

raises for the biographer-historian the issue of “what life to select.” The lives of Moskowitz, Hillman, and Goldberg, he suggested, raise questions about the motives and experiences of Progressive women hired by “corporate welfare systems”; about how workers, too, like Progressive reformers, sought to “impose standards” (which for them meant union rules); and about how workers can become critical of union leadership but fiercely defend their unions and contracts. Both Stebenne and Montgomery agreed that biographies are the best route for labor historians if they want to reach the general reading public. Montgomery emphasized that in biographies the voice of workers is often left out, and he suggested that the size of the panel be doubled to include biographies from “both ends of the spectrum”—both workers and labor leaders.

The quality and number of papers presented at the meeting demonstrate that labor history continues to thrive. They raised questions about workers’ identity, what it means to be a member of the “working class,” and whether “labor history” is the history of leaders or workers. However, they often failed to consider gender, religion, and other factors which help to shape workers’ identity. Although some of the papers did rely on nontraditional sources, such as oral testimony, many of the presentations would perhaps have been enhanced by the use of sources employed in the “new cultural history”—film, music, and popular literature. Since many of the papers dealt, in some fashion, with the idea of “workers’ identity,” the use of these sources may shed further light on the cultural creation of working-class cultures. As labor history moves into the twenty-first century, and an age where “cultural studies” is becoming increasingly important, labor historians need to begin to recognize that factors other than class help to create working-class identity.

## Council for European Studies: Toward the Social and Cultural History of Capitalism

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At a conference dominated by the scholarship of political scientists, three prominent historians of modern Europe—Elisabeth Domansky, Geoff Eley, and William Sewell—gathered at a roundtable session of the Council for European Studies meeting (Chicago, March 14–17, 1996) to present

their visions of labor and working-class history. How apt that Ira Katznelson, a political scientist whose own project (often laid out in the pages of this journal) has focused on coupling the fields of political theory and labor history, should preside as commentator. A tension between disorientation and effervescence, both political and methodological, shaped the discussion of the current crisis of labor history and the political Left.

The participants agreed on the sources of the crisis in labor history. On a political and economic level, all pointed to the advent of the “new times” characterized by the decline of socialist parties and organized labor, the increasing globalization of capital, the rise of new classes and conceptions of work, and the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. In terms of method, they agreed on the ambiguous impact of what could variously be called poststructuralism, postmodernism, the linguistic turn, or cultural studies.

There was also general agreement on the intellectual genealogy of labor history since the 1960s and the effects of recent political and methodological transformations on its practice. The starting point was the move by labor historians of the 1960s away from the history of official labor organizations and toward the history of the working class. Inspired by the work of E.P. Thompson, they sought to capture working peoples’ “experience” of proletarianization.

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed crucial challenges to that version of working-class history, as well as to the political program that informed it. On the one hand, historians like Sewell, Gareth Stedman Jones, and William Reddy questioned the materialist and teleological assumptions of the proletarianization thesis and explored the idiosyncratic cultural construction of class. On the other, feminist historians challenged the male focus of much labor history, initially unearthing the history of working women and eventually emphasizing the cultural and gendered construction of class and work. For all the participants, the sum of these theoretical transformations has been a fruitful crisis that has destabilized traditional categories such as “class” and “work” and the narrative of modern European labor history implicit in the proletarianization thesis. What comes next for labor historians?

The participants offered research agendas united by the desire to undergird increasingly dominant cultural approaches with new materialist perspectives. Elisabeth Domansky called for a critique of “science, linearity, and productivism.” She argued that those regimes of knowledge and practice had consistently cut across differing modes of production in modern Europe. To Domansky, communism and liberalism may have offered distinct approaches to property relations and political representation, but they shared an ideology of productivism and technological progress. It is thus necessary to emphasize the complicity of the ideology of productivism in the violent implementation of productive systems in the modern world. Referring to the recent work of Anson Rabinbach and Tessie Liu, she

urged two directions for research: first, into the economic theories that legitimated the organization of work and production; and second, into what she called “nonproductivist” conceptions of the state and of class (for instance, in early socialist movements).

Geoff Eley recommended that labor historians begin their histories from the end: that is, from the contemporary disarray of the Left and the crisis in the “class” concept. Eley argued that “class” was a historical identity most successfully deployed by the European Left between the 1880s and the 1920s because it conformed to a particular economic and political conjuncture. What does “class” look like in the “new times”? To find out, Eley suggested that historians engage in a constant deconstruction of class in its specific historical contexts, looking beyond (though inclusive of) relations of production to other fields of life, such as popular culture and nationalism, to understand how political identities are solicited and constituted. While conceding that working people no longer understand “class” in its traditional conception, he argued that “class” was still a useful category for denoting the institutionalization of inequality as long as it encompassed the diversity of identity and fields of social life.

Sewell urged historians to construct new metanarratives now that the old one of class formation and class consciousness was discredited. He argued that the project of an exclusively “workerist” labor history had come to an end. Like the other panelists, he advanced an approach that incorporated the study of work into a broader historical field, what he called the “social and cultural history of capitalism.” That history should extend over the *longue durée* to view capitalism as “a dynamic, self-transforming system.” For Sewell, the Marx of *Capital* and *The Grundrisse* should be the guiding light for such a history because he enabled historians to see capitalism as a dynamic, destructive system constantly escaping the control of its agents and dramatically and unevenly altering work, politics, and culture.

In his comments on the other papers, Ira Katznelson called for a reconsideration of the centrality of the state in labor history and for a reexamination of the impact of liberalism in shaping the terrain of labor politics in modern Europe (see Katznelson’s similar proposal in *ILWCH* 46 [Fall 1994]). Historians should “take liberalism seriously,” for not only did it shape struggles over political and civil rights in modern Europe, but it also grappled seriously with the questions of citizenship and the state. The discussants varied in their responses to Katznelson’s invocation of liberalism. Domansky characterized the liberal project as a “dismal failure,” while Eley offered “democracy” as an analytical starting point for problematizing liberalism.

Despite these differences, the discussants were agreed on a practice of history that acknowledged the interplay of the material and cultural. Eley’s paper was an extension of his and Keith Nield’s recent affirmation of the “class” concept against Patrick Joyce’s dismissal of Marxism and material-

ism (see *Social History* 20:3 [October 1995]). Sewell noted that the cultural turn of the 1970s and 1980s can be seen in retrospect as an attack on the deterministic social science paradigms that were predominant in the western world after World War Two. Historians should claim victory in that battle, Sewell argued, and reengage with the material, physical realm of history. The distribution of wealth and the demands of work have always shaped history, but they have always done so in particular political and cultural fields.

## The Continuing Relevance of Class

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This one-day seminar, organized by the London Socialist Historians Group and the Seminar in Comparative Labour and Working Class History, took place on May 25, 1996, at the Institute of Historical Research in London. It was attended by a hundred historians, political economists, and social scientists.

Neville Kirk (Manchester Metropolitan University) gave the keynote lecture. He warned of the dangers of presentism and that the serious defeats suffered by the labor movements of the United States and Europe, the electoral victories of the Right, and the “seeming triumph” of the market have all served to trigger this tendency. Historians have a duty to reconstruct the past as accurately as possible, not to mention contemporary concerns; however, he stressed, such engagements must be based on dialogues between concept and evidence.

Though opening a conference on class, Kirk did not reject the historical importance of other categories of identity, especially race and gender. He agreed with Dorothy Thompson that any adequate study of identity involves the most careful attention to language. He shared David Roediger’s view, however, that “debates about whether to give priority to race or class necessarily lead to a zero-sum game and dead-end debates whereby an increasing emphasis on one variable leads inexorably to a diminished emphasis on the other.” In fact, according to Kirk, an engagement with the full complexities of the evidence can demonstrate that, in certain contexts and over stipulated periods of time, one form of identity can take precedence over others.

Kirk illustrated his claims primarily by exploring the increasing attack on the centrality of class in studies of British Chartism—in particular, revisionist “linguistic” interpretations of mid-nineteenth-century En-