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What Was So Great About Herbert Gutman?

David Roediger

Herbert G. Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class*, Ira Berlin, ed., (New York: Pantheon Books 1987).

FEW EMINENT UNITED STATES HISTORIANS in the recent past have received such sharp and consistent criticism as the late Herbert Gutman. Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, for example, found Gutman a "bourgeois" writer "occasionally referred to as a Marxist by people who could not possibly tell the difference." Gutman's work on the Black family, according to Genovese and Fox-Genovese, "embraces ... a self-generating black family ... worked out, as it were, after dark and in almost total abstraction from the labour process." Genovese and Fox-Genovese further suggested that Gutman's massive book on the Black family could have been trimmed to 200 pages.[1] Lawrence T. McDonnell characterized Gutman's labour history as marked by a "strange sentimentality" and added that it was a "sentimentalism of the right."[2] Michael Kazin, in a recent essay, dismisses McDonnell's criticisms of Gutman as examples of "muscular Marxism" but adds that Gutman's writings suffered from a "wistful conception of the past."[3] The increasingly irrepressible John Patrick Diggins called Gutman, not flatteringly, a "Parrington in overalls."[4] Herbert Hill, in a significant forthcoming article, regards Gutman's work on race relations in the United Mine Workers a "mythmaking" based on a "romanticized vision of the working class."[5]

None of these criticisms are wildly off the mark, but the harshest of these assessments tend to collapse on themselves. If Gutman's work were mainly

[1]Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, "The Debate over *Time on the Cross*: A Critique of Bourgeois Criticism" in *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (Oxford 1983), 143 and 426-7, n. 3. "Solidarity and Servitude," *Times Literary Supplement* (25 February 1977).

[2]Lawrence T. McDonnell, "'You Are Too Sentimental': Problems and Suggestions for a New Labor History," *Journal of Social History*, 17 (1984), 638 and 630.

[3]Michael Kazin, "The Historian as Populist," *New York Review of Books*, 35 (12 May 1988), 48-50.

[4]John Patrick Diggins, "Comrades and Citizens: New Mythologies in American Historiography," *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 625.

[5]Herbert Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History: Herbert Gutman and the United Mine Workers of America," *Politics, Culture and Society*, 2 (1988), forthcoming.

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noteworthy as an example of leftish culturalist nostalgia, then what would be of interest is not so much a dissection of his errors as a political explanation of how he nonetheless came of be one of the two or three most influential historians of his generation.[6] How, specifically, did he come to inspire so many socialist historians?

I am not quite yet ready to argue, using Fox-Genovese and Genovese's image, that a whole generation of historians has sunk "into a neo-antiquarian swamp."[7] This essay therefore tries to come to grips with Gutman's substantial heritage by first of all looking to the strengths which make his work appeal to those wanting to understand and change the world. It argues that Gutman's work was not only better than most of his detractors allow, but also that it managed to transcend some of his own lapses and rhetorical excesses. Part of his success derived from Gutman's individual passion and genius but, I will argue, much of it also derived from his roots in the much-maligned Old Left.

Power and Culture provides an excellent opportunity to examine Gutman's contributions. It gathers a dozen of Gutman's articles, representing Gutman's interests in labour history, Afro-American history, and public history. Celebrated essays like "The Workers' Search for Power" (1963) appear alongside unpublished manuscripts and pieces previously published in other languages. The longest essay, almost a book in itself, is the previously unpublished "Labor in the Land of Lincoln: Coal Miners on the Prairie," Gutman's most sustained study of the white working class in a given area. Materials not included in Gutman's classic *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York 1976) are published here for the first time. Especially important in this regard is "Schools for Freedom: The Post-Emancipation Origins of Afro-American Education," an unpublished fragment edited for inclusion in *Power and Culture* by Eric Foner. "Schools for Freedom" wonderfully captures what W.E.B. DuBois called "the rhythm of united effort" through which freed people sought "to learn and know."[8] "Class Composition and the Development of the American Working Class, 1840-1890," co-authored by Gutman and by Ira Berlin, and published in English for the first time, provides abundant statistical support for Gutman's contention that the urban working class was largely re-made through immigration in the late nineteenth century. A useful bibliography of Gutman's writings, compiled by Andrew Gyory, is appended to the collection.

Berlin, the editor of *Power and Culture* also contributes a long and fascinating introduction on "Herbert G. Gutman and the American Working Class." That essay reflects its author's friendship with Gutman but also manages a fair portrayal of the academic quarrels in which Gutman came to be involved. Most of all, Berlin

[6]Hill's article, cited above, does attempt to make political sense out of the influence of Gutman's work, at least that part of his work on labour racism. He argues that Gutman's writing reproduces the privileging of class over race found generally among US scholars, especially radical scholars, and among American progressives generally.

[7]Fox-Genovese and Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History," in *Fruits of Merchant Capitalism*, 201.

[8]W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York 1971, originally 1935), 637.

shows that at every turn Gutman's historical writings reflect a political commitment, though not a politics easily summarized or labeled. Berlin succumbs to occasional overstatements, as when he characterizes Gutman's *The Black Family* as a study of "class formation."[9] but the introduction as a whole is the best published appraisal of Gutman's writings.

Berlin provides an excellent initial clue as to what set Gutman apart from, and above, most historians of US working class life, writing "For Gutman, ... study of the Afro-American family was not a detour on the road to a history of the American working class, but the center lane on the main highway." (46) With the exceptions of old leftists such as Herbert Hill, Philip S. Foner, and George Rawick, few American historians have deeply researched both the white and Black working class.[10] Gutman's project was startlingly expansive and sophisticated. As Genovese wrote in 1970:

> Gutman has set out to reinterpret the history of the American working class and in doing so has come to emphasize the process by which various immigrant groups ... became acculturated, in the double sense of 'Americanized' and integrated into an advanced industrial economy. This concern has naturally led him toward a critical appraisal of the intersection of peasant migrations, the growth of the working class in its particular ethnic manifestations, and the black experience. This new approach to the history of the black and white working class points toward an appreciation of culture as politics.[11]

Perhaps predictably, Gutman only partially realized this full agenda. His work on Black workers and that on white workers, for example, generally remained separated. When he attempted to discuss race relations within the working class, a desire to recover anti-racist traditions led to a straining of the evidence and an unwillingness to probe the extent of white working-class racism. That Gutman lacked any sympathetic understanding of Black nationalism likewise left profound gaps in his work.[12] But he did argue for the fullest possible inclusiveness in

[9]Berlin, "Gutman and the Working Class," in *Power and Culture*, 45. As Gutman's own "The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: A Revised Perspective," in *Power and Culture*, 359-79, esp. 374, makes clear, the book version of the *The Black Family* is based primarily on nineteenth-century records, especially those covering from 1830-1860. By that time slaves had long since become a class. Nor do the intriguing short passages in the "revised perspectives" (374-9) provide more than hints about slave class formation in the eighteenth century. Moreover, there is too little sense of the master class and slaves in conflict in *The Black Family* and too inconsistent interrogation of the relationship between kin networks and class consciousness for the book to qualify as a treatment of class formation. See George Fredrickson, "The Historiography of Slavery," in *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism and Social Inequality* (Middletown, CT 1988), 122.

[10]See David Roediger, "'Labor in White Skin': Race and U.S. Working Class History," in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, eds., *Reshaping the U.S. Left* (London and New York 1988), 287-308. Eric Foner is also exceptional in this regard.

[11]Genovese, "The Influence of the Black Power Movement on Historical Scholarship: Reflections of a White Historian," in *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History* (New York 1984), 245.

[12]Hill, "Myth-Making as Labor History," forthcoming; see also the handling of evidence of possible violence and racism against Black workers by white Illinois miners in the "Labor in the Land of Lincoln" article in *Power and Culture*, esp. 178-80, 189-90 and 202-5 and Herbert G. Gutman, "Black Coal

working-class studies moving away from the profession's concentration on large urban workplaces and toward the small city, often in the Midwest, the artisan workshop, the plantation, and the slave-holding farm. He pioneered in the study of workers off the job and his students made seminal contributions to the study of gender and labour. He studied railway workers, miners, plantation slaves, house slaves, industrial slaves, the unemployed, coopers, refinery workers, housewives, and more. And yet he did not "disaggregate" the working class out of existence. His work was broad but also broadly focused. The focus was on the making and reconstruction of the working class.

The second great virtue running through Gutman's work is an abundance of intellectual curiosity. He was clearly no master of theory — the most subtle insights of Raymond Williams and Sidney Mirtz are quote alongside a historical and idealist pronouncements from Clifford Geertz in Gutman's work and with little sense that different ways of looking at the world are being alluded to. But Gutman was enormously interested in, and adept at handling, evidence and ideas growing out of the evidence. In "Labor in the Land of Lincoln," for example, he lingers over details in portraying working-class life, providing even descriptions of footraces among the miners. (136) Gutman's writing, in this regard, much resembles Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks* and W.E.B. DuBois's early sociological work.[13] Like these two, Gutman provides a wealth of ideas to go with the wealth of detail. Rereading "The Workers Search for Power," written by Gutman a quarter-century ago, one is struck not so much by its well-known thesis — that in smaller cities cross-class pro-labour alliances developed more frequently than in large urban areas — but by the article's variety. The central thesis, as Gutman himself came to realize (16-17), has not survived intact. But the article survives because of the stories it tells and the fact that it contains a half-dozen sub-themes, on topics ranging from republicanism to ethnicity, and develops those themes brilliantly. *The Black Family* similarly shows Gutman at his absolute best in interpreting sometimes fragmentary evidence.

Another of the tremendous strengths of Gutman's work is its attention to the timing of historical changes. His writings show a sharp concern for periodization, a concern not common among US labour historians. His groundbreaking essay, "Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America," not reprinted in *Power and Culture*, proposed a new periodization for working-class history and Gutman was quite disappointed that, though the essay won wide praise, it sparked little debate over periodization.[14] His "Class Composition and the Development of the

Miners and the Greenback-Labor Party in Redeemer Alabama, 1878-1879," *Labor History*, 10 (1969), 506-35. On Black nationalism, see Gutman's mechanistic response to Manning Marable, "Toward a Black Politics: Beyond the Race-Class Dilemma," *The Nation*, 232 (11 April 1981), 434 and Genovese and Fox-Genovese, "Debate over Time on the Cross," in *Fruits of Merchant Capital*, 170-1.

[13]See Franklin Rosemont's superb essay on Marx and the *Ethnological Notebooks*, forthcoming in *Arsenal*; DuBois, *The Negro American Artisan* (Atlanta 1913); DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia 1899).

[14]Gutman, "Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review* 78 (1973), 531-88; Gutman, *Power and Culture*, 338-42.

American Working Class, 1840-1890" (with Berlin), included in *Power and Culture*, returns to the issues of timing raised in "Work, Culture and Society." And, of course, *The Black Family* and related essays insist that history must be understood as a process, even as an unfolding drama. This emphasis on time and change grew not just from historical craftsmanship but also from a belief that showing a fluid past contributed to a sense of alternatives in the present and widened political possibilities for the future.[15] 'Twas not, Gutman emphasized, ever thus.

Sustaining Gutman's intellectual curiosity and his attention to change was his commitment to history as a democratic process. As the concluding essay in *Power and Culture*, "Historical Consciousness in Contemporary America" makes clear, Gutman worked hard to make history accessible. Individually and through his American Working Class History Project (later, American Social History Project) he sought both to popularize history and to humanize it. As Berlin points out, part of the reason for his sharp attacks on Fogel's and Engerman's *Time on the Cross* was that the book had been so thoroughly hyped as the triumph of high-tech, computerized history. Gutman believed, according to Berlin, that *Time on the Cross* had "mystified a democratic art."[16] He relished his position defending that "democratic art" with but a pocket calculator, just as he enjoyed his role as a public historian attacking Daniel Patrick Moynihan and other scholar-policymakers in his writings on the Black family.

All of the above bears emphasis but it will be unexceptionable at least to Gutman's admirers. It argues that Gutman was a great historian because he was diligent, curious, broad-minded, and committed. It suggests that to emulate Gutman we should be bright, meticulous, and democratic. This is true enough but in the balance of this essay I should like to advance one further, far more controversial, reason for Gutman's strengths — one which quite complicates the manner in which we envision taking up and extending Gutman's heritage. Gutman was successful, I would argue, in large measure because he was enough a product of the Old Left to maintain a focus on power and exploitation even as he moved toward a culturally-based history.

Berlin provocatively titles this collection *Power and Culture* as an answer to those of Gutman's critics who branded Gutman soft, sentimental and nostalgic. Berlin maintains that:

> whatever else Herbert Gutman was, he was not 'soft.' Although he spoke in the language of culture, he was preoccupied with questions of power . . . the relationship between the two — power and culture — was the central theme of his work. (*Power and Culture*, viii)

The individual essays in *Power and Culture* give some support to Berlin's assess-

[15]See Gutman, "Historical Consciousness in Contemporary America," in Berlin, eds., *Power and Culture*, 411.

[16]Berlin, "Gutman and the Working Class," in *Power and Culture*, 54. Parts of Gutman's criticisms of *Time on the Cross* are reprinted in *Power and Culture* as "Enslaved Afro-Americans and the 'Protestant' Work Ethic," 298-325.

ment. "The Worker's Search for Power" is, of course, about power, though it has little sense of the extent of ruling-class power at either the state or the national level. The same can be said of "Joseph P. McDonell and the Workers' Struggle in Paterson, New Jersey." "Labor in the Land of Lincoln" and the superb "The Labor Policies of the Large Corporation in the Gilded Age: The Case of the Standard Oil Company," are tough-minded assessments of workers' self-activity and of the power of companies and even the state. The material criticizing Fogel and Engerman, especially their use of statistics on whippings, tries to make a vital point regarding power, a point that perhaps never explicitly emerged in the debates with Genovese over *Time on the Cross*. Gutman argues, implicitly at least, that not short-term profit maximizing but long-term labour and race control governed the logic of capital in the slave South.

But in other places Gutman does adopt loose and sentimental culturalist assumptions. His work on race relations within the working class, discussed above, is the worst example but essays like "A Note on Immigration History" and "Labor History and the Sartre Question" show that these tendencies in Gutman's work were not confined to racial matters. In the valuable interview with Mike Merrill in *Power and Culture*, Gutman's confused discussion of republicanism and socialism would have been greatly enriched by attention to power. Similarly, when he discusses "essentialism" and what is of lasting value in Marxism in the interview, Gutman rather softly settles for saying that Marx's theories provide "some ... very useful questions." (344)

The overall picture which emerges from Gutman's work is neither that he has the sure-handed ability to balance culture and power posited in Berlin's essay nor that he wears nostalgic blinders as charged by his critics. Instead Gutman's work, as a whole and in many individual instances, tends towards sentimentality and toward a hesitancy to confront ruling class power but never quite succumbs. He complains rather wildly that historians have shown "excessive interest" in high points of class struggle like "the Haymarket riot ... , the great strikes of 1877, the Homestead lockout and the Pullman strike." He laments that "close attention has also focused on the small crafts unions, the Knights of Labor and the early Socialists, excluding the great mass of workers who belonged to none of these groups." (70) But, in his work, Gutman constantly focused on strikes and on organized workers. He wrote fine introductions to reprints of the International Working Peoples Association's *Alarm* and to *International Socialist Review*. Under his direction the American Social History Project began the making of an award-winning film, *1877*, about the great strikes of that year.

The best example of Gutman's flirting with unedifying formulations but then transcending them in practice lies in his frequent allusion to the "Sartre question." In *Power and Culture* Jean-Paul Sartre is frequently and most approvingly quote or paraphrased as saying "The essential is not what 'one' has done to man, but what man does with what 'one' has done to him." (358 and also 58, 326-8, 346, 349) Though a clever phrasing, issues of gender and language aside, the quote shows

Sartre at far from his best. Despite the way the "Sartre question" inspired Gutman it is not even a slightly useful formulation for historians. In order to portray what "man does with what 'one' has done to him," we must, of course, know what 'one' did. Thus putting the most charitable interpretation on it, the "Sartre question" is but a convoluted and inferior phrasing of Marx's point that people make their own history but not under circumstances of their own choosing. The use of 'one' rather than "exploiting class" in Sartre's maxim is problematic and, oddly enough, the maxim subverts its own populism by seeing the oppressed as reacting within ground rules set by "one's" behaviour.

But Gutman apparently extracted from the "Sartre question" a way to balance emphases on power and on culture. He called Sartre's line a "Thompsonian formulation," referring to the work of E.P. Thompson. Thompson has consistently studied class struggle and has reminded readers that "class entails a historical relationship" which cannot be portrayed except in writings which discuss both the exploiters and the exploited.[17] The first three historians he mentions as being successful at answering the "Sartre question" are all Old Left Marxists, albeit monumentally subtle and creative ones. In praising W.E.B. DuBois's approach in *Black Reconstruction*, C.L.R. James's historical writings and the work of George Rawick, Gutman singles out historians concerned with exploring class conflict by analyzing workers' self-activity within class relationships.[18]

Gutman once said that much of the new labour history "developed out of the decomposition of classical Marxism" and that it came "out of a politics broadly associated with the redefinition of socialism." (342-3) It might be added that the best of recent historical writing — that of Rawick, Genovese, Alexander Saxton, David Montgomery, and E.P. Thompson — has succeeded because these writers retained, even internalized, Old Left problematics regarding exploitation, resistance, and class power as they made creative advances. This patterns holds to a significant extent for Gutman, who grew up in a radical family, was immersed in Popular Front causes while at Queens College, and was for a time a Communist. Berlin is on the mark in calling Gutman "very much a son of the Jewish Old Left" (7) and it may well be in this heritage as well as in his creative departures from the heritage that Gutman's work gains strength.

[17]E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1966), 9 and *passim*.

[18]On self-activity and power, see esp. George Rawick's comments in "Symposium on Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*," *Radical History Review*, 4 (Spring-Summer 1977), 87-8 and *passim*.