Introduction

Eric Schocket

Readers unfamiliar with the particular tenacity of American exceptionalism may be surprised to learn that “working-class studies” was only institutionalized in the United States at Youngstown State University in 1993, almost a century after Engels’s *Condition of the Working Class in England* was published in English, and a generation after similar academic formations gained a foothold in European institutions. Stranger still, in retrospect, was this field’s inception before the United Parcel Service strike and the upsurge in the antiglobalization movement, when union membership was rapidly declining and much of the labor left seemed ready to follow Clinton into what would become an era of tremendous economic stratification. These dark years proved, however, to be an auspicious time for the renewal of lapsed alliances between labor and the academy. The fall of the Berlin Wall made political divisions on the Left seem less critical, while the proletarianization of labor processes within universities brought class into the classroom in a manner unanticipated even by those New Left intellectuals who had been agitating for its reconsideration since the 1960s and early 1970s. If the institutionalization of working-class studies and the move to reconsider class within fields as various as literature, history, economics, and geography thus bespeak a certain amount of anxious self-reflection in the face of increasing university corporatism, it could hardly be otherwise. The field’s late emergence into the postindustrial, “new” economy ensured that the division of labor would occupy the foreground and that the project of forging solidarity, real or symbolic, between mental and manual laborers would fundamentally structure its various endeavors.

One sees evidence of this foundational problematic even in the topography of Youngstown, where working-class studies scholars meet every two years to discuss labor organizations and labor culture in resplendent buildings that look out over the now wasted landscape of the once industrial Mahoning Valley. The organizers of the Youngstown program succeed, to a remarkable degree, in integrating members of the community and local labor organizations in these proceedings. But this heightens rather than dispels the questions and tensions that must, perhaps, infuse any academic/labor alliance. What does it mean to study the working class? Or to reveal this concern in its more local manifestation, what does it mean to teach working-class studies to the children of steelworkers in a city where working-class consciousness has been radically altered now that entry-level jobs are primarily in the service industry and the prison-industrial complex? Perhaps this is merely to restate, in more specific language, the tensions that now pervade many fields in the humanities and social sciences—the realization that “objectivity” is never objective, that pedagogy is always political, and that the relation between the scholar and the subject of his or
her study always structures the inquiry itself. But if this is the case, these tensions come to the fore in working-class studies with a material urgency that is always palpable even when it is not specifically theorized. The issue is one of tone as well as methodology: How to make nostalgic and elegiac evocations of a working-class past pertinent in the present? how to structurally articulate the project of cultural “recovery” (a major mode in this field) with the radical visions that drive many, if not most, of its practitioners?

The diverse traditions of Marxism do, of course, provide an entry point for these issues, theorizing variously the relationship between intellectuals and the working class, the role of radical organizations, the specifics of a radical pedagogy, and the epistemological problematic of the subject/object relationship. But Marxism hardly predominates within working-class studies. At most, the main currents of this field share the version of neo-Gramscianism now popular within American cultural studies, which, from a more Marxian perspective, often underestimates the circumscriptions of material relations in its celebrations of “cultural resistance.” Much has been said already of this recent turn toward “culturalism” within left academic circles, and of its connections to postmodernism and to a post–cold war intellectual formation that eschews earlier investments in totality and political teleology. And much could be done to link this trend to working-class studies. For present purposes, however, this field’s relationship to the more specific discourse of multiculturalism most deserves note for, within the space of working-class studies, the lines between Marxism and post-Marxism are not nearly so significant as lines between Marxism and the identitarian precepts that link agency to cultural positionality. These precepts build upon a tradition of labor populism in the United States that has long been hostile to what it sees as the systematic abstractions of Marxian class analysis. Here the tradition emerges newly reinforced by broad multicultural inducements to weave the story of labor into the “mosaic” that is “the American experience.”

Multiculturalism has, certainly, opened up a valuable space within the academy for consideration of the working class as a fundamental part of any capitalist formation, but this space is not without its own, attendant contradictions. In its infancy, Youngstown’s Center for Working-Class Studies received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities after pointedly asking in its proposal, “Will the working class be invited to the diversity banquet?” Though this gesture uses a nice bit of realpolitik to broaden the space of liberal pluralism, its rhetorical alignment of class with race and gender proceeds from several assumptions—principally that class, race, and gender share the same ontological status and thus found analogous projects of recovery and affirmation. But what does it mean to affirm class—to understand it as an aspect of diversity when it names, even in its least radical usage, an unequal economic relationship? And what, more pointedly, does it do the project of socialism which takes as its goal not the affirmation but the eradication of this particular aspect of “difference”?

The essays and comments that follow (which were first presented at the Center’s May 2001 Conference) approach these issues from a number of perspectives. As each
articulates its own assessment of the relationship between Marxism and working-class studies, each helps to shape an ongoing discussion of issues central to this developing field. One common concern, which suggestively distills most of the various aforementioned problems, is the issue of language. What is the appropriate lexicon for this field? Are the terms that Marxists regularly use—exploitation, surplus-value, wage-labor, alienation—invaluable tools for social analysis? Or are they inappropriately abstract, overly intellectual, and distancing? To some extent, this is the current mode through which the Marxism/cultural identity argument is articulated, a mode that revisits the debate between Althusserians and the cultural Marxism of E. P. Thompson. But whereas that was a debate about agency and causality, this is a debate about direction and strategy. At issue, most fundamentally, is whether or not working-class studies wants to honor, eulogize, or supersede the subject of its own inquiry.

Ten Propositions on the Role Played by Marxism in Working-Class Studies

Barbara Foley

As my contribution to today’s symposium, I’d like to advance ten propositions about the role Marxism can play in the project of working-class studies. I am well aware that these propositions rest at the level of assertion and require demonstration through logic and evidence.

(1) Marxism holds that class is a social relation of production, not—or at least not primarily—a subject position. Although membership in the working class may give rise to various modes of identity, the working class is defined as a class through the process of exploitation—that is, the unequal exchange of wages for labor-power that results in the production of surplus-value. The working class consists of wage slaves. While such terms as “domination” and “oppression” may adequately define various features of the experience of inhabiting a society structured along class lines—especially for women and workers of color—“exploitation” is the principal engine driving the antagonism between what Marx called the “two great warring classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat.” The class struggle goes on every day and will continue
to go on until exploitation, class hierarchy, money, and divisions between mental and manual labor are abolished. Working-class studies should do all it can to hasten, and assist in, the abolition of wage slavery.

(2) The principal need of the working class, according to Marxism, is to be able to understand, analyze, and act upon the totality that is the social formation. To examine—even valorize—the experience of being in the working class does not necessarily produce a revolutionary understanding of the working class as a group that will fulfill itself only by abolishing itself. Working-class studies should be, properly, class studies. The proletariat needs to understand not only its own variegated subjectivities—as both means and barriers to emancipation—but also those constituting the ruling class, as well as the nature of the objective necessity—capitalism—that dialectically binds the “two great warring classes” to one another. If working-class studies features experience rather than structural position as definitive of working classness, it aids and abets the obfuscation of the class relations it should be seeking to negate and supersede.

(3) Marxism proposes that the study of culture (or cultures) cannot be separated from the study of ideology. Working-class studies need not be bound to a single definition of ideology. At some times the notion of interpellation is required to describe the relatively autonomous ways in which ruling-class hegemony is structurally replicated. At other times the more purposive notion of ideology as social control mechanism is required. At other times, more neutrally still, ideology is the zone of thought, doctrine, and attitude in which the class struggle fights itself out. While “culture” may not be identical with ideology, it is bathed in ideology. Marxism asserts, moreover, that the dominant ideologies in any social formation will be those advancing the imperatives of the ruling class. Hence it is crucial for working-class studies to avoid the pitfalls of a culturalism that celebrates working-class culture as comprising discourses that subvert, oppose, or resist elite hegemony. It is thus at our peril that we allow the category of “discourse” to supplant that of “ideology.” It is also at our peril that we jettison the much-abused category of false consciousness, which remains indispensable, in my view, to the analysis of literature and culture.

(4) Implicit in all the above, Marxism teaches that there is indeed a ruling class and that this class exercises state power, through both the repressive and the ideological state apparatuses, to ensure its reign. To propose this paradigm is not to embrace a crudely conspiratorial notion of ideological control: except in times of crisis, ruling classes benefit more from capitalism’s structural replication of bourgeois ideology than from any purposive interventions to shape mass consciousness. But if working-class studies bears in mind that the top ½ percent of the U.S. population owns and/or controls more than half the nation’s wealth, and that the interests of rulers and workers are antagonistically opposed, it is positioned to construct analytical paradigms very different from those based upon such non-class-based notions as power/knowledge, corporate dominance, neoliberalism, or globalization. While the
theoretical approaches implied by these terms do not preclude consideration of class rule, they often separate the state from the zone of the “economic,” reconfigure exploitation as the unfair distribution of wealth, or simply dissolve the political into the discursive. Marxism, by contrast, insists that there is a ruling class that sees itself as a ruling class and that (albeit by varying ideological stratagems) both rationalizes and defends its position of advantage.

(5) Marxism demonstrates that racism and capitalism go hand in hand. As both ideology and material practice, racism—based upon the false notion of “race”—functions to superexploit workers of color and immigrants, deepen the exploitation of white and native-born workers, and above all prevent the working class from attaining the class-conscious unity needed to combat its antagonists. Marxism proposes that the single most urgent project facing the multiethnic and multiracial proletariat is to combat racism. It also proposes, however, that for white workers to do so is not a matter of relinquishing “white skin privilege,” a doctrine based upon the false notion that differential treatment equals benefit. Fighting racism is a matter not of missionary guilt but of class survival.

(6) Marxism is resolutely internationalist, and thus proposes that any working-class studies project that is nation-based needs to be wary of exceptionalist doctrines of any kind. That the working classes of different nations have been and are still differentially inserted into the network of global imperialism does not mean that the similarities in their positions are outweighed by the difference, although a reified view of “culture” and “difference” runs the risk of proposing the opposite. Moreover, Marxism’s analysis of imperialism urges us to keep in view the antagonistic and competitive nature of nation-based capitals and, contra various theories of globalisation, to realize that the sons and daughters of the working class who sit in our classes will sooner or later be cannon fodder in the next imperialist incursion undertaken by the U.S. ruling class.

(7) Marxism theorizes sexism as integral to capitalism (indeed, all forms of class society) and proposes that women will truly be the “equals” of men only when wages are abolished and all socially necessary labor (including the immense amount of currently unwaged labor performed in the home) is recognized as being of equivalent value. Working-class studies undertaken from a Marxist perspective features the centrality of women’s work to capitalism—in the wage-labor market, the informal economy, and the domestic sphere—as well as the ideologies that at once justify and render invisible women workers’ superexploitation. Marxism also stresses that the psychological and material “benefits” accruing to working-class men through sexist practices are largely illusory, and that men have immeasurably more to gain than lose through the emancipation of women in an egalitarian society.

(8) Examining all institutions in capitalist society as part of the ideological state apparatus, Marxism cautions those of us who teach in colleges and universities to have few illusions about higher education as a site for transformative pedagogy. The purpose of higher education under capitalism is to ensure the continuation of class
stratification and exploitation. Colleges and universities are above all ideology factories—from the humblest vocational programs in community colleges to the most exalted study of liberal arts in the Ivies. Even the most paradigm-shattering pedagogy thus occurs within a context of hierarchical and authoritarian social relations that divests what we do in the classroom of about 90 percent of its radical effect. Indeed, our very existence in the classroom of the bourgeois college or university can be taken as testimony to the virtues of capitalist pluralism and democracy. Teachers of working-class studies should of course do all that we can to learn from our students on the one hand and bring to them the totality of class relations on the other. Marxism reminds us, however, that we can have a truly revolutionary impact on our students only if we get to know them—and work alongside them—in class struggles outside of the classroom.

(9) Marxism brings to working-class studies an awareness of the continuing centrality of anticommunism to the paradigms guiding inquiry in the social sciences and the humanities. During the era of the cold war, the role played by anticommunism in discussions of class in the United States was fairly explicit. Even before the fall of the USSR, however, anticommunism had gone into the cultural ground water as the antipathy to totality; indeed, to this day “totalization” carries for many the overtones of “totalitarianism.” Whether articulated as the critique of “phallogocentrism,” “Western rationalism,” or “class reductionism,” however, anticommunism continues to function epistemologically in the a priori rejection of any form of comprehensive structural analysis that guides much current theorizing about class. Indeed, this hostility to totality is a given in the turn “against theory” that currently claims the local and conjunctural as the proper sphere of working-class studies, even as flexible accumulation has rendered the reality of capitalist social relations more cruel, yet more opaque, than ever before.

(10) Finally, it needs to be stated that the Marxism that would aspire to guide working-class studies in the direction of revolutionary critique, as outlined here, will need to be as critical of its own history as it is of any bourgeois tendencies in the alternative versions of working-class studies with which it enters into debate. The task of revolutionary Marxists is made immensely difficult in the current historical moment not because, in the course of the twentieth century, capitalism defeated communism, but because attempts to build socialism came apart through their own internal contradictions. The immense cynicism expressed by many workers about the possibility of transforming society in an egalitarian direction cannot primarily be attributed to the success of capitalist propaganda. Rather, it has been the tragic errors of communists (the embrace of productive forces determinism, the elevation of nationalism over internationalism, the cult of personality, to name just a few) that have resulted in the current impasse. Twenty-first-century Marxism needs to rebuild the fight for communism from the ground up. Twenty-first-century working-class studies should contribute to, rather than impede, this project.
In “‘The Special American Conditions’: Marxism and American Studies,” an important piece heralding *The Cultural Front* (1996), Michael Denning wrote of American studies’ regal image. Zeroing in on these “anti-Marxist American exceptionalists” who trumpeted the American myth of classlessness, he prophesied the rapprochement between labor studies scholars and Marxist scholars that to some extent has occurred in the years between the article and *The Cultural Front* itself. Denning’s Marxism was composed of four categories: the concept of dialectics, a materialist concept of history, a critique of capitalism, and a belief in social transformation. Paying special heed to the last two categories, he posited that America’s peculiar brand of capital formation was powered by the disenfranchisement of racial and ethnic minorities as well as women. The selective denial of racial empowerment, much less upward mobility, demonstrated the very limits of orthodox Marxism in American studies (Denning 1986).

These are exciting times for an inquiry into the utility of Marxism within the realm of working-class studies; there Barbara Foley and I definitely agree. In a broad sense, all such studies uphold one or another form of Marxism. Alliances between intellectuals and workers are occurring, at least on the publicity level, between left-leaning academics and the scions of the Central Labor Councils, AFL-CIO, and established “business unions” of the United Auto Workers (albeit more unorthodox locals like New York City’s 2110, representing Museum of Modern Art workers). Single women of color, many of them poor mothers, make $28,000 as clerical workers while their employer, in a Jay Gould-like way, amasses more millions. In some recent strikes, including a highly visible one at New York University, they have received support from student groups.

There is, though, a difficulty in redefining the struggles of these and similar workers in the developed world and to effect what Sumner Rosen (2000) calls “endless and creative engagement with existing institutions.” Again quoting Rosen, “a plausible alternative to the mantras of freedom of capital” remains problematic both in and outside the working-class studies community. For one thing, we must return to Denning’s allusion to the hegemony in the old American studies community (which included Marxists and non-Marxists alike) of the American exceptionalism trope. Leon Fink, I think, has provocatively summed up the problem.

New Marxists need to explore the ways in which radical political parties and oppositional movements in U.S. labor history have imperfectly understood organic ethnic and class angers, cultural radicalisms, and utopian aspirations in America. To ask how these parties and movements might have attained power is less important
than to ask what they might have done better to understand the grass-roots interests and aspirations on which these parties and movements relied (Fink 1994).

Let us return briefly to the above-mentioned alliances, admittedly only a segment of labor activity in 2001, and focus on an organization like the Workers’ Rights Consortium. Taken up by some U.S. colleges and universities, the Workers’ Rights Consortium brings together Students against Sweatshops and verifying agencies backed by labor interests to police oppressive labor venues in the garment trades of the United States. Much of the rhetoric of and thinking behind such an organization aims at identifying graduate students as workers, exposing unfair labor practices, forging an inter-“trade” sense of entitlement in the university community, and unionizing campuses. Students in both the undergraduate and graduate schools often spearhead campaigns to help janitorial, cafeteria, and clerical staff by appealing to segments of the university community whose attention the campus rank and file cannot attract. While there are organizing sessions with the workers or their representatives, college students themselves enlist the college newspaper, the campus rallying places and kiosks, and other public forums. Articles attempting to awaken the privileged constituencies of the tuition-paying gather statistics often embarrassing to the administration and expose unfair labor practices in Ivy League and “red brick” venues.

The alliance students decide to forge with labor, however, is often a tentative or transient one. Their tactics work best as support for striking workers themselves. Thus, a few years back students joined the “blue collar” at New York University and pressured it to allow stewards time to leaflet, to stop its thuggish tactics on behalf of the corporate university, and to implement for its various workers a closed rather than an agency shop in which union membership is not required (Teach-in 2000).1 The power of unionism, in sum, to combat the corporate and commercial viewpoint may well be a point of entry for those seeking critiques of capitalism and social transformation.

I’d like to turn very briefly to my own (sub)field of inquiry, the U.S. sweatshop past and present—its epistemology, iconography, narrative representations, and stifled voices. Shaping a canon of working-class or, in this case, sweatshop studies would mean articulating a viable Marxism for the oppressed, invisible sweatshop workers whom established unions like UNITE can aid only in garnering back pay or improving their English and sewing skills or treating with immigration lawyers. Sweatshop studies would also tread on the toes of organized labor, which has recently come out in support of “illegal” garment workers in this country. The “male and pale” union hierarchy and the minority women of color who comprise/compose the garment trades seem not to be constituencies that meet anywhere at or away from bargaining tables. A new approach to the sweatshop rank and file would mean balancing the way in which, as Dan Bender (1999) remarks, antisweatshop activity is still ratifying capitalism by seeking change from within. Since workers’ rights are routinely violated

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1. On 1 March 2001, New York University capitulated to its graduate students and agreed to a union on the eve of a strike authorization vote. The local will be part of the United Auto Workers. While unionized, however, clerical staff at the university have not fared well in salary demands.
in the United States, Human Rights Watch reports might well be included in readings on U.S. sweatshops. (Let us remember El Monte, California [Blumberg 1999; Mrosak 1996]). The fallacy of offshore and illegal aliens needs to be considered: i.e., that wages in the undeveloped world are below par while those in Los Angeles or Chinatown are enough to live on and the parallel assertion that most U.S. sweatshop workers are illegal aliens.

The issue phrased another way is how to shift the discourse of sweatshops away from the extremes of the rich and poor and to study instead how sweatshop workers and well-paid but hardly self-employed or managerial trade unionists have no authority over the pace and content of their work. Most poor people are workers, but so-called working families or middle-class workers also are feeling the fact that they make almost 20 percent less per hour today than in 1972 (Zweig 2000). Working people are not, then, prospering in the last twenty years despite the hype, but the anger has been redirected against the poor and to some extent against unions and foreigners. A sweatshop studies canon would explore to what extent imaginative and overtly “political” literature chronicling the 150 years of the U.S. sweating system experience shares in the reluctance to engage in anything resembling class warfare. It would engage, again in Zweig’s terms, “what strategies have been deployed” against a Marxist ideology “to redirect that conflict” (2000, 3). What unfair labor practices, in particular, committed by employers, have deflected attention from the sweatshop as an oppressive class site to the illegality of migrants?

In closing, though, I’d like to suggest some of the problems involved for working-class studies scholars of every stripe—whether sympathetic to socialism or disbelieving in it—in overturning America’s cherished myth of self-transformation. In rebutting American exceptionalism, we need to separate object from biography in order to avoid dismissing artists too quickly. Let us look for an American radicalism every bit as revolutionary, say, as Gladkov in his 1920s Proletkult novel Cement. But let us do so by understanding that, as Americanists, we need to understand the power of tropes such as the loner, the open road, the search for community, the distrust of factory life, even the construction of the immigrant as Other. Is taking Lewis Hine to task as a “tool” of the liberal Pittsburgh Survey of the Progressive Era realistic in assessing what else a committed social documentary photographer of slavelike child labor in mills and mines could have done or been (Sekula 1975)? How different, after all, is today’s Hine, Sebastio Salgado? And why cannot we factor in the politics of such creators of an urban mythology of industrial photography as the devotedly leftist Ben Shahn? Is not his radical heritage as much an informing principle as his visual talent for his spiritual heirs like Robert Bourdeau, James Gedney, Mel Rosenthal, Danny Lyon, Bill Owens, and Bruce Davidson? Their contributions

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2. On 2 August 1995, the American press reported on the discovery of a sweatshop apartment complex in El Monte, California, both poorly housing and exploiting seventy-two Thai workers imprisoned for seven years. These garment workers had been making garments for some of the top U.S. manufacturers and retail stores. When the workers were released from their industrial captivity, court cases ensued in which they had by 1996 claimed some modest financial victories (Su 1997).
to working-class studies are surely more important than their stated legacies as artists of or apparent indifference to the Marxist mode.

Such photodocumentarians, furthermore, swell the new ranks of sweatshop studies and the larger field of American labor studies. Observes Kathy Frederickson (2000) of this new history from the bottom up, it can only “help us better contextualize our individual and collective relationships to labor—as sweating participants, as privileged spectators, as students of cultural history, as advocates for reform, as thoughtful scions of toilers intent on recovering and dignifying our forbearers’ alienated labor.”

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**Working Class, Middle Class, and Marxists**

*Jack Metzgar*

I am, I think, still a Marxist—in terms of method, certainly, but still in many of the premises of my thinking as well. But I’m now a solid social democrat, which in the United States means a “liberal Democrat,” and in politics, there’s not a dime’s worth of difference between me and my Congressman, Danny Davis, or Barney Frank or Dick Gephardt, for that matter—at least in terms of program, if not method.

My main point in this symposium is that Marxism is not very relevant to working-class studies, and in some ways I fear it as a potential liability.

I teach working adults at an urban commuter university. And I can’t talk to my students in the kind of language that’s in Barbara’s ten theses. Worse, I concluded long ago that I can’t listen to them in that language. Marxist terms and categories allow you to talk about and think about the working class while having no direct experience of the dizzying diversity of actually existing working-class life. There’s a powerful strength to that, but it’s also a liability.

Still, so much of Marxism has been incorporated within the American academy and within progressive thinking generally that, for the present at least, I feel like I can take a lot of the best of Marxism for granted—and I sort of count on that.

The very broadest sense of Marx’s class analysis is still highly relevant today—that American society, and increasingly the global economy, are organized by the relation between free wage-labor and capital. And a Marx-informed or— influenced understanding of capitalism is crucial to any understanding of our current reality. In
class terms, there are still but two great classes, labor and capital, and all of us who depend on wages and salaries are clearly part of labor—and this is truer now than it was when Marx was alive, and truer than fifty years after his death.

That is fundamental as background or framework, but it doesn’t take us very far in understanding our current reality. There are different forms of free wage-labor, and the most important difference now, one that Marx never envisioned, is the sheer size and cultural/political power of the professional middle class—which I would argue is the culturally dominant class in our society.

Working-class studies is located at the juncture of the professional middle class and the working class, and that’s where I think it should stay. As academics we earn our wages by producing and reproducing the managerial and professional class, of which we ourselves are part. But because of our backgrounds, the kinds of students we teach, or our political or ideological beliefs, many of us attempt to be for and/or with the working class. But we are not ourselves “working class,” and, in my view, we need to understand ourselves better as a class—that is, our class position in a modern capitalist society.

We are, in my view, the twenty-first-century version of a petty bourgeoisie, as Marx and Lenin and many of the best Marxist thinkers were in those other centuries. And it is a complicated class position. Let me illustrate with a story, and then a quote from Marx about Proudhon.

In the fall of 1998, you may remember, there were a couple weeks when even the business press feared a global financial collapse that could lead to an old-fashioned capitalist crisis of the sort that Marxists like me had been hoping for for most of our lives. During those weeks, I was discussing the situation with two Marxist economists who had been colleagues in both academia and activism over a couple of decades. We feared, rather than hoped for, the collapse. As we talked, we awkwardly acknowledged that we were no longer prepared to think or to act on “the worse, the better.” Indeed, most of our activism, journalism, and scholarship over the previous twenty years (in the antishutdown movement in the 1980s and among low-wage workers after that) had been dedicated to trying to keep the worse from getting even worse. And we were no longer prepared to see the kind of suffering working people would experience in such a collapse or to believe that that suffering would or could lead to a cooperative commonwealth. But we also acknowledged what a collapse would mean for us—most importantly, what it would do to our TIAA-CREF pensions, which had run up during the 1990s in a way that might allow us to retire early. A financial collapse would threaten, and probably eliminate, that possibility. Because of our shared focus on what was happening in working-class life over the past twenty and thirty years, we were also particularly aware of our increasingly privileged position as middle-class professionals in American society—the amazing material and status progress we had made since the early 1980s as working-class life and power deteriorated so substantially—and we feared losing the freedom that this privilege allowed us in living our lives.
Unlike the nineteenth-century petty bourgeois, we are free wage-labor but we are tied to the capitalist class in a way they were not, both in our profession and in our ownership of capital through our pension plans. We are both workers and not workers at all.

In a letter to Annenkov in 1846 (which is usually published as an appendix to *The Poverty of Philosophy*), Marx captured some of our essential nature, I think (in the gendered language of the Victorian household patriarch that, of course, he was): “[T]he petty bourgeois is necessarily from his very position [in society] . . . dazed by the magnificence of the big bourgeoisie and has sympathy for the sufferings of the people. He is at once both bourgeois and man of the people. Deep down in his heart he flatters himself that he is impartial and has found the right equilibrium . . . [but] contradiction is the basis of his existence. He is himself nothing but social contradiction in action” (1967, 193).

Our class, the professional middle class, seems at the moment to be particularly “dazed” by the glories of capital, exhibiting less bad conscience about working for the powerful than I can remember in my lifetime. But scratch the surface, and there is also a worker—who has been passed over, or bullied and intimidated by her boss, or simply is not paid enough—and someone who is spontaneously sympathetic, even outraged, at “the sufferings of the people.”

One of the goals of working-class studies should be to maintain and heighten the contradictory nature of our class, and I suspect most of us here, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, do that on a regular basis. But we also need to understand ourselves better as a class, a class with interests and values and with a culture that is different from, but by no means better than, that of the working class. Only through a comparative, self-reflective, dialectical method can we understand the actually existing working class, not some figment of the petty bourgeois imagination. In doing so, I think we need to aspire to a cross-class dialogue, not the kind of know-it-all, patronizing, imperial attitude that is characteristic of our class, Marxist and non-Marxist alike, and which is a particular occupational hazard of teachers, in any case.

Marxism, so far as I can see, is of little help in such an undertaking, whereas the messy diversity of working-class studies in the Youngstown mode, with its emphasis on the lived experience and memory of actually existing workers, nurtures it. Calling ourselves “petty bourgeois” (with its traditionally negative connotations) and understanding ourselves as part (and an important part) of a professional middle class that is far from culturally and politically powerless can help us, I think, cultivate a more modest and more accurate self-understanding. And that could even prepare us, as at least a substantial fragment of our class, to be more worthy of a great cross-class alliance that can tame or limit or at least consistently resist the overweening power of capital. In that endeavor, I would want Marxism to be a part, but in principle it cannot and must not be the whole. The working class itself must have its say.
Marxism’s traditional opposition to nationalism and support for proletarian internationalism reflects its resistance to capitalism’s efforts to enforce worker identification with the borders of the state in place of their solidarity with each other. Understanding these concepts from a Marxist perspective suggests that the first step toward working-class emancipation is the recognition by workers that they must lose, not gain their “identity” and identification with capitalism, nationalism, imperialism, and other capitalist processes. Only by losing this identity and identification, that is, may they attain both their class consciousness and their awareness of each other as global comrades in a globalized world.

This Marxist lesson bears on working-class studies as it simultaneously seeks its own academic ‘identity’ and aspires to represent the interests of working-class people. Both working-class studies and working-class people, that is, face a similar problem: how to escape their identification with systems of capitalist domination (the university, the corporation, the factory, the bosses) while creating an alternative to these. To do so, working-class studies and working-class people need to do something difficult—that is, refuse to accept the premises (or what we might call the material ground) of their own existence under capitalism. Luckily, Marxism had an answer for that, too, called Communism.

Yet, Communism is what working-class people in the United States have historically often been taught to fear. This raises the question of how easily working-class studies and Marxism itself can coexist, particularly in the United States. The answer thus far, I think, is: very uneasily. Working-class studies has accepted and promoted several premises about the working-class that might be called anti-Marxist and anti-communist: first, that the category ‘working-class’ is primarily understood as an ‘identity’ and identification (be it as individual or group) rather than as a product of exploitive capitalist social relations; second, that working-class studies as a project is meant to understand, rather than change, the social relations of capitalism under which it labors; third, that national boundaries and borders should be understood as aspects of working-class identity rather than attacked as tools of capitalist profiteering and working-class division; fourth, that the university is a generally hospitable place for people to learn about class relations and their own place within them.

These anti-Marxist assumptions have the potential to place unnecessary limits, or borders, around working-class studies in ways that precisely mirror the limits, and borders, commonly placed by capitalism on the working class. I am thinking, by example, of the anticommmunism that contributed to the formation of the contemporary Western academy, including cold war–era academic disciplines like American
studies, labor studies, and even ethnic studies. By largely effacing, eliding, or erasing Marxian categories of ideology, interpellation, and class struggle, each of these academic disciplines reflected at their inceptions variations on traditional American exceptionalism. The most salient features of this exceptionalism included an emphasis on pluralist or populist models of both “identity” and class discourse, a narrow focus on U.S. politics and culture, and overt or tacit protections against Marxian critiques of capitalism, particularly in the United States. Ironically, working-class studies has thus far posited its own disciplinary creation narrative in juxtaposition to some features of this exceptionalism, pointing out the recurring erasure of class in some areas of U.S. academic discussions, while reiterating many of the same analytical tendencies that led to this erasure in the first place. This has had a particularly limiting effect, I think, on discussions of race and ethnicity within working-class studies. Several of the texts claiming to be, or claimed to be “foundational” of the field have attempted to villainize, for example, various racial or ethnically based social movements in U.S. history (African American and Latino/Chicano, for instance) as anti-theoretical to or preemptive of the formation of “working-class studies” or “working-class identity” in the United States. A Marxian analysis of these movements would recognize and delineate their working-class—and often quite radical—character, while carefully analyzing political question in these movements that may indeed have made them partially constituent of “borders” between working-class citizens. Failure to do this careful class analysis exposes working-class studies to accusations of what other Left scholars have called “white identity politics.”

Indeed I would argue that more, not less Marxist analyses and methods would help working-class studies realize the negation of academic and disciplinary boundaries that threaten its own “solidarity” with other multiracial, antiracist, internationally minded movements inside and outside the academy. It is inspiring to see speakers at this year’s conference addressing workers and working conditions in Western Europe and at the U.S.-Latin American border, and to see panels dedicated to political and cultural forms of internationalism; yet too rarely discussed in books, articles, and conferences in what now constitutes working-class studies is the ongoing exploitation of workers in China, Latin and Central America, Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. Likewise, the vast body of writing on these areas of the world, much of it Marxist in outlook and methodology, has been too often excluded from reading lists and bibliographies that have been put forward as attempts to define the discipline of working-class studies. The elision of critical work by Saskia Sassen, Gayatri Spivak, and Winston James or the creative writings of Ding Ling, Ama Ata Aidoo, or Paule Marshall—itself often construed as “postcolonial studies,” indicates the capitalist (or accumulationist) power of academic disciplinary formation itself, throwing up racial, temporal, and otherwise conceptual “borders” between teachers and workers committed, in some way, shape, or form, to the “study” (or liberation) of the working class. Working-class studies, because it is so potentially important, should lead the attempt to overcome this kind of destructive, anti-working class sectarianism.
The goal of such a fight, I think, is to create and maintain a working-class studies flexible and durable enough to keep pace with the attacks on working people taking place simultaneously around the world. Since time is short, I will use that which remains to me today to recommend two recent projects that I think, used appropriately by those of us in the field, can help this cause along: one from the contemporary world of academe, one from the contemporary world or working-class struggle. In their book *The Many-Headed Hydra* (2000), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Redliker take us backward and forward to tell the story of what we now call globalization and its discontents. Linebaugh and Redliker remind us that both Adam Smith and Karl Marx, capitalism’s alpha and omega, posited the social division of labor under capitalism as a “Herculean enterprise” meant to cripple workers and divide them race against race. Instead, they show how workers, sailors, and commoners black, white, red, and brown—conforming to what Marx called a “motley pattern”—created their own multiracial resistance to and attack on capitalism across the Atlantic. Their figure of this motley crew is itself a glorious figure of capitalist disidentification: the proletariat is the “many-headed hydra” of Greek myth which literally imagines itself as beyond the boundaries, borders, and disciplines of capitalist subjectivity. Its monstrous deformation of identity is the promise of its liberation.

Likewise, in the past decade in Mexico, Subcommander Marcos and the Zapatista rebels have provided us with both real and rhetorical models of revolutionary working-class praxis that attempt to undermine capitalist discipline and its identities about which I speak today. In 1994, prior to the Zapatistas’ carefully crafted interventions on behalf of striking *Duro maquilora* workers and their negotiations with new Mexican President Vicente Fox, Subcommander Marcos defined his own Zapatista “identity” in a manner reminiscent of the labors of the Atlantic’s motley crew. In a postscript to one of his CCR1-GG communiqués, Marcos, as a kind of author to his own revolutionary book, described his literary alter ego El Sup as

- gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, Chicano in San Isidro, Anarchist in Spain, Palestinian in Israel, indigenous in the streets of San Cristobal, . . . Jew in Germany . . . Communist in the post–Cold War era, prisoner in Cintalapa, pacifist in Bosnia . . . Mapuche in the Andes . . . artist without gallery or portfolio, housewife on any given Saturday night in any neighborhood of any city of any Mexico, guerrillem in Mexico at the end of the twentieth century, striker in the CTM . . . campesino without land, fringe editor, unemployed worker, doctor without a practice, rebellious student, dissident in neoliberalism, writer without books or readers, and, to be sure, Zapatista in the Mexican Southeast. (Marcos 1995, 214)

Marcos’s is an interdisciplinary and antidisciplinary identity that is many-headed, internationalist, and impossible to, well, discipline. It is both dialectical and a negative dialectic that refuses to give a center to either the international working class or

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1. I am grateful to Ben Olguin (n.d.) for providing this citation in his very fine essay, “Of Truth, Secrets and Ski Masks.”
working-class studies, while insisting that both are vital, central, and alive. Yet it is so only when it refuses to claim itself, speak itself, as belonging, only when it seeks to overthrow what could be its own national and political borders: only, in short, when it is revolutionary. Thus I conclude optimistically that a many-headed Marxism itself should be at the center of working-class studies in order that it might proclaim of itself and the working class it seeks to serve: Workers and working-class studies scholars of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your identities!

The Place of Marx in Class Studies

Michael Zweig

The subject we are exploring is the place of Marx in class studies, which is not at all the same as the place of class in Marxist studies. This distinction in the focal point of our work helps us to sort through a number of contentious issues, including the nature of language, or jargon, appropriate for our work.

Starting with the problem of class, we have to say that class is a central feature of society—of modern society and society since the most primitive. That is just a fact. To understand class, then, we must investigate society, which is where Marx enters the picture.

I teach a course in Marx in the economics department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. I start off trying to explain to the students who are there because it fits into their schedule, or because they have to take one more upper-division economics class, or because they’re interested, how they’re going to explain to their Aunt Sadie and Uncle Roy that they’re actually taking a class in Marx. “What is this? Don’t you know Marxism is finished—that it’s a throwback to the nineteenth century? Get with the times, child, and go out and become a stockbroker.”

I start out on the very first day of class by putting four names on the blackboard: Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Marx. I don’t think that you can understand the mind unless you go through Freud. I don’t think you can understand the natural world unless you go through Darwin. I don’t think you can understand the physical world unless you go through Einstein. And in the same way I don’t think you can understand society unless you go through Marx. Of course, this doesn’t mean that everything these

great thinkers thought was correct or that they are the only great thinkers. Nor does it mean that their thinking was comprehensive and all we need to know. But it does mean that you can’t understand society, not just class, unless you understand Marx.

On the other hand, when I wrote *The Working Class Majority* (Zweig 2000), which I tried to root in a Marxist understanding, I didn’t use Marxist terminology. The name of Marx appears only in the introduction to give homage to a person whom anyone who thinks about class has to acknowledge. After that, it was time to move on and talk about class, not Marx. That again brings us back to what is really the subject matter that we’re trying to explicate.

I want to go back and forth in these remarks between the discussion of class and the discussion of Marx. Marxism is extremely limited and primitive. It has been stunted and crushed because Marx deals with something very central: power. When you start talking about power, particularly class power, you’re dealing in serious matters and people get excited pretty quickly. And if you’re not on the wavelength of people with power, using these categories can get you into trouble. Historically, Marxist study of society, the knowledge and development of Marx’s ideas, have been systematically suppressed. In the capitalist world, it is obviously threatening to the capitalists. But, if we look in the socialist world, in the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, I think we’ll also find that the study of Marx was stunted and subverted to the political needs of the day as interpreted by Communist party leadership.

Consider N. D. Kondratiev, the Soviet economist who discovered “long waves” in capitalist economic activity, fifty-year cycles. It was interesting work. In 1931, Stalin had him arrested and shot. Why? Because he was a “counterrevolutionary agent.” Why was he a counterrevolutionary agent? Because he understood that there were long cycles of upswing and downswing in the capitalist economy and he posited that the depression that was unfolding in the beginning of the 1930s might be one of these long downturns. Implicitly, then, there was a way out at the end of it into an upturn. “Ah. You are saying, Comrade Kondratiev, that capitalism is not now finished. You are saying that this is not the final conflict. You are saying that capitalism has a bright future. Therefore, you are a counterrevolutionary agent and you are gone.”

A few years ago I was at UC Berkeley browsing in the library and I came upon a Soviet encyclopedia, translated into English—a modern, up-to-date edition that came out in the late 1970s or early 1980s—and I looked up Kondratiev. “Counterrevolutionary.” Well, how can you develop Marxist categories and Marxist understanding in that kind of an intellectual climate? You can’t. So I would say that, if we ask, “What is the place of Marxism in class studies,” we have to say that it is very tentative because Marxism is still so unformed. We can learn from Marx but we have to go well beyond what Marx, and Marxists since, have done. We have to go back to first principles in Marx. I’d like to talk a little bit about what those might be, and how they might guide our discussion of class.

First of all, Marx didn’t discover classes. People recognized class long before Marx. What Marx discovered was that class was a particular social relationship. He discovered and described the core economic relationships of power that constitute class and
that set the material foundation for class struggle in history and the role of class conflict in social transformation. This has immediate consequences for class studies. Since class is a relationship, not a category, you can’t understand the working class unless you understand the capitalist class as well. Working-class studies, which will hold special interest for Marxists, has to be a study of the whole of society: the capitalist class, the working class, and the middle class, which is in the middle of labor and capital—and all the complicated, borderline areas where classes intersect as well.

I think our understanding of class needs to be informed by these insights. Class is not primarily a question of income distribution or of life style; it is not a question of where you live or how you speak. It is a question of relationships of power—power at work, and power extended into the broader society.

There are two aspects of Marxist principles, different but related, that we should carry into class studies: issues of method and of substance. The method is materialism, dialectics, and historical materialism. I’m going to come back to the question of language and how we pursue this method. Then there’s the question of the substantive elements. One is the notion of class as a set of social relationships. But there is also the distinction between labor and labor-power, the structure of capital accumulation, the interactions between base and superstructure. These are contexts in which we need to develop our work on class, insights from Marx that we need to elaborate. They are both substantive and methodological. We have to embody dialectical thinking and dialectical practice in our work, which is not easy.

And when it comes to class studies, as opposed to Marxist studies, we have to do it transparently. In this regard, my role model as a writer is Stephen Jay Gould. When Gould writes about nature, he writes dialectically, but he doesn’t tell you that he’s dialectical. He has a dialectical appreciation, and a materialist appreciation, for evolution, for the way natural processes work, but in his popular writing he doesn’t involve us explicitly in the philosophical debates about dialectics versus metaphysics and all those things; he just does it. And because he just does it, his work is not only brilliant but also quite accessible to a general audience. What makes it so powerful is that he embodies, he engages, Marxist method in a transparent way.

That’s what we have to do with regard to class. That is the question of language. When we talk about, “What is the place of Marx in class studies?” I would say it involves getting away from the jargon of Marx into the actual content of Marx, into its substance and its method. That’s what we have to learn how to do. We don’t know how to do that very well, but that’s what we have to constantly challenge each other to do.

There are many reasons to avoid Marxist jargon in class studies. It is too easy to use stock terms as shorthand when the terms themselves need clarification and thinking through. Jargon can prevent fresh thinking about concrete realities. Academic Marxists and political leftists too often use Marxist jargon in an abstruse way, making what they say unintelligible to most people. It is good discipline for us to say what we mean directly, in terms of lived experience. And we need to acknowledge that people who are not Marxists have vital contributions to make. We Marxists should be able to convey our substantive understanding without requiring our audience and
colleagues in class studies to be fluent, or even conversant, with Marxist terminol-
ogy—all the more so when we consider that working-class people should play an
important role in the development of class studies.

One crucial way to develop class studies is to constantly keep the lived experi-
ence of class as the point of reference of our work. If we get drawn off into the theo-
retical debates, self-consciously theoretical debates, of Marxism, we’re going to be
in a lot of trouble when it comes to class studies because Marx, not class, will be the
subject. To understand class in a Marxist fashion, we have to constantly hold onto
the lived experience of class as the point of reference, go from that and back to that.
And as we do, we’re going to learn a lot which we can then take off to another place
and have a conversation about what is, and what is not, Marxism, as a method and
also in matters of substantive understanding and social practice. Marxist studies are
of course important and we have many conferences, forums, and journals like
RETHINKING MARXISM through which we can and should elaborate Marxism. But that
theoretical work cannot advance without close connection to the description and
puzzling over the lived experience of class. Marxist studies, as much as class stud-
ies, needs to be rooted in life.

As we describe and understand the structure of class and class dynamics, we should
be attentive to what lessons we learn in regard to Marxist theory. But that’s another
discussion from the one about class, with a different language and a different scope.
That’s not what we’re doing at this conference, for example. That’s not what we’re
going to be doing next year at the How Class Works conference at Stony Brook, to
which I invite you all. There again, the problem for the presentations will be to under-
stand class, how it actually works. I would say it’s good if the method is Marxist, but
that will not be a litmus test since we hardly know what “Marxist” means and since
Marxism is still so undeveloped. The test should be whether the presentation con-
tributes to an understanding of class.

Well, these are some basic points of departure that I hope can help develop the
discussion.

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**Audience Comments**

**Audience member 1:** I am a visiting scholar from Japan. I thought that Marx
was dead in the United States, that I must not say the name of Marx in the United
States. But I was very surprised and grateful to know that Marx was right here in
the United States—right here. I want to ask the question, why are you interested in Marx again?

**Audience member 2:** I have two remarks. First of all, with regard to the capping that several people on this panel did of Barbara Foley’s language. I think that we have to understand that this is fundamentally a conference of academics, and she simply evokes the wording that academics would understand. She does community work in New Jersey, and quite frankly if she were in Newark she would not be speaking this language that we heard this afternoon. So let’s not be intellectually dishonest when we criticize it—point one. Point two, in answer to our guest from Japan, the reason why Marxism is alive and well in the United States is because class struggle is not over, and as long as you have classes in the United States, you will have this consideration and discussion.

**Audience member 3:** Is language relevant? I’m thinking of someone from China who was interviewing me the other day and said, “Wow, I was reading some of your essays and you keep using this term ‘class struggle.’ Do people in America do that?” And I stopped and thought, and said, “Probably not.” It struck her, but it seems to me that this is a language we need to keep using just to keep that sense of possibility and resistance open in people’s minds as they engage in their everyday lives and think about class. I just think we need to be careful about reducing Marxism to poor communication skills and lack of awareness of audience. In our classes, as Michael Zweig was saying, we all use the Marxist perspective to help our students illuminate their everyday experiences. I teach at a university with a largely working-class student body, and frankly it’s been far easier for me teaching there than somewhere like Colgate because they just suck it in. It immediately makes sense to them, given the proper language. And I think that you can start there and then give them terminology for making sense of things. I think there are ways to talk about Marxism and then introduce certain terms so they know it’s a totally different way of engaging the world and thinking than they’re used to. It’s just a matter of having communication skills. You don’t have to throw out the baby with the bath water.

**Audience member 4:** First, a few terms: capital, surplus-value, exploitation, ideology, alienation, class struggle, and division of labor. Can either Michael or Jack suggest better terms, or perhaps euphemisms, for these Marxian concepts—I realize they’re not exclusively Marxian concepts—which, in my opinion, help to explain capitalism and the problems with capitalism? I’m not sure how one can write a book about class without talking about capital, surplus-value, exploitation, ideology, alienation, class struggle, and the division of labor. But these are just some essential concepts that have great explanatory power. Of course, students and the working class in America won’t have these concepts at their fingertips, but why is that? Because we live in an anticommunist society. Capitalism purposefully makes such terms inaccessible or ridicules them, because these are precisely the kind of terms that can empower people to understand how capitalism works, and therefore perhaps how to create a better system without capital, surplus-value, exploitation, and so on. So, as educators, we don’t just simply say, well, our students don’t have these concepts, or
they have these other concepts which are racist, and we don’t want to introduce new concepts; we’re just going to use their language. Of course we don’t use simply their language. You lose the whole role of taking—when necessary—a leadership position. You tail behind. So that’s something that I think we need to address as well.

**Jack Metzgar:** I’m good with the list, except alienation. I’d take that one off. But except for alienation, those terms are not owned by Marxist thought or the Marxist tradition, but they are essential concepts.

**Michael Zweig:** When I wrote *The Working Class Majority*, I had to come to grips with exactly this set of terms. Let’s take the question of surplus-value and exploitation. How can you talk about class without talking about that? I decided it’s not possible to talk about class without talking about that. How do you talk about it? I decided that the way in was to use it as a way to challenge individualism, to say, “One of the foundations of individualism is the claim that wealth is the result of the activity of the wealthy”—right? Well, it isn’t. Wealth has a social foundation, and what I tried to do with this book, in the chapter on values, was to try to understand what’s wrong with individualism, and one of the things that’s wrong with individualism is that it is a lie that wealth is an *individual* result. So, I tried to explain this. The word exploitation is not in there, but some basic explanation of how it is that wealth is socially created and then taken is something that I did try to include. So, again, if I was teaching a class or writing a book on Marx, it would be a different language and a different set of vocabularies that I would feel comfortable using. And as Marxist studies develop in this country, so that Marx again is, in a sense, rehabilitated, it will be easier to develop class studies more consciously in Marxist categories. But right now, my judgment is that I have to be very careful. One other thing: I can’t tell you how many people—leftists, socialists, Marxists, labor leaders—said “don’t use class.” Talk about working families, talk about the corporate agenda, talk about the corporate domination, stay away from class because people don’t want to hear it. And I said, “You know, the whole point is to talk about class, and you can’t tell me I can’t talk about class and that I have to come up with some euphemism. I’m not going to do that.” And it turned out that that was a good bet, because people *are* ready to talk about class. They’re not ready to talk about surplus-value, but they are ready to talk about the limits of individualism. Remember what Mao said about practicing the mass line? Well, what we have to do is practice the mass line if we want to get into that language and that terminology, and into that head. That’s what we have to do, and doing it means being transparent about it, when that is what is necessary, to talk to the people you’re talking to.

**Audience member 5:** I think we need to not just use Marxism transparently—we do need to do that sometimes—but our biggest problem in America has been that we haven’t found a way to take the next step and explain what we are doing nearly as elegantly as Marx did in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* in that first chapter where he said, “Now, I’m just going to be talking about France, but I want to be clear where I’m coming from. I want you to understand where I’m coming from in general.” I think we can do much more now in terms of being explicit about class terms than at any time before in
most of our lives. And I urge us to do so. People say, “People can’t deal with it.” We’ve got to be careful who we’re thinking about as people, right? What people can’t deal with it? Maybe our academic colleagues, maybe the people who sit in our tenure committee have a lot of trouble, but those working-class students that I teach at Malcolm X Community College in Chicago, they don’t have a problem at all—not a whit. They want clarity, and directness, and they like it just fine.

Audience member 6: I want to come back in two concepts: identity (are you ready to lose your Marxist identity, also?) and the notion of lived experience. I think you really have to be very careful about tossing out identity and memory and history, because there’s a lot of amnesia that’s at risk here. I understand the concern about having identity be very static, and having boundaries around identity, and coming out of that identity as the only place from which to speak. Obviously that’s not our future; we can’t stay there. On the other hand, dialectically, lived experience, listening to the lived experience, honoring lived experience, having the patience for that kind of epistemology is extremely important. One of the lessons of becoming established as an academic, whatever curse that might be, is the responsibility, the necessity, of that recall, of that memory, not to discard it, not to toss it out, not to be nostalgic or sentimental which is what we’re usually accused of, but knowing when to be silent and when to listen. I certainly do not want to let go in any way, shape, or form of the notion and importance of lived experience.

Audience member 7: I just want to follow up on that because while I agree with the primary definition of class having to do with social relationships of power, it seems to me dangerous and short-sighted not to understand class in cultural terms as well. Class as culture, in the anthropological sense of a way of life, is a category that really comes from outside Marxism on the whole. It doesn’t fit very well. But I would really hate to see us go backward in our rehabilitation of Marxism if what that does is foreclose the possibility and, indeed, the necessity of understanding class as an aspect of culture. Culture is one of those sloppy words, because it tends to fall over into simply works of our culture—with a capital K as they used to say—but it is necessary as a conceptual framework for talking about class as the framework of power and social relationships.

Audience member 8: Let me ask you about my autoworkers at Lordstown. When they ask me, “Why are you academics suddenly interested in class again?” should I say it’s because of the ongoing legitimation crisis? Should I tell them that there are problems with scaling the independent variables associated with Weber? Or should I say there’s some semiotic disruption or discursive panic going on that’s made us all rethink issues of language and the sign? What I’m trying to say is, in terms of an intellectual history for all of us, the last thirty years have been important. Old fogies like we old new leftists have been changed by things that have gone on in cultural studies, feminism, and black studies, to name a few. And a part of it is how we can incorporate that sort of intellectual change in history into our own politics and Marxism, and use approaches that are not, I would say, necessarily as dogmatic, at least in terms of language. We did a program at the Chicago Federation of Labor on class. Now, how do we do a program on class at the Chicago Federation of Labor without
really talking about class directly? It’s about language. We just started out using James Carville’s line about Paula Jones: “What happens when you drag $100 through a trailer park? You get Paula Jones.” And everybody started laughing. Then we said, “Why did you laugh?” They understand issues of sexism, but they also started to understand issues about class, and from that point on, we didn’t have to say another word. They knew about class, they understood about class, they had their own vocabulary about class, and it was not terribly dissimilar to the vocabulary that we have.

References