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# What's Class Got To Do With It?: American Society in the Twenty-First Century

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# What's Class Got To Do With It?: American Society in the Twenty-First Century

## **Abstract**

The contributors to this volume argue that class identity in the United States has been hidden for too long. Their essays, published here for the first time, cover the relation of class to race and gender, to globalization and public policy, and to the lives of young adults. They describe how class, defined in terms of economic and political power rather than income, is in fact central to Americans' everyday lives. This book is an important resource for the new field of working class studies.

## **Keywords**

gender, class, race, American, society, policy, workers, economic, political, power, United States, global, market

## **Comments**

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE CHALLENGE OF WORKING CLASS STUDIES

Michael Zweig

### I.

The long silence about class in the United States is finally coming to an end. In the early years of the twenty-first century, as capitalism has emerged triumphant from the Cold War and capitalists are asserting their power ever more brazenly in the United States and around the world, the central importance of class in American life is increasingly obvious for all to see. Euphemisms about the middle class and consumer society are no longer persuasive when chief executives pay themselves tens of millions of dollars while their employees are thrown out of work with ruined pensions. When huge tax cuts go to the richest 1 percent of the population while workers suffer the burdens of lost public services, people wonder if we're really all in this together. Working people notice that the tiny amounts they get in tax relief are more than eaten up by the consequences of the resulting fiscal crisis.<sup>1</sup> They wonder what is going on when attention to the corporate scandals of Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen, and so many other firms has been buried deep in the rubble of a war costing tens of billions of dollars.

Whether in regard to the economy or issues of war and peace, class is central to our everyday lives. Yet class has not been as visible as race or gender, not nearly as much a part of our conversations and sense of ourselves as these and other "identities." We are of course all individuals, but our individuality and personal life chances are shaped—limited or enhanced—by the economic and social class in which we have grown up and in which we exist as adults.

Even though "class" is an abstract category of social analysis, class is real. Since social abstractions can seem far removed from real life, it may help to consider two other abstractions that have important consequences

for flesh-and-blood individuals: race and gender. Suppose you knew there were men and women because you could see the difference, but you didn't know about the socially constructed concept of "gender." You would be missing something vitally important about the people you see. You would have only a surface appreciation of their lives. If, based only on direct observation of skin color, you knew there were white people and black people, but you didn't know about "race" in modern society, you would be ignorant of one of the most important determinants of the experience of those white and black people. Gender and race are abstractions, yet they are powerful, concrete influences in everyone's lives. They carry significant meaning despite wide differences in experience within the populations of men, women, whites, blacks.

Similarly, suppose that based on your observation of work sites and labor markets you knew there were workers and employers, but you didn't recognize the existence of class. You would be blind to a most important characteristic of the individual workers and employers you were observing, something that has tremendous influence in their lives. Despite the wide variety of experiences and identities among individual workers, capitalists, and middle class people, it still makes sense to acknowledge the existence and importance of class in modern society. In fact, without a class analysis we would have only the most superficial knowledge of our own lives and the experiences of others we observe in economic and political activity.

This book is meant as a resource for the newly emerging field of working class studies, which is dedicated to an exploration of class as it plays out in all of our lives. Later in this introduction I define classes, using power as the basic guide rather than income or lifestyle. This introduction also explores the historical context for working class studies in the United States. The chapters that follow explore four themes.

First we look at the "mosaic of class, race, and gender." Classes aren't uniform, nor are races or genders. The working class is made up of men and women of all races and nationalities. If you look at the population of white people, or African Americans, or other racial and ethnic groups, you will find workers among them, but all kinds of middle class people and capitalists as well. The same is true of course for men and women. This complicated mosaic of identities, corresponding to complex arrangements of power, means that class analysis isn't a simple matter of fitting people into neat categories. In the first part of the book we see how our understanding of class can be informed by knowing the operation of race and gender in our lives. We see that no meaning of class is fully independent of race and gender, because a person's experience of class position depends on the person's race, ethnicity, and gender. At the same time,

we see how an appreciation of class can illuminate some of the complexities of racial and gender experience.

We then turn to the operation of class in the global economy. Here we see how globalization, the spread of capitalist institutions to most countries around the world since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, has affected working people and national economies. We find that very little separates the domestic U.S. economy from the global economy. As workers have lost ground in the United States, the same has been happening around the world. At home and abroad, income, wealth, and power have become much more unequally distributed.<sup>2</sup>

This fact is not lost on U.S. strategic thinkers and military planners. The United States Space Command, presenting a justification for placing and operating U.S. military weapons in space, warns: "Although unlikely to be challenged by a global peer competitor, the United States will continue to be challenged regionally. The globalization of the world economy will continue, with a widening between the 'haves' and 'have-nots.'"<sup>3</sup>

Usually, what we mean by "haves" and "have-nots" is "rich" and "poor." In U.S. popular culture and political conversation, we tend to talk about class in terms of income, assuming that the United States has a broad "middle class" that includes most people, with some rich people at the top and some poor people at the bottom. By world income standards, most workers and even the poor in the United States do pretty well, so when U.S. strategic planners refer to the world's "have-nots," most Americans think of someone else, far away. But, as the chapters in the second part of this book establish, if we understand class in a different way, not in terms of income but in terms of power, new relationships and the possibility of new political alignments emerge. They suggest a basis for linking most Americans with the world's have-nots, separating us from the haves in important ways, and opening the door to new approaches to doing politics and building social movements.

The two chapters on class and public policy in the third part of this book use class analysis to investigate the lived experience of American workers in the last decades of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first century. Here we see the close connections between working people and the poor. We see how the decline of union power has contributed to the decline in living standards that workers experience, and how public policy in the United States has been shaped by class power to the detriment of working people.

In the final three chapters, on class and young adults, the authors explore the operation of class in the lives of young workers and working class students attending colleges and universities. Here we see that class has important cultural aspects with psychological implications. These in

turn expose useful but often painful questions for the education process itself, allowing faculty as well as students to think in new ways about the experience of higher education when viewed through the lens of class.

## II.

Before turning to the aspects of class explored in the four parts of this book, we need to define clearly the terms of discussion. When people in the United States talk about class, it is often in ways that hide its most important parts. We tend to think about class in terms of income, or the lifestyles that income can buy. The essays in this book contribute to the growing field of working class studies by understanding class instead as mainly a question of economic and political power.

Power doesn't exist alone within an individual or a group. Power exists as a relationship between and among different people or groups. This means that we cannot talk about one class of people alone, without looking at relationships between that class and others. Working class studies, then, necessarily involves the study of other classes, most importantly the capitalist class. But in working class studies, we look at all classes in society from the point of view of working people—their lives, experiences, needs, and interests.

The working class is made up of people who, when they go to work or when they act as citizens, have comparatively little power or authority. They are the people who do their jobs under more or less close supervision, who have little control over the pace or the content of their work, who aren't the boss of anyone. They are blue-collar people like construction and factory workers, and white-collar workers like bank tellers and writers of routine computer code. They work to produce and distribute goods, or in service industries or government agencies. They are skilled and unskilled, engaged in over five hundred different occupations tracked by the U.S. Department of Labor: agricultural laborers, baggage handlers, cashiers, flight attendants, home health care aides, machinists, secretaries, short order cooks, sound technicians, truck drivers. In the United States, working class people are by far the majority of the population. Over eighty-eight million people were in working class occupations in 2002, comprising 62 percent of the labor force.<sup>4</sup>

On the other side of the basic power relation in a capitalist society is the capitalist class, those most senior executives who direct and control the corporations that employ the private-sector working class. These are the "captains of industry" and finance, CEOs, chief financial officers, chief operating officers, members of boards of directors, those whose de-



cisions dominate the workplace and the economy, and whose economic power often translates into dominant power in the realms of politics, culture, the media, and even religion. Capitalists comprise about 2 percent of the U.S. labor force.

There are big differences among capitalists in the degree of power they wield, particularly in the geographic extent of that power. The CEO of a business employing one hundred people in a city of fifty thousand might well be an important figure on the local scene, but not necessarily in state or regional affairs. On the national scale, power is principally in the hands of those who control the largest corporations, those employing over five hundred people. Of the over twenty-one million business enterprises in the United States, only sixteen thousand employ that many. They are controlled by around two hundred thousand people, fewer than two-tenths of 1 percent of the labor force.

Even among the powerful, power is concentrated at the top. It's one thing to control a single large corporation, another to sit on multiple corporate boards and be in a position to coordinate strategies across corporations. In fact, if we count only those people who sit on multiple boards, so-called interlocking directors, they could all fit into Yankee Stadium. They and the top political leaders in all branches of the federal government constitute a U.S. "ruling class" at the pinnacle of national power.

Capitalists are rich, of course. But when vice-president Dick Cheney invited a select few to help him formulate the country's energy policy shortly after the new Bush administration came into office in 2001, he didn't invite "rich people." He invited people who were leaders in the energy industry, capitalists. The fact that they were also rich was incidental. Capitalists are rich people who control far more than their personal wealth. They control the wealth of the nation, concentrated as it is in the largest few thousand corporations. There is no lobby in Washington representing "rich people." Lobbyists represent various industries or associations of industries that sometimes coordinate their efforts on behalf of industry in general. They represent the interests that capitalists bring to legislative and regulatory matters.

Something similar operates for the working class. Over thirteen million people are in unions in the United States. Most of these unions—like the United Auto Workers (UAW); the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); the Carpenters; and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT)—maintain offices in Washington and in major and even smaller cities where their members work. In addition to engaging in collective bargaining at the workplace, these unions lobby for their members and occasionally coordinate their efforts to lobby for broader working class interests. Sixty-eight unions have

joined under the umbrella of the American Federation of Labor, Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) to pool resources and try to advance the interests of working people in general. These organizations represent workers, not “the poor” or “middle-income people,” even though some workers are poor and some have an income equal to that of some in the middle class.<sup>5</sup>

In between the capitalist and the working classes is the middle class. The “middle class” gets a lot of attention in the media and political commentary in the United States, but this term is almost always used to describe people in the middle of the income distribution. People sometimes talk about “middle class workers,” referring to people who work for a wage but live comfortable if modest lives. Especially in goods-producing industries, unionized workers have been able to win wages that allow home ownership, paid vacations, nice cars, home entertainment centers, and other consumer amenities.

When class is understood in terms of income or lifestyle, these workers are sometimes called “middle class.” Even leaders of the workers’ unions use the term to emphasize the gains unions have been able to win for working people. “Middle class workers” are supposed to be “most people,” those with stable jobs and solid values based in the work ethic, as opposed to poor people—those on welfare or the “underclass”—on one side, and “the rich” on the other. When people think about classes in terms of “rich, middle, and poor,” almost everyone ends up in the middle.

Understanding class in terms of power throws a different light on the subject. In this view, middle class people are in the middle of the power grid that has workers and capitalists at its poles. The middle class includes professional people like doctors, lawyers, accountants, and university professors. Most people in the “professional middle class” are not self-employed. They work for private companies or public agencies, receive salaries, and answer to supervisors. In these ways they are like workers.

But if we compare professional middle class people with well-paid workers, we see important differences. A unionized auto assembly worker doing a lot of overtime makes enough money to live the lifestyle of a “middle class worker,” even more money than some professors or lawyers. But a well-paid unionized machinist or electrician or autoworker is still part of the working class. Professors and lawyers have a degree of autonomy and control at work that autoworkers don’t have. The difference is a question of class.

It is also misleading to equate the working class as a whole with its best-paid unionized members. Only 9 percent of private sector workers

belong to unions, and millions of them are low-paid service employees. The relatively well-paid manufacturing industries are not typical of American business, and they are shrinking as a proportion of the total economy.

The middle class also includes supervisors in the business world, ranging from line foremen to senior managers below the top decision-making executives. As with the professional middle class, some people in the supervisory middle class are close to working people in income and lifestyle. We see this mostly at the lower levels of supervision, as with line foremen or other first-level supervisors. They often are promoted from the ranks of workers, continue to live in working class areas, and socialize with working class friends. But a foreman is not a worker when it comes to the power grid. The foreman is on the floor to represent the owner, to execute orders in the management chain of command. The foreman is in the middle—between the workers and the owners. When a worker becomes a supervisor, he or she enters the middle class. But just as the well-paid “middle class worker” is atypical, so “working class bosses” make up a small fraction of supervisory and managerial personnel in the U.S. economy.

We see something similar with small business owners, the third component of the middle class. Some come out of the working class and continue to have personal and cultural ties to their roots. But these connections do not change the fact that workers aspire to have their own business to escape the regimentation of working class jobs, seeking instead the freedom to “be my own boss.” That freedom, regardless of how much it might be limited by competitive pressures in the marketplace and how many hours the owner must work to make a go of it, puts the small business owner in a different class from workers.

At the other end of the business scale, senior managers and high-level corporate attorneys and accountants share quite a bit with the capitalists they serve. They have considerable authority, make a lot of money, and revolve in the same social circles. But they are not the final decision makers. They are at a qualitatively different level in the power grid from those they serve, who pay them well for their service but retain ultimate authority. They, too, are in the middle class.

In all three sections of the middle class—professionals, supervisors, and small business owners—there are fuzzy borders with the working class and with the capitalists. Yet the differences in power, independence, and life circumstances among these classes support the idea of a separate middle class. The middle class is about 36 percent of the labor force in the United States—sizable, but far from the majority, far from the “typical” American.

Like the working class and the capitalists, the middle class is represented in the political process by professional associations and small business groups. There is no “middle-income” lobby, but there are, for example, the Trial Lawyers Association, the American Medical Association, the American Association of University Professors, the National Association of Realtors.

Clearly, classes are not monolithic collections of socially identical people. We have seen that each class contains quite a bit of variation. Rather than sharp dividing lines, the borders between them are porous and ambiguous—important areas to study and better understand. Also, beyond the differences in occupations and relative power within classes, which lead to differences in incomes, wealth, and lifestyles, each class contains men and women of every race, nationality, and creed. Yet, despite these rich internal variations and ambiguous borders, a qualitative difference remains between the life experience of the working class compared with that of the professional and managerial middle class, to say nothing of differences both of these have with the capitalists.

### III.

A look at the last sixty years of U.S. history indicates that silence has descended over the topic of class, and how that silencing has been related all the while to sharp class conflict in economic and political matters. In the twenty-five years following the end of World War II, workers in the United States won substantial increases in living standards through the power of unions in collective bargaining. Since the late 1970s, however, these historic gains in workers’ living standards have come under increasing attack in industry after industry. “Concession bargaining,” in which unions are forced to give back previously won wages and benefits, have come to characterize collective bargaining in basic industry. Corporate threats to move production overseas have become more widespread and more effective in manufacturing, business services, and other sectors of the economy that can take advantage of the new “free-trade” environment of NAFTA and the WTO.<sup>6</sup> The result has been a systematic, long-term decline in union strength and workers’ living standards coupled with a steady increase in profits going to corporations and wealth going to the capitalists who run them.<sup>7</sup>

Class differences play out in power relations on the job, where most people work under the direction of a relatively small number of senior executives. In larger firms these executives extend their power to the shop floor through intermediate layers of management. Where there is no

union to protect them, workers are employed “at the pleasure of” the boss. Unions arise first and foremost to give workers an opportunity to match the power of the boss through the countervailing power of concerted collective action. In the United States at the start of the twenty-first century, a large majority of working people want to be in unions, though fewer than 15 percent actually are. Well-documented implacable hostility to unions by employers, often involving practices that violate U.S. law and international human rights standards, makes it difficult for workers to realize their desires by organizing into unions for collective bargaining.<sup>8</sup>

The contest is about more than money paid out and received in wages and benefits. Workers also turn to unions to secure a measure of respect at work, to be treated “like human beings” instead of in arbitrary and demeaning ways. These issues are often more important than money, both to the workers and to their employers, who typically offer pay raises at the last moment to try to defeat union organizing campaigns and preserve their power. Seniority provisions, grievance procedures, and work rules all operate to protect the worker from the boss, and all depend for their success on the organized strength of workers taken together. Even the money end of the agreement isn’t just about money; it is about the ability of workers to secure a “fair” share of the product they create and a “living” wage that provides a decent life for the worker and his or her family. These concerns and conflicts arise in every industry, for every occupational group of workers. They are problems of class, even though individuals who may have little else in common experience them in different settings. The right to organize into unions and conflicts over contract terms are clearly class questions.

Given this country’s rich history of confrontations—sometimes violent—between workers and capitalists, it is ironic that the prevailing culture so rarely admits the existence of class, the reality of class conflict. From the beginning of the nineteenth century until now, capitalists have used every means of judicial restraint, police and military power, and private armies of goons and thugs to suppress unions, while workers have resisted by using militant methods of mass organizing.<sup>9</sup>

Those who present class as a question of income instead of power entirely miss this history. They fail to see the continuing array of attacks the working class suffers, and dismiss the possibility that the working class could again mobilize power on a massive scale in the United States. When explicit talk of class warfare emerged on the national scene in early 2003 in the context of President George W. Bush’s tax proposals, it seemed to some that Bush himself was launching such warfare. But one commentator dismissed the possibility of class-based mass opposition to this tax re-

lief for the rich, citing evidence that many Americans mistakenly believe themselves to be rich, or aspire to be even though they aren't. He concluded that attacking the rich in American politics is a strategy bound to fail.<sup>10</sup>

If class conflict is represented as an attack by the poor on the rich, it may not find resonance with most Americans. But if class conflict is represented as what it *is*, a contest of power to decide which interests will be served in the workplace and by public policy, a contest in which the interests of working people are different from those of capitalists, most Americans, and certainly most workers, get it. It turns out that class struggle is as American as cherry pie.

Class divisions operate in public policy as well as in corporate structures. Class can be found in the differential impact of such everyday elements as tax burdens, the pattern of government service cuts in a fiscal crisis, and the privatization of public services and imposition of markets and private enterprise for the provision of such basic services as health care and education. Class operates in regulatory policy and in government action (and inaction) related to collective bargaining and the ability of workers to organize unions. Class divisions even extend to foreign affairs, affecting the rules of international trade and investment, the structure of alliances, definitions of friend and foe, and the decision to make war.

For many decades the capitalists have been on the offensive in this contest, but, happily for the majority of people, in some periods of the twentieth century the tide went the other way. During the Progressive Era and through World War I, reformers expanded the regulatory powers of the state to limit the excessive market power of trusts, impose quality standards on food processing, and otherwise constrain the alarming power of the new large corporations. There was widespread public vilification of the plutocratic capitalist with cigar and top hat. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire in 1911 and the Lawrence (Massachusetts) textile strike in 1912, among other incidents of harsh working class suffering at the hands of employers, contributed to a public atmosphere in which restrictions on union activity loosened a bit and more workers were able to organize.

But following the 1917 Russian Revolution, the business community—fearful revolution might be contagious—fought back with an anti-Bolshevik campaign marked by the arrest of ten thousand active workers in the January 1, 1920, Palmer Raids and the summary deportation of over four hundred of them. The 1920s were a period of weak unions and strong companies, a time when the president of the United States would say, "The business of America is business."<sup>11</sup>

The Depression of the 1930s brought with it widespread discontent

with the suffering that came from the obvious failure of capitalism as a system and the failure of capitalists as a class to secure progress for the country. Powerful strike waves shook the country as workers demanded recognition for their unions. New Deal legislation brought the national government's power to bear on the side of the working class, securing their legal right to a union of their own choosing, making it illegal for employers to interfere with organizing and requiring them to bargain with the unions workers chose to represent them. In the latter half of the 1930s, over four million workers joined unions. Path-breaking Depression-era legislation also established the Social Security system, unemployment compensation, and public welfare for the destitute (called "relief" at first); created the first minimum wage; and made time and a half for overtime the law for millions of workers.<sup>12</sup>

President Franklin D. Roosevelt's role in securing these reforms earned him the bitter hatred of many capitalists, who saw him as a traitor to his own class. Other capitalists saw his policies as a necessary and wise response to the extreme conditions of the time. But once the Depression was history and World War II had ended with the United States a preeminent world power, a reaction set in. As millions of workers engaged in a renewed cycle of strikes immediately after the war (during the war, unions had signed no-strike pledges and, except in rare instances of the grossest provocation, kept production going at full pace to support the war effort), capitalists came to agree that working class power had gotten out of hand and took steps to assert their own power more forcefully.

The working class has been on the defensive ever since. The capitalists' offensive against labor has had several interconnected elements.<sup>13</sup> In the area of legislation, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. The law greatly restricts the tactics of solidarity workers can use to organize unions. Among its provisions, it became illegal to organize a secondary boycott, in which people are urged to stop buying from a company that buys, sells, or uses products made by another company that is resisting a union organizing drive or refusing to negotiate. In the 1970s, for example, when farm workers in California tried to force growers to bargain with the United Farm Workers Union, it was legal to organize a primary boycott of grapes grown on certain farms, but illegal to organize a secondary boycott of supermarkets that sold the disputed grapes.

Taft-Hartley also allows states to pass legislation that makes illegal a collective bargaining agreement requiring all workers covered by a contract to belong to, or pay dues to, a union, even though all the workers get the full benefits of the contract. More than twenty states have adopted these so-called right-to-work laws, which greatly weaken union bargaining power and political strength. The fact that many of these right-to-

work states are in the South has helped to secure the region as a safe haven for corporations fleeing unions in the Northeast and Midwest. To this day southern workers are the lowest paid and least unionized in the United States.

In 1947 Congress passed Taft-Hartley and overrode President Truman's veto of it as the Cold War was starting and anticommunism was beginning to grip the country. The act made it illegal for a communist to be a union officer and required union members to take an oath swearing they were not communists as a condition of taking union office. The resulting purge of left-wing unionists went far beyond the relatively few Communist Party members who were then officers. In the context of the general anticommunist hysteria encouraged by years of congressional hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and several Senate committees, including the one Senator Joseph McCarthy chaired, many liberal critics of capitalism were also silenced. Anyone with an explicit working class sympathy or sharp class-based hostility to capitalist power was completely marginalized, and sometimes even jailed. The purge of the Left went far beyond the union movement, extending also to writers, movie directors and actors, academics, schoolteachers, and journalists.<sup>14</sup>

By the time the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations merged in 1955 to form the AFL-CIO, a federation of almost all unions in the country, the purge of class-oriented labor leaders was almost complete. This merger, which created a unified labor movement with over a third of all workers in the country protected by collective bargaining, marked the high point of union strength in U.S. history. But ironically, without class-based leadership and organizing among workers, and with increasingly hostile corporate practices in labor relations, workers were not able to build on that strength. It has been downhill for unions ever since.

A parallel positive effort to redirect the labor movement accompanied the deliberate campaign to tame unions through purges of the Left. In the period following World War II, business, government, and cooperative unions worked to establish and strengthen a number of labor studies and industrial relations programs at premier universities across the country, including Harvard, Berkeley, Cornell, and the Universities of Michigan and Wisconsin. These programs were designed to promote a sympathetic understanding of collective bargaining, in the context of mutual respect of each side for the other. Faculty and staff at the centers conducted important research, published journals, and developed the new field of "labor studies." These programs also conducted training sessions for union officers and their management counterparts to acquaint both sides with



commonly accepted and legally sanctioned methods of collective bargaining and contract administration.

But class analysis was not welcome in labor studies. The field was permeated by Cold War liberalism that accepted the legitimacy of capitalism at home and U.S. power abroad. Anticommunism dominated the field to such an extent that the Industrial Relations Research Association (IRRA), the professional society for labor studies, was the only academic organization in the social sciences in which no New Left, radical caucus or trend developed during the 1960s and 1970s. When, in January 2002, the annual meetings of the IRRA included a session titled "Is Class Relevant in Industrial Relations Studies?" it was the first time in the association's fifty-five year history that class was explicitly addressed in one of its sessions.<sup>15</sup> Even then, it was accepted for the program only in the form of a question, rather than with the more assertive title originally proposed, "The Relevance of Class in Industrial Relations Studies."<sup>16</sup>

In the context of general anticommunism and the purges and isolation of almost everyone associated with class analysis during the Cold War, class disappeared from polite conversation. In its absence, workers came to be known as "consumers" or "middle class." Income and lifestyle became the markers of class. The focus of attention in economic matters turned from production to consumption, as summed up in Walter Reuther's famous question to the auto executive who proudly showed the UAW president the latest automated equipment that would substitute for workers in the factory: "Very interesting, but who will buy the cars?"

The capitalists' counterattack against labor began just after World War II, but it wasn't until 1973 that power relations had reversed to the point at which working class living standards began to decline absolutely.<sup>17</sup> It took until 1979 for union strength to become so eroded that concession bargaining came to dominate collective bargaining, first in the auto industry, then throughout the economy in the 1980s. President Ronald Reagan set new standards for antiunion, antiworking class action when he fired over eleven thousand air traffic controllers in 1981 when they struck, not for more money, but for additional periods of rest during their work hours to relieve the tensions of the job. Reagan's action destroyed the Professional Air Traffic Controllers' Organization (PATCO), a union that had supported him in his election campaign the previous year.

The George W. Bush administration has continued the broad assault on unions in the Reagan tradition. In the debates establishing the new Department of Homeland Security, President Bush demanded that workers in the new department be stripped of their union protections and right to collective bargaining. He wanted the utmost flexibility in personnel matters and suggested that unions undermine national security. The result

was loss of union protection for 180,000 workers and professional employees who had been represented by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) before their agencies were transferred to the new department.

This theme was picked up in a remarkably Orwellian display of “up is down and down is up” thinking by the National Right to Work Legal Defense and Education Fund in a letter they circulated in early 2003. They sought funds to oppose “the union bosses’ drive to use the national emergencies we face today to grab more power.” The letter said the drive “presents a clear and present danger to the security of the United States,” and claimed that this behavior is “not surprising, given the history of how Big Labor notoriously exploited the Second World War” to “expand its power at the expense of the war effort.” Many union leaders objected to the letter in the strongest terms; one such leader was Harold A. Schaitberger, president of the International Association of Firefighters, who has been trying to extend collective bargaining protection to fire fighters in so-called right-to-work states. Schaitberger said, “How dare you question the patriotism of the nation’s firefighters and their elected union officials, all of whom have crawled down a burning hallway, faced uncontrolled flames, and risked their lives countless times for the citizens of our great nation. . . . I have never felt more outrage, astonishment, and utter disgust than I feel today.”<sup>18</sup>

The lies and distortions involved in these attacks on labor take us back to the days of the “un-American activities” hearings and McCarthyite investigations into alleged domestic subversion that marked the 1940s and 1950s. Now, as then, such attacks are motivated by an explicit fear of the power working people can wield. They are happening at a time when the president of the United States has the authority to declare unilaterally, without any prospect of judicial review, anyone to be an enemy combatant and have that person arrested and held indefinitely without bail, without access to anyone other than his or her captors, not even a lawyer. But, unlike during the Vietnam War period, in early 2003, at a time of a limitless and vaguely defined war on terror and the projection of U.S. military power around the world, significant sections of organized labor openly opposed the war with Iraq and questioned the interests such a war and subsequent occupation would advance.<sup>19</sup> By the end of 2003, U.S. Labor Against the War had brought dozens of large locals and international unions together in a National Labor Assembly for Peace that declared:

We propose to create a voice within the labor movement that is an energetic advocate for policies that strengthen international institutions so

that conflicts between nations can be resolved through diplomacy rather than war. We seek a U.S. foreign policy that promotes global economic and social justice, not the use of military force. We want our government to meet human needs, not cater to corporate greed.<sup>20</sup>

Are we experiencing class warfare in the United States? President Bush and Republican commentators feared it might be so, characterizing criticisms of their policies and challenges to corporate behavior as evidence of class warfare being waged by irresponsible opponents.<sup>21</sup> They use the old rhetorical trick that labels an opposing argument in a way that suggests it should be disregarded without their having to answer it. They ridicule and dismiss their critics for even hinting that such a thing as “class warfare” could be going on, or that “class warfare” has any legitimate place in American political conversation.

They protest too much. Of course class warfare is going on. Capitalists have been waging it relentlessly for over fifty years, and for generations before that, and it continues to this day in virulent and destructive forms. Class has played a central part in U.S. history from the beginning, finding explicit expression in the policy calculations capitalists have made, and slave owners, merchants, and landowners before them.<sup>22</sup> Capitalists have long believed that workers *as a class* need to be strictly disciplined and controlled.

Until the middle of the twentieth century class was also an explicit part of working people’s understanding of their place in society, and they attempted a variety of organizational forms to assert their own class interests.<sup>23</sup> As our future now unfolds and becomes new history, class will surely continue to play a crucial role. Capitalists understand this, whether the rest of us recognize it or not.

It is not a simple matter to make history, to act in a way that helps to shape events and influence outcomes on a social scale. At any given moment it may not be at all obvious what to do. It takes careful thought and meticulous organization to make and then implement the best decisions. Capitalists have their think tanks devoted to strategic matters, places like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the Brookings Institution. Capitalists have PACs, trade associations, and other organizations trying to make history that benefits them. On college and university campuses there are many centers of learning devoted to understanding and promoting the interests of capitalists. Their scholars defend the dominant role of markets and the capitalist system, domestically and globally, and take as their agenda defining and solving the problems of this system from the point of view of capitalist interests.

By comparison, the working class has only the most meager resources.

Still, as the early twenty-first century unfolds, many leaders and activists in the labor movement and other social movements are showing renewed interest in the subject of class. Scholars, intellectuals, and journalists are taking note. Labor studies programs are paying new attention. There are more open challenges to the legitimacy of capitalist domination and more interest in organizing working people and their middle class allies to engage in class politics.

Working class studies—an attempt to understand how class works to shape our lives and the larger society—is arising in this social and intellectual ferment. In an analogous way, black studies and other ethnic studies programs developed in the context of the powerful civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and women's studies developed in the midst of the feminist social movement of those years. Working class studies is taking shape in the context of ever-more-obvious class divisions and growing movements of resistance to capitalist power stimulated by the human suffering and environmental disruption it entails.

Capitalists and their defenders sometimes decry working class studies, portraying it as a lamentable venture into bankrupt, outdated, and ideologically motivated "class struggle politics," as women's studies and black studies were once (and still are) resisted by those whose power they challenge. But class power leaves tracks. If we learn to discern them, we can better understand the particularities and complexity of power and be in a better position to influence history as it is made. The outcome is not predetermined. In every present moment, the future is in the balance, shaped in some important measure by the understanding and organizational capacity of the classes contending for power.

The fact that classes are not monolithic has important consequences in this process. Not every worker will be sympathetic to working class politics or want to join a union. Not every capitalist supports the extreme forms of capitalist power and market ideology that the George W. Bush administration and its backers have championed. Some workers will prefer to express sympathy for the capitalists and aspire to be one of them, while some capitalists will willingly make personal and corporate sacrifices to satisfy the needs of their own and other workers. Still, there is a basic conflict in class interests that divides worker from capitalist on a social scale, whatever the opinions and values of individual workers or capitalists, based in the way a capitalist economy organizes production, generates profit, and distributes goods and services to the people.<sup>24</sup> The middle class, caught in the midst of this basic power grid, is in a particularly complicated place.

There is an old saying in the labor movement to the effect that "the boss is your best organizer." Most people would prefer to avoid confrontations

at work. Most people prefer not to participate in mass demonstrations, engage in building unions, or organize social movements, wishing instead to lead calmer lives devoted to family and personal interests. But people are driven to take these actions from time to time by intolerable conditions, disrespectful treatment, and evidence of gross injustice, to themselves and to their neighbors. To the degree that capitalists are responsible, it is they themselves who stimulate the class struggle, even as they denounce and seek to avoid it.

Talk of class and class conflict naturally brings to mind the nineteenth-century social critic Karl Marx and his theory of social revolution. But Marx did not invent or discover classes; they were known long before him. Nor did he discover that the capitalists' profits originate in the labor of the workers they employ and correspond to the product those workers create, taken from them by their employers. Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century founder of modern economics and a staunch defender of capitalism as it was coming into being, described this process in detail in his pioneering study of capitalism, *The Wealth of Nations*, published ninety years before Marx's *Capital*. Marx's contribution to class analysis is contained in the double claim that class conflict drives history, and that the working class in particular will become the revolutionary force that brings capitalism to an end.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, with a combination of social reform and military power, the capitalist class managed to defeat or marginalize nearly every attempt to end its rule and bring the working class to power. Still, whether or not Marx was wrong about revolution in the long run, classes exist and class conflicts continue. In society as on the shop floor, capitalists will bear significant responsibility for the history that results.

Class is an enormous topic with many facets. No single book can cover all, or even many, of its important elements. It will take a fully developed framework of working class studies engaging scholars and activists throughout the world to make a serious dent in the problem. The articles in this collection raise important issues that deserve further investigation. We hope they will stimulate discussion and even controversy in classrooms, union halls, professional academic settings, wherever people come together and discuss what's going on in the world. In these discussions, new voices are heard through which deeper understandings of class and society will emerge.

# **PART I**

## **THE MOSAIC OF CLASS, RACE, AND GENDER**

In the great triumvirate of class, race, and gender, class has receded from view since the 1960s as the civil rights and women's movements have shaken the country and focused popular and academic attention on other urgent matters. Now, with the ever-bolder assertion of capitalist power in the United States and across the globe in the post-Cold War era, class is coming back into focus. Working class studies investigates how class operates, not in isolation from race and gender, but in ways that seek to understand the complex interactions among these different aspects of power and experience.

In the United States, we have capitalist women, capitalist blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other nationalities. Despite this variety, capitalists are disproportionately white men. White men are also, to a lesser degree, disproportionately found in the middle class, which is more mixed by race and gender. In 1996, women were 46 percent of the employed labor force and held 44 percent of middle class jobs and 47 percent of working class jobs. Blacks and Hispanics also had significant membership in the middle class as well as the working class but were disproportionately more likely to be in the working class and less likely in the middle class. Within each class, because of continuing racism and male chauvinism, women and minorities have tended to hold the lower paying, less powerful positions.<sup>1</sup>

Lack of clarity about class can lead to problems when addressing the concerns women and minorities raise in their social movements and can undermine the interests of the working class as well. When we take class to be a matter of income, for example, and see the world divided into rich, middle class, and poor people, we open the door to some of the most common and most pernicious misunderstandings about American society: that most poor people are black or Hispanic, and that poverty is a wom-

en's issue. In fact, in 1999 two-thirds of all poor people were white, and more than three-quarters of all black people were not poor.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that poverty affects minorities and women disproportionately. But if we treat poverty as a race issue or a gender problem only, we miss its class component, the unstable work environment and low wages with few benefits that make most people poor. The tendency is then to blame poverty either on the failings of the poor themselves, a view fed by the racism and male chauvinism that supposes "the poor" to be inferior, or to blame white people and men as the perpetrators. In both scenarios, capitalism disappears, and no attention is paid to the role of markets in creating and perpetuating poverty. Racializing poverty also separates the antipoverty movement from the over two million white men who are poor in this country. Poverty is a class problem. Addressing poverty requires a realignment of class power.

But it would be a mistake to reduce the problem of poverty to one of class alone, since the continuing force of racism and male chauvinism means that women and minorities suffer particularly hard from poverty. That extra suffering, within class experience, must be addressed by challenging racism and male chauvinism directly, as they operate within the working class as well as within the larger society where capitalists make the rules.

It is a complicated task to trace the intricate patterns of power and often conflicting interests, sometimes within an individual, that constitute the mosaic of class, race, and gender. In her chapter here, **DOROTHY SUE COBBLE** examines women's activism in the union movement from the 1930s to the 1960s, the period between the suffragist movement and the second wave of feminism that began in the mid-1960s. In this period the dominant wing of feminism centered its attention on issues of class. Yet it sought to build not only the labor movement but also a *different* labor movement, one that took up the particular needs of women workers and welcomed women into leadership positions. Cobble examines some of the conflicts this activism created that divided women by class, relating those conflicts also to gender divisions in the working class. Recovering this history allows us to see that feminism did not die out in the decades between its generally recognized two waves, nor was the labor movement uniformly or simply a class uprising.

Class and race have been inextricably linked since the first settlements in the New World.<sup>3</sup> **BILL FLETCHER** looks at this history to explain the low level of class-consciousness among workers in the United States. As capitalism generates competition among workers in the labor market, race divides workers in a special way to make classwide unity rare. Fletcher also observes that the dominant role of the United States in the world con-

tributes to “imperial consciousness” among workers, especially the native born, further dividing the working class by immigrant status and effectively disrupting international working class solidarity. To address this weakness, Fletcher proposes that workers in the United States create “social justice unionism” with a broad agenda that encourages class awareness and solidarity.

**JEFF LUSTIG** also looks at the long history of race in the United States. He points out that class consciousness does not arise spontaneously from conditions of oppression and exploitation. Because our interpretations of experience are filtered through politics and ideology, including views on race, the experience of class in the United States has always been merged with the experience of race. He recounts how racism weakened the reforms of the New Deal by exempting farm labor and domestic workers from Social Security coverage and wage and hour protections. Most black workers were in these occupations and therefore exempt, their white employers free from these obligations to them. This race difference in treatment of the working class was the requirement southern Democratic Party senators and representatives demanded before they would vote for the programs. Lustig pays special attention to the idea of “whiteness,” which he characterizes as a cross-class alliance of white workers and white capitalists (and southern planters in slavery times). He uses racial history, especially among whites, in a critique of traditional theories of class that focus exclusively on economic conditions.

The connection between race and class has played an important role in the history of repression and terror in the United States. The Ku Klux Klan is rightly known as a racist organization that terrorizes black people. But the Klan also lynched union organizers throughout the South and fomented hatred against Catholics, almost all of whom were working class, and Jews, who tended to be liberal and antiracist. During the “un-American activities” hearings in the HUAC and McCarthy era, investigators looking for communist sympathizers routinely focused on whites who opposed racism.

Cobble, Fletcher, and Lustig help us to see why class never appears in pure form. Even though class has its roots in economic relationships, the people in classes are enmeshed in complicated networks of race and gender as well. While each of these “identities” has a certain integrity, none exists in isolation, and none can be understood without taking the others into account.



## WHEN FEMINISM HAD CLASS

Dorothy Sue Cobble

Twenty-three-year-old Myra Wolfgang strode to the middle of one of Detroit's forty Woolworth's five-and-dime stores in 1937 and signaled for the planned sit-down strike of salesclerks and counter waitresses to begin. The main Woolworth's store was already on strike, and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE) was threatening to escalate the shutdown to all the stores in Detroit. Wolfgang was an art school dropout from a Jewish Lithuanian immigrant family. A natural orator with a wicked wit, she had already given her share of soapbox speeches for radical causes as a teenager before settling down to union organizing in her early twenties. Nicknamed the "battling belle of Detroit" by the local media, she eventually became an international vice president of HERE. But in the 1940s and 1950s, Wolfgang ran the union's Detroit Joint Council, which bargained contracts for the thousands of union cooks, bartenders, food servers, dishwashers, and maids in Detroit's downtown hotels and restaurants. She relished a good fight with employers, particularly over issues close to her heart. A lifelong member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), she insisted, for example, on sending out racially integrated crews from the union's hiring hall in the late 1940s and 1950s, rejecting such standard employer requests as "black waiters only, white gloves required."

In the 1960s, Wolfgang, now in her fifties, led a sleep-in at the Michigan statehouse to persuade legislators to raise the minimum wage. She also brought Hugh Hefner to the bargaining table to talk about the work-

Portions of this chapter are drawn from Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and from Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Lost Visions of Equality: The Labor Origins of the Next Women's Movement," *Labor's Heritage* 12 (winter/spring 2003): 6–24.

ing conditions of Playboy bunnies at his Detroit club. HERE eventually won a national contract covering all the Playboy clubs by 1969, but Detroit was the first to go union. In the initial bargaining sessions in 1964, Wolfgang and her negotiating team debated with management over the exact length in inches of the bunny suit, that is, how much of the food server's body would be covered. They proposed creating rules not just for bunnies but for *customers*—rules such as “look but do not touch.” And they challenged the Playboy practice of firing bunnies as they aged and suffered what management called “loss of bunny image,” a somewhat nebulous concept according to the union but not in the eyes of the Playboy Club. Bunny image faded, Playboy literature warned, at the precise moment bunnies developed such employee defects as “crinkling eyelids, sagging breasts, crepey necks, and drooping derrieres.”

These fascinating and somewhat atypical labor-management conversations came only after an extensive seven-month organizing campaign. Wolfgang launched her assault by sending her younger daughter, seventeen-year-old Martha, in as a union “salt,” shortly after the Detroit club opened in 1963. She was promptly hired, despite being underage. Martha then fed Mom a steady diet of useful information, particularly about the club's wage policies, or rather its *no-wage* policies. Bunnies, it turned out, were expected to support themselves solely on customer tips. Wolfgang and her volunteers picketed the club, wearing bunny suits and carrying signs that read: “Don't be a bunny, work for money.” They also secured favorable media coverage, lots of it. To the delight of scribbling reporters, Wolfgang “scoffed at the bunny costume as ‘more bare than hare’ and insisted that the entire Playboy philosophy was a ‘gross perpetuation of the idea that women should be obscene and not heard.’”

I first stumbled across Wolfgang—or, better put, she reached out and grabbed me—when I came across her papers some years ago in the Walter P. Reuther labor archives in Detroit. It was not just her entertaining antics that kept me awake. I was intrigued by her *political philosophy*, particularly her gender politics. She considered herself a feminist, and she was outspoken about her commitment to end sex discrimination. Yet at the same time, Wolfgang lobbied against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) until 1972, and she led the national committee against repeal of woman-only state protective laws. She also accused Betty Friedan, author of the feminist best-seller *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), of demeaning household labor, romanticizing wage work, and caring not a whit about the needs of the majority of women. Indeed, in a 1970 Detroit debate between Wolfgang and Friedan hosted by Women's Studies at Wayne State University, things rapidly devolved into mutual name-calling. Friedan

called Wolfgang an "Aunt Tom" for being subservient to the "labor bosses" and Wolfgang returned the favor, calling Friedan the "Chamber of Commerce's Aunt Tom."<sup>1</sup>

My curiosity roused, I set out to discover more about the Myra Wolfgangs of the post-Depression decades. I came to understand that there were multiple and competing visions of how to achieve women's equality in the so-called doldrum years<sup>2</sup>—the supposedly quiescent trough of feminist reform between the 1920s and the 1960s. Moreover, the Wolfgangs of the world, far from being oddities, were the *dominant* wing of feminism in that era. In other words, a feminism that put class and social justice at its core did not end with the Progressive-era generation of women reformers. Indeed, stimulated by the rise of a new labor movement in the 1930s and the heady experiences of World War II, it emerged refashioned and modernized by the end of the war. And significantly, unlike the social justice feminism of an earlier era, it was led by *labor* women, women who identified with and worked in the labor movement, arguably the largest and most powerful social movement of the period.

But why hasn't this history been told before? Why aren't the reform efforts of labor women part of the standard narrative of postwar labor and women's history? In part, the absence results from long-standing gender biases that are still operative among many historians of labor. Labor history as a field takes as its primary focus male workers and their activities in the public wage-earning arena. Gender as a category of historical analysis remains external to the narrative and theoretical frame.<sup>3</sup> Yet labor women also are missing from the history of American *feminism*. Indeed, the scholarship on American feminism has a class problem. The history of feminism is largely the story of the efforts of white middle class and elite women to solve their *own* problems. The efforts of working class and minority women to achieve gender justice, as *they* define it, are relegated to the historical margins, if they appear at all.<sup>4</sup>

The labor women reformers featured in this chapter also had a class problem, but theirs was of a different sort. The class problem for them was, in many ways, what I assume it is for many readers of this volume, that is, how to create a *new* politics of class—one that recognizes the multiplicity of class experience and that refuses to take any single class identity or location as representative of the whole. In pursuing their aims, they chose to work closely with the labor movement, and they embraced many of its fundamental tenets. But at the same time, they sought to create a *different* labor movement, one that would include women fully in its governance and in its agenda. In so doing, they were pioneering an alternative feminism, a feminism that took class seriously and that sought a gender equality that would meet the needs of the majority of women, not just the