the opening years of the twentieth century.⁸ Finally, there is a tremor of ahistorical argument within such a position, for much of Cumbler's data on the cafes and lodges is drawn from post-1900 records and oral histories based upon memories that could only have reached back to the early twentieth century. But as Paul Faler and Alan Dawley have made clear, a working-class culture in Lynn stretched back to the very early nineteenth century. That culture

* Perceptive readers will note in this position an element of self-criticism, for my own book, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal 1979), is perhaps guilty of some of the same sins, although not, I would argue, in the same way or with the same degree of seriousness.

was forged in the transformation of work and the bitterness of acute conflict.⁹

For all of Cumbler's insistence that Lynn was a worker community, this essential reality is obscured in his study. Part of that obscurity is revealed in Cumbler's shadowy depiction of the Knights of Labor, a mass movement that emerged in the Lynn of the 1880s as a culmination of the nineteenth-century experience; his discussion of early twentieth-century trade unions and their leadership is little better, and also lacks substance. Another part of that obscurity is the failure of this book to delve into the nature of work. Cumbler is no doubt right to stress that shoeworkers exercised a degree of control over their work pace, but it is questionable whether their work was as nonalienating as he assumes. It is surely stretching a point to conclude that work environments that were thoroughly mechanized and staffed by 50-200 workers were intimate shops. In their twentieth-century context they were no doubt sweated and speeded-up, undercapitalized and viciously exploitative, factors no doubt at the root of the 57 wildcat strikes erupting in Lynn between 1920-33 and the ultimate decline of the shoe industry. None of this is to demand abandonment of Cumbler's argument that Lynn's working-class culture was a rich and sustaining force, capable of buttressing class solidarity. It is to ask for a shift in emphasis and reorientation.

The treatment of Fall River is similarly constructed, although attention is

⁹ Cumbler's use of oral history is problematic and his appendix on this particular kind of evidence is a weak effort to argue through some questionable premises. He contends that oral history data "are not manipulated by existing information but rather are created by the historian," as if the sole force acting upon the respondent is the interviewer. Cumbler also argues that control of the interview must rest with the informant, but pays lipservice to the role of the historian's direction. In the Cumbler study interviews are used throughout the study, but they are far from central. (See esp. 227-8.) The richness of oral histories, as well as some of their problems, emerges more fully in Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, *Amoskeag: Life and Work in an American Factory City* (New York 1978), a work composed almost entirely of oral histories. Like *Working Class Community in Industrial America*, the Hareven-Langenbach book deals with a textile community in the throes of dissolution in the 1920s. It is a sensitive depiction of the role of family, ethnicity, and paternalism in the twentieth-century milltown, and it conveys well the significance of work. The authors' willingness to let the historical figures speak for themselves provides us with some fascinating material but leaves us with the analytical tasks still ahead. Hareven has produced a study of the Amoskeag that will address many of the historical questions raised by this collection. Cf., Paul Faler, "Workingmen, Mechanics, and Social Change: Lynn, Massachusetts, 1800-1860," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971; Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1976). The most strikingly innovative approach to oral history, which goes beyond both the Cumbler and Hareven-Langenbach works, but which also develops out of a particular, if not peculiar, informant-interviewer relationship is Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh 1975). See, as well, Russell Hann, "Introduction," in Daphne Read, ed., *The Great War and Canadian Society: An Oral History* (Toronto 1978), 9-38.

diverted to the interplay between ethnicity and community. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century Lancashire workers formed the vanguard of the mill workers' unionism, and drew the Irish, and, eventually, the French Canadians originally recruited to the town as strikebreakers during an 1879 battle, to their cause. These ethnic workers lived in their own neighbourhoods and formed their own associational networks that helped to isolate them from middle or upper-class influences. In the face of conflicts at various workplaces, which are depicted too episodically in this book, these different groups gradually became integrated into a fragile worker community. But at the very point of consolidation, the balance of unity was again undercut by waves of Portuguese (1890s) and Polish (1900s) immigrants. A 1904-05 strike established the extent to which these new immigrants were locked out of the worker community of the 1880s, and the social place of the union as an integrative institution withered, replaced by a narrow business unionism. The moment of possibility was lost and an industrial unionism embracing men and women, English-speaking and foreign-born, was little more than a stillbirth. While the Portuguese workers endured the greatest hardships and refused to "scab", the union leadership and worker community split apart, dividing along skill and ethnic lines. By 1919 the process had run its course, and when the Portuguese organized a doffers' union and struck the mills, union spinners broke their strike; the textile worker community was dead.

There is in this Fall River overview more than a hint of the divisive potential of ethnicity within the American working class, and Cumbler's book is testimony to the severe limitations, as well as considerable strengths, of culture. This is an eminently sensible approach. But, as in his analysis of Lynn, there is perhaps too much of a cultural voluntarism, and Cumbler argues that in Fall River, "The established working class closed off their institutions to the uninitiated and transformed these institutions into self-serving exclusive institutions to protect the already initiated members of the working class." While containing insight, such a perspective stops analysis prematurely. For it is the context of the material constraints upon culture that are of central importance in understanding the worker retreat of this period. The state and its agents, both coercive and manipulative, had begun to chip away at workers' autonomy by this late date, and the rise of a mass culture took its toll. As the localism of the nineteenth century receded, the strength of community declined, as Cumbler knows well. More importantly, the 1904-05 strike took place in the midst of local capital's concerted drive to increase textile production and thwart the external drive to monopoly that seemed about to overcome it. Southern competitors threatened Fall River's hegemony in this period, and were technologically far more advanced. Between 1904-10, as Cumbler points out in his discussion of the Fall River economy, 400,000 spindles were added to the city mills (one-seventh of the national total), and weavers were forced to work ten to twelve looms rather

than the customary six to eight. The final day of reckoning for the increasingly obsolete production methods employed in the New England milltown was given a reprieve by the demands for coarse cloth during World War I, but in the post-war recession the labour intensive, high-wage structure of Fall River's textile industry (relative to that of the South) took its toll in declining profits, curtailed production, and wage cuts. Between 1923-50 30 of the city's mills liquidated and by 1965 the last surviving cotton mill closed its doors. Rather than see the demise of worker organization and solidarity in Fall River flowing from a class divided against itself, we may point to the material constraints that undermined the very structure of class existence, breeding divisiveness, increasing sectional concern, and conditioning exclusionary contempt where solidarity had once reigned. These, to be sure, were not decisive and absolute developments, but rather tendencies that could, in moments of reestablished militancy, be countered.

But even to be able to make such critical points is to be in Cumbler's debt. There is a wealth of material on work, leisure, and struggle in these two vitally important industrial cities. If he has decided to avoid analysis of the political history of workers in *Working-Class Community in Industrial America*, Cumbler has nevertheless taken the question of culture into the twentieth century. He has given us a sensitive depiction of culture as a resilient unfolding of possibility, in which associational life in the community is related to work. We have here one of the first efforts to understand structure (necessity) and behaviour (agency). The history that emerges is one that convinces us of an essential reality: culture is not always a dead end, and within the working class it unfolded in ways that revealed the possibilities inherent in the class experience as well as the limitations imposed upon it.

All of these studies, then, address the character of working-class culture, and bring us closer to an understanding of both its strengths and weaknesses, not only as a facet of a changing history but also as an interpretive device. A recent collection of essays, edited by Milton Cantor, fulfills the same purpose. Many of these essays first appeared in *Labor History*. Bruce Laurie's fascinating discussion of Philadelphia artisans, a brief preface to the more refined statement now to be found in *Working People of Philadelphia*, was one of these, as was an important article by Cumbler. Cumbler provided a much-needed reminder that Herbert Gutman's nineteenth-century community,¹⁰ in which the workers' struggle for power was often successful, was in fact breaking down as manufacturers consolidated their authority on a national basis and drew upon the abundant resources of the corporate enterprise or the repressive powers of the state to crush militant, but locally rooted, workers. Articles by Michael Feldberg and Daniel J. Walkowitz

¹⁰ Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York 1976). Note David Montgomery, "Gutman's Nineteenth Century America," *Labor History*, 19 (1978), 416-29.

explored crowd actions of Philadelphia workers and the structural dimensions of working-class life among the iron moulders of Troy, New York.

Such work, nourished by Cantor's interest and encouragement, made *Labor History* an exciting place to publish in the mid-1970s, moved the journal's audience towards an appreciation of the diversity of working-class experience glossed over in largely institutional studies of unions, politics, and labour ideology, and pushed working-class history into prominence as an emerging field of inquiry in American social history. Cantor's introduction to *American Workingclass Culture* underscores such developments and, like a recent essay by David Montgomery, lays considerable stress upon the importance of the social relations and organization of production, the role of women in the nineteenth-century workforce, and the relationship between ethnicity and class. But Montgomery has also taken pains to stress that it is the area of politics, of the workers' impact upon the party system and the emergence of independent political activity in the communities of late-nineteenth century America, that has been most neglected.¹¹ Cantor's introduction, and the vast majority of studies in this collection, however, seldom venture beyond the community, the work sector, or the immigrant group, to comment upon the workers' place in the world of politics.

This shortcoming, of course, can hardly be attributed to the individual essayists whose work appears in Cantor's collection, for many set out to explore particular experiences that were often necessarily treated outside of examination of political life. Thomas Dublin's study of the women of Lowell's textile mills and their early challenges to employer paternalism and emerging industrial capitalism, or Philip T. Silva's effort to root Fall River workers' struggles in the violently contradictory stance of labour and capital on just about every significant development of the 1880s (the organization of work, the expansion of the mills, the character of social relations of productive life, and attitudes towards leisure time) are just such studies. Silva's demonstration of the workers' resistance to the acquisitive individualism that employers tried to push into their minds and on to the shopfloor, or Dublin's exploration of the developing sense of self of the women of Lowell proceed, understandably, without close attention to the political context.

Charles Stephenson, however, proposes to explore the relationship among mobility, social structure, and political participation in nineteenth-century America. While an invaluable survey of studies of community, class, and mobility, it is weakest in its comments on political process, reducing the workers' experience in the political realm to two pat formulations: 1) those who participated were the skilled, stable sectors of the class rooted in particular communities; 2) political leaders rarely addressed working-class needs, and where leaders developed within the working class

¹¹ See Montgomery, "To Study the People: The American Working Class," *Labor History*, 21 (1980), 485-512.

they rose from the labour aristocracy. This tells us very little, in fact, about the political experience, and may well confuse more than it clarifies. But if the weakest link in Stephenson's argument is the political, there are other strong and compelling points. He raises a fundamental challenge to Thernstrom's assertion that the volatile nature of the nineteenth-century working class inhibited the formation of class consciousness, and instead contends that "the working-class community was no gathering of strangers but a culture that was vital, robust, complex and capable of sustaining its self-esteem even in the face of challenge, and subsequent victory, of American industrial capitalism."¹² Finally, Stephenson is perceptive and sensitive enough to grasp the essential elasticity of culture, and to argue against the effort to structure it too tightly within scholastically attractive but historically problematic categories.

Indeed, two of the most influential and exciting pieces in this collection raise questions that flow out of just such categorization. The preliminary, and highly innovative, study was that of Paul Faler, who attempted to classify working-class cultures in Lynn, Massachusetts according to how specific groups of workers responded to the imposition of an industrial morality, capital's agent in the cultural sphere. Among Lynn's shoemakers in the years of capitalist transformation from 1826-60, Faler discerned three distinct cultures: the rambunctious traditionalists who defied the new morality by clinging to their drink, their customs, and their political celebrations; the passive loyalists, accepting of the new morality and their employers' authority on the shopfloor and in the realm of electoral politics; and, finally, the rebellious mechanics who practised temperance and frugality the better to oppose the economic injustice and moral degradation of industrial capitalism. Faler thus concluded that the cultural side of the industrial revolution divided workers, "circumscribing the formation of class consciousness." This analysis was extended in a wide-ranging discussion of the politics of the industrial revolution in the United States, jointly authored by Faler and Alan Dawley. Here again industrial morality was seen as the central factor in creating a cleavage within the working class between traditional and modern values. Traditionalists vied with modernistic loyalists and rebels, the latter two groups splitting over their views of political economy.

¹² Our work in Canada suggests that Stephenson's comments give the political lives of workers short shrift. See Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980), esp. 124-71, 216-290; Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900*, forthcoming, Cambridge University Press, 1982; Wayne Roberts, "Labour and Reform in Toronto, 1896-1914," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1978; David Alexander Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Miners, 1917-1926," Ph.D. dissertation, Dalhousie University, 1979, esp. 155-214, 290-413. On mobility and class consciousness cf., Bruce Dancis, "Social Mobility and Class Consciousness: San Francisco's International Workingmen's Association in the 1880s," *Journal of Social History*, 11 (1977), 75-98.

While the loyalists saw labour and capital as mutually dependent, the rebels saw these two camps as diametrically opposed. But in broadening the sweep of the argument Dawley and Faler were forced to consider the profound economic change of the post-1860 years, and to note that the coming of the factory system (as opposed to its first stirrings in Faler's earlier period) chipped away at traditionalism, forcing its retreat, induced loyalists to recognize the need for worker organization, and provided grist for the rebels' mills. In spite of this, however, the rebels did not transform American society, and Dawley and Faler claim that by the end of the century most American workers "probably linked their desire for collective self-help to a conception of labor as an interest group rather than a class." The historical alchemy that changed this rebellious workforce into an agent of reconciliation was the political party system which successfully fused the ritual of democracy with non-working-class leadership and direction, and gained a moral authority from the Civil War. All of this shifted the terms of intellectual trade within the working class away from the rebels and towards the loyalists. In the end this loyalist contingent not only made peace with the labour movement, it took it over.

There have been few such venturesome attempts to synthesize the nineteenth-century working-class experience, or to address the question of American exceptionalism in such a new and productive way. It is no surprise that the Dawley-Faler classification has had such a pronounced impact among working-class historians, and Laurie's Philadelphia study is but one of many works influenced by themes elaborated in these articles. Yet there are tangible problems with the traditionalist, loyalist, and rebel classifications, as my earlier discussion of Laurie's similar, but reformulated, cultural categories would suggest. For if we are to accept such ideal types we will necessarily downplay important realms and aspects of analysis — periodization and context, in which economic and ideological developments shift the ground upon which the working-class experience walks — and dichotomize forces that, under sensitive scrutiny, share essential parts of a perspective and history. The inflexibility of Faler's and Dawley's categories, for instance, defy the experience of many workers and skim lightly over life cycle differences, which may find traditionalist youths becoming rebel workers or loyalists. In the late nineteenth century, particularly, complex blendings of traditionalism, loyalism, and rebellion were commonplace, and produced a volatility that must have, at times, shocked self-proclaimed paternalist employers (just as it has astonished contemporary sociologists whose research is heavily dependent upon survey data).¹³ The stress that

¹³ Note David Frank and Donald Macgillivray, *Echoes From Labour's War: Industrial Cape Breton in the 1920s* (Toronto 1978), 15, for use of the Dawley-Faler categorization. Problems in this orientation should be obvious from a reading of Bernard Mandel, *Samuel Gompers* (Yellow Springs, Ohio 1963); Stuart B. Kaufman, *Samuel Gom-*

Faler and Dawley lay upon politics as the coffin of class consciousness seems overstated given the ways in which the incorporation of the working class could break down in the face of increasing exploitation and repression.¹⁴ For these and other reasons it seems best to read this attempt to classify American working-class experience culturally with some skepticism, regarding the Dawley-Faler argument as a stimulating and thought-provoking interpretive effort that leads us in the direction of many vital and significant questions, but that provides answers riddled with a series of new problems and difficulties.

The final area of importance to emerge from the pages of *American Workingclass Culture* is the relationship of ethnicity and class, a point that Dawley and Faler gesture towards in their conclusion that the traditionalist worker would be "reborn whenever a displaced ex-peasant migrated to America and set about to find work." Essays in this collection present a more complex picture. In New York City, as Michael Gordon shows, Irish workers were far from anti-radical traditionalists, and they borrowed from their old world culture to pioneer the use of the labour boycott in the shops and factories of North America. Slavic peasants, however, were more likely to be conservative traditionalists, and John Bodnar presents them as a group struggling to survive in the impersonal, modern world. Similarly, in the Louisiana sugar parishes, migratory Italian labourers studied by Jean Ann Scarpaci adapted to the work routine that post-Reconstruction blacks would no longer willingly accept, posing little sustained opposition to their employers. And, finally, as Ralph Mann's concluding essay indicates, there were ethnic groups that were so locked out of the dominant culture that they had no chance to adapt as workers, but only to sustain mere existence through reliance upon the brutal work and meagre pay supplied them by employers: in the California mining towns of the 1850s and 1860s the Chinese were violently opposed by a white working class that wanted no part of them.

These essays and a considerable body of other writing, thus suggest the

pers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848-1896 (Westport, Connecticut 1973); David Lyon, "The World of P.J. McGuire: A Study of the American Labor Movement, 1870-1890," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1972. Consider, as well, the cultural unity of workers in early Pawtucket (1790-1830) that would break down with the depression of 1837-43 and the coming of the Irish, revealed in Gary B. Kulik's essay in *American Working Class Culture*, 209-39. Or, for the later period, note the argument in Samuel Walker's "Varieties of Working-Class Experience: the Workingmen of Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1855-1885," (*ibid.*, 361-76), an essay that correctly avoids cultural reductionism.

¹⁴ This argument is made briefly in Mike Davis, "Why the U.S. Working Class is Different," *New Left Review*, 123 (September-October 1980), 14. See the important discussion in Leon Fink, "Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor in Local Politics, 1886-1896," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1977.

need for a nuanced appreciation of ethnicity and its relation to class. At times the immigrants were a traditional source of stability for employers, offering a docile, acquiescent labour force. Particularly among eastern and southern European workers this seems to have often been the case.¹⁵ But we must not be too quick to pigeon-hole the ethnic experience. The Slavic miners could convulse whole regions in their spontaneous communal uprisings, as Victor Greene has shown.¹⁶ Among Germans and Italians, socialist and anarchist views were always present; the New York City Jews could draw upon their experience in old world shtetls to fashion socialist unions in the garment trades.¹⁷ All ethnic groups utilized kinship networks and family ties to sustain an adaptation to work that could rise to the occasion of conflict in impressive demonstrations of solidarity.¹⁸ As Peter Friedlander has shown, there were slices of immigrant life that fed directly into the social democratic experience, even among highly traditional groups like the Poles.¹⁹ And among the Finns of the Mesabi Range or the Ukrainians of the Canadian mining west, ethnic workers would be the bulwark of socialism if not of Bolshevism.²⁰ The immigrant experience was one of constant change and seldom produced only an unqualified traditionalism. Just how immigrants reacted to industrial America depended very much on particular contexts (economic, political, and social), as well as upon the specific cultural baggage which ethnic workers brought with them and the degree of social differentiation within the ethnic community itself.²¹ Class and ethnicity were

¹⁵ David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York 1969), 96-111; Gerald Rosenblum, *Immigrant Workers: Their Impact on American Labor Radicalism* (New York 1973).

¹⁶ Victor Greene, *The Slavic Community on Strike* (Notre Dame 1968). But cf., John Bodnar, *Immigrants and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870-1940* (Pittsburgh 1977).

¹⁷ Melvyn Dubofsky, *When Workers Organize: New York City in the Progressive Era* (Amherst 1968); Herbert G. Gutman and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Many Pasts: Readings in American Social History, 1865-Present* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1973), 208-37; Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (New York 1970); Richard Oestreicher, "Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1877-1895," Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1979; David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860-1920," *Le Mouvement social*, 111 (avril-juin 1980), 207-8.

¹⁸ Hareven and Langenbach, *Amoskeag*, 293-358; Hareven, "The Laborers of Manchester, New Hampshire, 1912-1922: The Role of the Family and Ethnicity in Adjustment to Industrial Life," *Labor History*, 16 (1975), 248-65; Virginia Yans McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (Ithaca 1977).

¹⁹ Friedlander, *Emergence of UAW Local*.

²⁰ Donald Avery, *'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigrant Workers and Labor Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979); Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago 1969), 320-1.

²¹ Bruno Ramirez and Michael Del Balso, *The Italians of Montreal: From Sojourning to Settlement* (Montreal 1980).

thus a complicated mix, at times dividing workers, at other times uniting them.²²

American Workingclass Culture is thus a suitable introduction to problems posed by working-class culture. Between its covers we find attempts to classify cultures, relative silence on politics, and an ambivalence on the relationship of ethnicity and class. This is as it should be, for these are indeed some of the questions of the hour. But there is in this volume a peculiarly American blindspot. Rare is the work, among these studies of the American worker, that troubles itself with theory. It is perhaps time to step into that breach, to see if it might provide a way out of the apparent dilemmas posed by culture.

To do so, of course, is to cross the ocean, entering into a debate that has engaged English Marxists over the last few years. This controversy has produced a series of exchanges, not all of them particularly enlightening. On the one side stands an empirically oriented British Marxist historiography, with E.P. Thompson, E.J. Hobsbawm, and Christopher Hill as its central practitioners, while on the other side a more theoretically inclined contingent of Marxists has embraced various forms of structuralism to develop literary criticism, sociology, philosophy, and linguistics, and, along the way, pose a critique of Marxist history. In the process Marxism has fragmented along lines loosely denoted as "culturalist" and "structuralist."²³ A recent

²² Other collections of essays on this theme include Richard L. Ehrlich, ed., *Immigrants in Industrial America* (Charlottesville, Virginia 1977); John E. Bodnar, ed., *The Ethnic Experience in Pennsylvania* (Lewisburg 1973). John M. Laslett's *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924* (New York 1970), remains a useful guide to the radicalism of German, Jewish, and Irish workers while Eric Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish America," *Marxist Perspectives*, 2 (Summer 1978), 6-55 reorients us towards the fusion of Irish nationalism and radicalism in the labour upsurge of the 1880s. What is clear is that many of the earliest waves of American immigration — first, the Irish and Germans; second, the Jews — integrated into the class and, as early as the 1880s infused it with a reform if not radical orientation. The later immigrants, largely eastern and southern European, tended to adapt to the industrial experience more through kinship and family networks and a more insular communalism, although here too militancy was not always undercut and radicalism did indeed develop within an ethnic community capable of reaching out to touch a broader class experience.

²³ This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of this development. A brief introduction will be found in Gregory S. Kealey, "Labour and Working-Class History in Canada: Beyond the 1960s and 1970s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981). The "mature" texts of this development are E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London 1978), and Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London 1980). I have offered a more sustained comment on this controversy in *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto 1981). It is necessary to add that I do not accept the notion of "culturalism," it being little more than a denigration of work that has developed in opposition to economism.

collection of essays emanating from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, edited by John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson attempts to bridge the emerging gap between history and theory. For Perry Anderson, editor of the *New Left Review*, this volume represents an impressive and successful synthesis between two diverse traditions, a heralding of a much-needed critical balance.²⁴ My reading of this text is less enthusiastic.

Working Class Culture is divided into three parts, the first surveying traditions and approaches to culture by sociologists and historians, the second providing a series of studies of cultural developments with the British working class, the third addressing the problematics of theory. Most useful are the first and third sections, with the difficult studies themselves raising as many questions — theoretical and empirical — as they answer.

Chas Critcher opens the book with a survey of the essential sociological studies of working-class culture written over the last twenty-five years. Providing a textual analysis of key works like Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* or Dennis et al's *Coal is Our Life*, Critcher links the timing of the "discovery" of working-class culture to the social scientific denial of class in the late 1950s and 1960s, a denial that reached a new sophistication with the Goldthorpe/Lockwood studies of the affluent worker. The rejection of this position by the emerging new left, in conjunction with the failure of "theoretical nerve" of the advocates of *embourgeoisement*, shifted the debate towards a new point of departure in the mid-1960s. A communist-socialist "populism" (with Raymond Williams as its major proponent) was increasingly counterposed to a formalistic Marxism premised upon the need to import continentalist theory (a vanguard led by Anderson and Tom Nairn). This was the way the matter stood until the 1970s and the reinvigoration of debate surrounding the rise of structuralism and the publication of E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*.

Richard Johnson traces a similar evolution in historical writing, in which he draws attention to two formative moments in the development of British working-class history: 1) the 1860s-1920s, when social and economic history was first established; and 2) the 1950s and 1960s, when historical writing took a forceful turn towards culture. Separating these two moments were the mid-years of the routinization of labour history, led by G.D.H. Cole, who exemplified the tendency to see workers' history as a mechanical response to economic stimuli. It was in this period that Communist historians first matured as an intellectual and political presence, and their history was at once an attempt to refine economism and break from it. With the work of Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr that process was initiated, but it was with the break from Stalinism in 1956 that Thompson, Hobsbawm, and Hill forged a new history upon the "discovery of the cultural." This history held

²⁴ Anderson, *Arguments*, 127.

sway until the 1970s, when a largely structuralist critique of working-class histories developed, premised upon the need to transcend the literary-historical study of particular processes and establish a higher level of abstraction. But even with this development, the historiography of the previous decades had established that the theory and sociology of culture was now Marxist ground, a contest *within* Marxism rather than a general intellectual debate among historians and sociologists.

These introductory essays are helpful in situating the evolution of culture as a concern of historians and sociologists. But they are not overly useful in guiding us towards ways in which culture can be handled by historians or of how it has been used and lived in the past. To see this we must turn to the case studies in the second part of this book where, supposedly, theory will produce a historical practice in marked opposition to previous "culturalist" studies. Given the critique that Johnson and others have waged against so-called "culturalism" we can legitimately expect such studies to take us forward in our understanding of culture.²⁵ But these studies, while valuable, do not make that link between culture and not-culture that is supposedly at the very centre of their being and purpose. Some, in their avoidance of a wider context of economic process, class struggle, social antagonism and political life, operate at a level of "culturalism" that surpasses work they aim to go beyond. Richard Johnson's study of radical education and working-class culture (1790-1840) synthesizes previously disparate treatments of the subject and charts significant shifts away from the limited forms of workers' autonomy (an alternative working-class system of education) towards reliance upon the state and its educational facilities. But it restricts its treatment of the materiality of this cultural context to a highly abstract and overly brief concluding statement, comprised of a series of questions and corresponding assertions. Where these essays raise vitally important issues, as in Paul Willis's "Shop floor culture, masculinity and the wage form," they are often developed outside of the detailed examination of a wide variety of evidence. Yet it is in just this context that the ambiguous and contradictory character of culture emerges most profoundly. Lacking such "thick description," cultural studies remain little more than theoreticist speculations.²⁶ It is in precisely the avoidance of this pitfall that the empirical idiom of British Marxist historiography finds its resilience and attractiveness; it will not be superseded by studies that refuse to confront the awkward complexities of historical evidence.

We turn, then, away from the case studies with some disappointment, and hope for some salvation in the closing essays, self-proclaimed statements on theory. John Clarke's "Capital and Culture: the post-war working

²⁵ See, for instance, Richard Johnson, "Thompson, Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History," *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (Autumn 1978), 79-100.

²⁶ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York 1973), esp. 3-32, 412-53.

class revisited," raises important questions about the limitations of working-class culture, but his conclusion that the problem of culture must be located in "understanding the complex and contradictory forms within which the working class lives its subordination in capitalist societies" seems little more than a reformulation of Gramsci's view of hegemony. Like most of the case studies in this volume, Clarke's essay is rooted in a period when a mass culture was well established, and the state a central reality in the lives of working people. In many ways this is a period markedly different than that of the nineteenth-century pre-welfare state contexts that much of the work labelled as "culturalist" develops out of. Little attention is actually paid to this important role of historical context throughout this theoretical article.

This problem is more explicitly identified in Richard Johnson's stimulating closing attempt to present elements of a theory of working-class culture. Proceeding from a textual analysis of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci, Williams, Thompson, and Althusser, he quite rightly insists upon the rootedness of culture in material life and its relatedness to economic change. Johnson closes with a sensitive discussion of the importance of culture, of its heterogeneity, its development on particular levels ranging from common sense to ideological critique, and, finally, its relationship to conflicts in which capital's requirement that labour exist in a dependent state figure as dominant. It is this latter argument, an attempt to overcome what Johnson no doubt regards as the voluntaristic essence of "culturalism," that is most important and contentious. For while he is right to demand that those who study culture do so aware of capital's constraints, his insistence that "we must end . . . by looking at this process from the viewpoint of capital" may bury agency in a structuralist mountain of one imposing necessity after another. For all of his efforts to direct us towards capital's constraints upon culture, its requirements in relation to the reproduction of labour power, he is nevertheless content to close his essay on what must be considered a recognition of the role of human agency:

Working class culture is formed in the struggle between capital's demand for particular forms of labour power and the search for a secure location within this relation of dependency. The outcome of such necessary struggles depends on what ideological and political forces are in play, and, ultimately, upon the existence of socialist organization with an integral relation to proletarian conditions and working-class cultural forms.

The stress here on struggle, on culture as a contested terrain emerging out of capital's and labour's contradictory needs, is vitally important, as is the direction of our concern towards the political. But we must remind ourselves, in the absence of any attempt by Johnson to do so, that when we introduce the presence of socialist organization as a figure in the cultural equation we are implicitly raising the question of periodization. Even a Leninist may recognize that all of working-class culture need not be subordinated to the epoch of the Internationals.

What I have argued above must also be seen as self-criticism. For what I have rather single-mindedly questioned in this American literature is also problematic in my own work. Indeed, it is a thorn in the side of an entire body of literature that has emerged over the course of the last two decades within an international working-class historiography. We must recognize that there is not one single authoritative volume that has adequately resolved a series of contradictions and difficulties that emerge out of the study of culture. The primary ambiguities reside, first, in the relationship of economy and culture, of the ways in which culture retreats or advances in the face of economic cycles, of change or persistence throughout essential periods of transformation, of culture's development in the context of work; and second, in the relationship of culture and society, of the ways in which a working-class culture or subculture thrives or collapses in relation to the dominant culture, processes that are rooted in historical forms of social interaction that run the gamut from productive relations to ideology to politics to religion.

Having said this, it is necessary to add as well, that while self-critical, I am by no means persuaded that my own and others' work is entirely wrong-headed. In this sense what follows can be read as a self-defence.²⁷ I am simply unwilling to concede that we can easily ignore the problem of culture, as much working-class history has done in the past and continues to do so in the present. For while culture does indeed pose serious analytic difficulties, its potential has been demonstrated in a wide range of international literature that stretches forward from Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* and Thompson's *Making* to recent studies of popular Toryism in Victorian England.

²⁷ I reject the attack that has been mounted by a number of anti-Marxists, led by Professors Bercuson and McNaught. Their critique I find trite and trivial, ideologically non-reflective, and fundamentally ahistorical. Given to lifting quotations out of context and misconstruing particular positions, their recent efforts are a testimony to the fact that the debate over culture will be waged *within* Marxism. If non-Marxists wish to enter this debate they will necessarily have to move beyond homilies on the nefarious place of theory and shibboleths that derive their questionable validity from a twentieth-century context. They will have to start paying attention to historical context, periodization, and internationally prominent intellectual concerns. See David J. Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Assessment of the New Labour History in Canada," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981); and reviews of *A Culture in Conflict* in *Journal of American History*, 67 (September 1980), 421-2; *American Historical Review*, 85 (October 1980), 1021-2. All of this is not to argue that my work cannot be attacked, and there is much of value in an unpublished critique by Ian McKay. Although dogmatic and scholastic, it is a hard-hitting assessment that I am willing to accept *partially*, and my views have been modified by it. But McKay, unlike McNaught and Bercuson, draws his ammunition from an international Marxist discourse that I take it he and I are both a part of. See Ian McKay, "Towards a Materialist Understanding of Canadian History," unpublished paper presented to the Dalhousie North American History Seminar, February 1980.

To read closely the most ardent critics of work developed within this tradition merely confirms all of this. While the commentaries of Richard Johnson and his colleagues at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies pose an important critique of work they denote "culturalist," it reinforces the need for the study of the cultural realm. But it does little to advance, theoretically, our conception of culture, or our ways of approaching it. For the essential theoretical orientation *was* forged years ago, in E.P. Thompson's sympathetic confrontation with ambiguities in the early work of Raymond Williams. These two British Marxists, in their insistence that the base-superstructure metaphor that has long relegated culture to the status of secondary and derivative must be abandoned, provide in their considerable writings an approach to the cultural that is unrivalled in sophistication and sensitivity. Twenty years ago Thompson put his finger first, on the essential, and continuing difficulty in the historical study of culture, and, second, on the diversity of culture as an historical process, when he wrote:

Any theory of culture must include the concept of the dialectical interaction between culture and something that is *not* culture. We must suppose the raw material of life experience to be at one pole, and the infinitely complex human disciplines and systems, articulate and inarticulate, formalized in institutions or dispersed in the least formal ways, which "handle," transmit, or distort this raw material to be at the other. It is the active *process* — which is at the same time the *process through which men make their history* — that I am insisting upon: I would not dare, in this time of linguistic hypertension, to offer a new definition. What matters, in the end, is that the definition will help us to understand the processes of social change. And if we were to alter one word in Mr. Williams' definition [of culture] from "way of life" to "way of growth," we move from a definition whose associations are passive and impersonal to one which raises questions of activity and agency. And if we change the word again, to delete the associations of progress which are implied in "growth," we might get the "study of relationships between elements in a whole way of conflict." And a way of conflict is a way of struggle. And we are back with Marx.²⁸

In this passage we are reminded of a series of premises from which the study of the cultural must proceed: 1) culture must be scrutinized materially, studied in the context of that which is not culture, primarily the economic; 2) culture must be recognized as ambiguous, elastic, and complex, resting upon the formal and the informal, residing in and conditioned by institutions and mundane aspects of everyday life; 3) culture must be perceived as something more than a mere superstructural derivation, for, in certain historical contexts, and especially after it has attained a presence and continuity, it does not simply passively "reflect" the economic, but may actually "handle" it in particular ways that affect historical evolution; 4) culture is also set within the confines of specific, historically rooted determinations and established social relations, best explored within particular generalized periods; and 5) culture is also rooted in the socially antagonistic relations of

²⁸ E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution, I," *New Left Review*, (May-June 1961), 33.

conflict that emerge, necessarily, out of the process of economic growth and development. These related premises can be read in a series of ways and upon such readings the past can be interrogated in radically different fashions. The following is meant to suggest one approach.

We commence with the primary stress upon the materiality of culture, its rootedness in particular economic contexts, which are themselves related to one another in a discrete periodization of the historical process as a whole. At the beginning of such periods, as the economy is reconstituting itself, moving away from handicraft production or consolidating under the sway of monopoly capital, as the social structure is effectively traumatized by the infusion of new and often socially distinct immigrant peoples (pulled to their new homes by a demanding impersonal labour market that is sustained by state policies), or as new skills are emerging to reformulate the hierarchical arrangement of labour (a consequence of the transformation of work, advancing technology, and refined managerial strategies and practices), it is quite possible that culture will split apart at the seams, appear directionless and divisive, rather than a force buttressing solidarity. There have been a series of such moments in the history of North America, although as yet we lack an adequate charting of them. For the United States it would seem that the 1840s-1850s and the 1890s were two such transitional periods, while in Canada the shifts may have lagged behind, but the difference in timing of such periods of change seems to have been negligible. (Both of these periods, across North America, appear to have been years of nativist upsurge and working-class retreat.) Such an orientation recognizes the transitory nature of culture and, in terms of the grand sweep of history, does indeed reduce it to the status of a dependent upon capital's prerogatives. But it also recognizes that as the culture breaks down or divides, there are gains in understanding and more precise formulations within a minority of the more conscious elements of the class: the labour reform ideology of the 1860s or the socialism of the 1890s were just such advances.²⁹ For the majority of the class this perspective also demands recognition that people do not live, like history, in the *longue durée*; they live in the present, which is historically conditioned and evolves to specific conjunctures. It is at just such conjunctures that culture may enrich the class experience, providing a space in which class can emerge with added potency. But that space is not, in the history, reducible to this category or that ideal type. It is an open-ended space in which we can talk only of tendency and potential. As E.P. Thompson has commented, admittedly on another problem, "One name for this space is ambiguity, another is possibility." And it is as possibility, rather than as a definitive and concrete historical event, that culture is lived in its class context.³⁰

²⁹ See, for instance, David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York 1967); Glen Seretan, *Daniel DeLeon: The Odyssey of an American Marxist* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1979).

³⁰ Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 361.

We can recognize the late nineteenth century, for instance, as the maturing of *entrepreneurial competitive capitalism in the United States*. It was also the period of perhaps the most significant cultural consolidation of the North American working class, a period that saw the labour movement move beyond the confines of trade unionism to embrace cooperation, draw skilled and unskilled together in the thousands of Knights of Labor local assemblies that mushroomed into existence in cities, towns, and mining communities, partially overcome the barriers of race, ethnicity, and sex, strike out for political independence, cultivate institutions of self-help and autonomous learning, and evolve means of communication, self-expression, and protest. Here, in a movement often chastised for its petty-producer mentality or backwardness came to be centred a critique of monopoly, a forward-looking rejection of the tyranny and injustice of corporate capital that, if we are to believe our economic historians, were still decades away; for the America of the 1880s was *not* yet a society transformed by a monopoly capitalism bred of the fusion of finance and industrial capital. Those that choose to denigrate this movement as capable only of looking backward will eventually have to face the striking reality that the late nineteenth century American labour movement was in fact looking forward, and in the process rejecting what it saw as the inevitable drift to economic concentration and political oligarchy. This was as much a cultural achievement as an economic one, in as much as the critique went beyond the actually existing economic configurations. If this cultural achievement developed out of past experience (how could it not?) and broke down in the 1890s this is not itself reason to condemn it to insignificance, but rather a stimulus to search out more precisely the relation of agency and necessity.

The cultural consolidation of the 1880s was not, however, a development that can be understood outside of an appreciation of long years of class conflict and intense periods of more sustained struggle.³¹ These grew out of the antagonisms of social relations that had been at the centre of America's transition to mature industrial capitalism in the years from the 1830s to the 1880s. Such conflicts and struggles would continue into the future, processes that, in part, conditioned a culture, broadly defined, within the working class, cutting it off from the elite. We can appreciate the fragmentation and heterogeneity of working-class culture in America, as elsewhere, without turning our backs on the persistence of cultural distinctiveness, which has historically rested upon the antagonisms of the wage relation, common to all workers, regardless of their differences. No religious affiliation, ethnic identification, political cross-class party, skill division, or regional or sexual distinctions will override this, although they may assure that, at times, this culture will remain only a ground upon which a more advanced class consciousness fails to fall. It is out of just

³¹ The distinction drawn by Raymond Williams between class conflict (as a persistent, ubiquitous aspect of the social relations of industrial-capitalism) and class struggle (a more episodic and radical challenge to authority) is an important, but neglected clarification. See Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London 1979), 135-6.

such processes, in conjunction with the ideological and the economic, that the ruling class fashions its particular hegemony. But that hegemony, as the persistent character of class conflict in America attests to, is never just a *given*; it is an ubiquitous contest, in which there are as many instances of arm twisting as there are handshakes. Moreover, as we all should recognize, the very same religious, political, ethnic, sectional, regional or sexual concerns that may reinforce the handshake may also, in altered circumstances, add muscle to the class involvement in arm twisting.

It is for this reason that I reject the notion that culture is insignificant or non-existent. And it is for this reason, as well, that I remain skeptical about attempts to force culture into particular ideal-type boxes or platonic categories, to define it as precisely this aspect or that process. For this can only lead to laying great stress upon the fragmentation of the class experience at specific given moments, or to locating *a* culture in this stratum or that sector. The dissolution of culture and its splitting apart is a central aspect of the historical experience of class in North America, but so too are the common features of working-class life. Fragmentation has, at certain historical moments, been overcome, drawing the class together, and in that process *the* cultural distinctiveness of the working class was of central importance. For all of the divisions that drove workers apart, they have been forced to deal with the reality of their separation from their rulers, a separation lived in the workplace, conditioned in a perception of the world that necessarily turns on collectivity, experienced in the home and domestic world (which often reappeared in the mill, the factory, or the mine), and reinforced in the political arena. Often that cultural separation was little more than a common sense understanding, an inarticulate way of life that surfaced in the seating arrangement of a church or the particular ways in which workers and employers spent their Sunday afternoons, the one on the baseball diamond the other at the country club; this was, for long periods of our history, an inert culture. But because it was inert we must not mistake it for unimportant. Its potential must not be dismissed. For the cultural inertia of the class, its apparent fragmentation and acquiescence or accommodation, could change with the drop of a hat, or, more precisely, with the drop of the wage, the demise of a skill, or the restructuring of work. In confrontations that turned on such developments, culture would resurface, moving beyond the passivity of a way of life to articulate a rejection of acquisitive individualism or to affirm class identity in demonstrations of mutuality and collective aspiration.

If we look at the history in this way, then some of the works under review here can be turned towards interpretations different from those espoused by the original authors. The period that Hirsch and Faler are concerned with (1800-1860), for instance, might not be seen as only one of basic class divisions or the rise of distinct and opposing worker subcultures, years willing a legacy of division and separation to the American working class. Rather, this can be seen as a contradictory period or social formation in which class and culture are severely constrained by the transition to industrial capitalism, but a

period which nevertheless sees the beginnings of class struggle, the rise of the first American workers' movement, and hints that in the cultural sphere there are forces at work that will, in the changing context of the later nineteenth century, provide sustenance for resistance and material support for labour unity. Cumbler's book, which takes us into this changed context of the later period, establishes that unity and its breakdown in the transition to the *monopoly capitalism and mass culture of the early twentieth century*. Stress upon the Civil War and the cooptive effectiveness of democratic politics as forces moving workers towards loyalism, as developed by Dawley and Faler, seems similarly misplaced. For the Civil War's role in structuring American workers into an ideological, political, and social niche that they shared with capital was but an indication that *the crucial constraint remained*, as late as the 1860s, the nature of material life. (In this sense, this moment of class experience was not all that different than the Canadian process of state building and the debate over the National Policy.)³² With the victory of northern capital in the Civil War and the defeat of the Southern way of life, that question was settled. In the future a working-class culture forged in conflict would begin to address other questions that flowed from that original resolution of the 1860s, and would itself become a material force that polarized society as much as any strictly economic process. To see political life in America as the force undermining this new, late nineteenth-century class rebelliousness is perhaps too easy given the important but historically neglected place of the Central Labor Unions and United Labor Parties of the 1880s, and the vehemence of state and employer repression. And it may well be premature. Not until the depression of the 1890s had run its course, not until the second industrial revolution was revamping the nature of American capitalism and its labour force, was the lid slammed shut on the working-class radicalism of the late nineteenth century and the movement culture of these years thoroughly immersed in the throes of disintegration, reduced to a narrow, defensive business unionism. Against the development of monopoly capitalism in the twentieth century, however, sectors of the reconstituted workers' movement would pose socialism as an alternative, and among those of the working class embracing this outgrowth of nineteenth-century radicalism a new, strengthened oppositional culture would flourish. That would be a gain of considerable importance. The loss, however, was equally significant, for the numerically stronger eclectic movement culture of the 1880s would prove difficult to reestablish, especially in the face of the state's increasing intervention in daily life, the breakdown of localism, and the development of a mass culture that, at every step, denied the experience of class and proclaimed the American way.

Culture is not, therefore, the last instance of analysis, but part of an interpretive framework that builds upon recognition of the limitations imposed upon experience by economic constraints, places the moment of self-affirmation of

³² See Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 97-122; Kealey, *Toronto Workers*, 3-17, 154-71.

the class within the context of particular stages of development and levels of conflict and struggle, and, finally, attempts to bridge the gulf between culture and the forces that are both a part of it and work upon it. Such forces include those that may fragment as well as unite (family, sex, ethnicity, religion, and politics) in conjunction with those that seek to take culture to a higher level (ideology, class consciousness, leadership). When we see what has been accomplished in this analytic undertaking, we recognize how far we have to go if we are to reinterpret North American labour's past. But we can also see that an understanding of culture is vital if we are to get beyond where we were 20 years ago.

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