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Pauszek, J. (2025). *Worker writers: Community archiving in action*. National Council of Teachers of English.

Review by D-Jay Bidwell

Volume 11 Issue 1: Editorial

Sarah Attfield, University of Technology Sydney
Liz Giuffre, University of Technology Sydney

There has been a gap between issues of this Journal – in 2025 we were only able to produce one issue due to the demands of our jobs and the ongoing impact of a large restructure at our institution. Supporting colleagues facing redundancy, and campaigning against jobs cuts took up much of our time. On a more positive note, we also hosted the Working-Class Studies Association annual conference in Sydney in 2025, which was a delight. We were very excited to greet fellow working-class studies scholars from many parts of the world. The international reach of the WCSA and this Journal continues to grow – the 2027 conference will be in Manila in the Philippines. This extra activity meant that we were unable to produce our usual December issue in 2025, and once again we thank all authors who submitted and waited a long time for reviews and decisions about their submissions. We are (hopefully!) back on track now with this June issue, which has a large crop of articles, commentary pieces, creative non-fiction and book reviews.

In our previous editorial we commented on the tumultuous times – in the middle of last year things around the world were bad and we wondered whether things would get better or worse. Our concerns regarding the Trump presidency have been realised, with his war on Iran and the global consequences of that decision. While we write this, the football men's World Cup is happening, and while it is nice to see players from all over the world showing their skills and entertaining their fans, it comes with the discomfort of knowing that many of those fans (and even some teams) were not welcome in the US – Trump has created a hostile and dangerous environment for many and it will take some time for this to be repaired. We refuse to give up hope though, and once again, send solidarity to everyone in their struggles.

This issue begins with stories of resistance, starting with an account by Bjarke Refslund and Andrea Borello in "The Large Migrant Workers' Strike at Femern: Class Coherence and Intra-worker Fragility in Collective Action" of a migrant workers' strike in Denmark, followed by "The Feminist Awakening of the St.Louis Teamsters" by Amanada L. Izzo which outlines the alignment of feminism and worker solidarity in 1970s Missouri. Aurélia Gervasoni then presents a poetic analysis of the 1912 Massachusetts Bread and Roses strike in "The Poetic Claim of Labor Law: *Bread and Roses* as a Living Symbol of Workers' Struggles'.

Two articles on literature are next, with Julia Obert and Scott Henkel's ""Collective Human Substance": Power and Community in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*" which explores the themes of worker power in the fiction of Barbadian author George Lamming. Rebecca Shipp follows with her analysis of tramping practices in British author Jack Hilton's writing, arguing in ""The Sky Above and the Earth Below": The Tramping Narratives of Jack Hilton", that his working-class perspectives reveal a sense of agency in what is often seen as a deficit (vagrancy).

From here we move to a study of the potential benefits of universal basic income schemes for working-class people. In "How Universal Basic Income (UBI) Can Empower the Working Class Through Improved Wage Negotiation and Poverty Alleviation", Hefin Gwilym, David Beck and Nghiêm Phương Anh discuss these possible benefits while acknowledging the structural issues of class that cannot be fixed by income schemes alone. Simon Winlow then turns us to nostalgia in northern UK working-class communities in "Living in the Ruins: Melancholic Nostalgia and the Decomposition of England's Traditional Working Class" and asks why some communities hold onto images of the past. We then move away from the UK and to a global and historical exploration of the role played by workers in the formation of western civilizations in Kenneth Atkinson's "The Historical Persistence of Working-Class Culture: How Laborers Created the Ethical Foundation of Western Civilization".

The final paper in this section from James Beaufils is an interrogation of research practices in academia via a First Nations lens. "The Academic Echelon: Working-Class Research, First Nations Cultural Load and Relational Ethics in the Settler-Colonial University" explores research ethics in First Nations and working-class contexts.

From here we move to a mixture of commentary and creative non-fiction, starting with William Matthew McCarter's "Beyond the Knapsack: Rethinking Whiteness, Privilege, and Class in Rural America" which delves into the issue of white privilege, which is followed by a very practical and useful piece on how to achieve clarity in academic writing in Kristian William's "Academic Difficulties: The Enemies of Clarity". Two creative non-fiction pieces complete this section with Wayne Mason's "Factory Existentialism: The Machinery Of Meaning" which takes us into factory life, and Erin Vincent's "Working-Class Wheel of Fortune" which reminds us that we can never be sure of the outcome of choices we make (and how they are informed by our class status).

As ever, our wonderful reviews editor, Christie Launius has collated a selection of engaging reviews, beginning with a review of the 2024 film *Adjunct*, and followed by reviews of books on topics such as the author T-Bone Slim, the impact of disability on workers, the racialised effects of incarceration and child welfare systems in the US, the use of coal country currency in 1930s Appalachia, A peasant revolt in 1550s Germany, an autobiography that analyses whiteness, a study of white people's attitudes towards racism and sexism in the US, social diversity in US colleges, and working-class writers' communities. Books and works abound that centre issues relevant to working-class studies!

We hope you enjoy reading this issue and we thank our authors and readers for continued interest in the Journal and in the field of working-class studies.

The Large Migrant Workers' Strike at Femern: Class Coherence and Intra-worker Fragility in Collective Action

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Abstract

Migrant strikes are rare occurrences, and even more rarely do they end up with a successful outcome. In this article, we scrutinise one of the largest migrant strikes to date, in which 300 Polish migrant workers successfully claimed a wage increase at a large construction site in Denmark. We delve into the social dynamics of the strike including the endeavour to maintain class-coherence during a strike. We explore the preconditions and sense of injustice that enabled the strike as well as the internal coherence, focussing on intra-worker tensions and the formation and negotiation of interest, preferences and strategies that shaped the course of the strike. The article provides empirical and conceptual knowledge of the social dynamics that unfold during collective action among migrant workers. We conclude that migrant workers can express agency and secure a wage claim when the right preconditions are in place, and when an alignment of interest and strategies are overall maintained. However, intra-worker tensions and management strategies pose threats to the collective action, making the outcome of the strike somewhat ambiguous in the aftermath. We conclude that even in a setting with high wages, strong institutional backing and a rather homogenous workforce it is highly challenging to secure and maintain coherence among the workers.

Keywords

Migrant workers, strikes, Denmark, Femern tunnel, class consciousness

Introduction

In June 2022, around 300 Polish construction workers blocked and closed down the Femern tunnel, one of the largest and ongoing infrastructure construction projects in Europe[1]. The strike and blockade lasted for five days. The migrant workers used their strong structural power resources and managed to win improvements in their wages and working conditions. The strike is thus paramount in being one of the largest industrial actions by migrant workers at least in Europe, illustrating that migrant workers can win industrial disputes despite the poorer odds they typically face. This article delves empirically into the strike dynamics and explores how the strike unfolded and the social dynamics that occurred along the way. We focus particularly on the pre-conditions and injustices enabling the strike, the internal coherence (and lack of same) among the striking migrants, as well as the formation and negotiation of migrants' interests and strategies during and after the strike.

[1] For information about the construction project, see: https://femern.com/the-tunnel/fehmarnbelt-tunnel/

Strikes remain the epitome of working-class action, and thus one of the most concrete and vivid showcases of working-class power and cohesion (Hyman, 1977). Hence, strikes can be seen as the expressions of working-class formation and interests. Nevertheless, the literature shows that strikes are complex phenomena that can occur in spurts and take a large toll on the participants (Batstone et al., 1978; Fantasia, 1988; Hyman, 1977; Knowles, 1952; McBride et al., 2013). The burden on the striking workers often leads to pressure on the internal cohesion, which may in turn result in intra-worker tensions (Thommes et al., 2014). The internal cohesion is particularly relevant for migrant workers, which often form a heterogenous workforce, especially when several ethnicities work in the same site (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020). This diversity may blur interest formation among migrant workers. To further develop the understanding of migrant worker strikes, we draw inspiration from the concepts of interests, preferences and strategies to theorise the process of strike formation (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024). Furthermore, we analyse the strike illustrating how certain pre-conditions (Refslund & Sippola, 2022), feelings of injustice (Borello, 2025; Kelly, 1998), the institutional setting (Hyman, 1977; Refslund, et al., 2026) as well as social processes shaped both the strike dynamics as well as the outcomes of the strike. To date, the literature has not been exhaustive in elucidating the social complexities of migrant strikes or what precedes strike activity; essentially, what preconditions that enables migrants to go on strike and what strategies allow them to maintain cohesion despite the poorer odds they face. We contribute to fill this gap by building upon existing literature and provide empirical evidence from migrant workers and other key actors involved in the Femern strike.

The strike took place in a large construction site in the south of Denmark characterised by union influence and relatively homogeneous group of workers (mainly Polish male migrant workers). Large scale construction sites have been the centre for much academic scrutiny on migrant workers' protest and resistance (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2019; Berntsen & Lillie, 2016; Lillie & Sippola, 2011; Wagner & Lillie, 2014). The European construction sector relies increasingly on migrant workers, typically working in segmented labour markets, and often posted from one EU member country to another (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2020; Buckley et al., 2016; Frangi et al., 2021; Haakestad & Friberg, 2020; Lillie & Greer, 2007). The construction sector was traditionally fairly well organised, and at least in Denmark construction have above average degrees of both unionisation and collective bargaining. It thus remains more organised than for instance agriculture (which likewise has a large proportion of migrant workers). Moreover, worksites in the construction industry are often large, which provide better conditions for collective action among workers. The large workplaces with a higher concentration of workers make collective interests flourishes more easily, especially when workers experience physical closeness to co-workers (Refslund, 2025, Lysgaard, 1972). This stand in opposition to other sectors such as domestic work or platform services characterised by spatial fragmentation, which makes collective action a rarity (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016). At the same time, the construction sector has experienced an increase in labour market segmentation, by deskilling and a return to a more neo-Tayloristic work organisation and labour processes, where low-skilled tasks are singled out for migrant workers in a second-tier labour market (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2019; Frangi et al., 2021; Haakestad & Friberg, 2020). This raises core concerns around how to maintain class coherence amid a strike in a context of segregation and evolving social dynamics during a strike.

We add novel insights on collective resistance and action among migrant workers in contexts of high union influence and homogeneous ethnicity contributing to the literature on worker resistances in large construction sites. More precisely, this article provides empirical and conceptual knowledge of how social dynamics among migrant workers may unfold amid a strike.

The article is structured as follows: First, we discuss the existing literature on migrant workers and collective action to carve out the conceptual framework we use to analyse the strike. After presenting the methods and research design, the article then moves on to the empirical case of Femern and tackles three selected themes based on the literature review: The preconditions that enabled the strike; the migrants' interests and strategies; and the migrant group's internal coherence including intra-worker tensions. Finally, the analytical and theoretical implications for migrant workers labour struggle is discussed based on our results.

Strikes and collective organisation among migrant workers

Strikes remain the zenith of organised labour and workers' protest in contemporary capitalism (Hyman, 1977; Korpi & Shalev, 1979). While the historical tendency in strikes rate has been downward over several decades in the Western world, there have been somewhat of a re-vitalisation of strikes in recent years (Hodder & Mustchin, 2024; Umney et al., 2024). Starting from a structural power perspective from power resource theory (for instance Greer, 2024 who draws on Perrone's (1983) pioneering work on positional power) we emphasise the disruptive element of the strike. The efficacy of the structural power is contingent on other power resources, in this case in particular the organisational and institutional power resources the workers were able to draw upon. Hence, the outcome of application of power resources depends on the totality of the power resources (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024; Nowak, 2022).

Migrant workers are less likely to utilise strikes as a weapon to improve their conditions because their totality of power resources is in general constrained (Refslund et al., 2026). They are more vulnerable to losing their job, as the cost of losing the jobs are high as they often come from low-income countries and because of dependency on the employer, complicating their possibilities of finding alternative employment (Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, migrants might have a family in the country of origin that depends on their wages sent from abroad and there may therefore be severe economic and personal costs associated with going home without the expected wages (Borello & Hau, 2026). Accordingly, migrant workers are in parts of the literature typically described as being on the losing site in labour disputes or even as victims of strikes. Migrant workers typically accept inferior wages and working conditions due to different expectations, low knowledge on host country labour markets and low degree of organisation which makes them more vulnerable to employer discretion (Bonacich, 1972; Piore, 1979; Scott & Rye, 2025; Theodoropoulos, 2025). The migrant workers' often weak labour market position further constrains the functioning of traditional inclusive labour market institutions such as collective agreements or legal rights (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2019; Berntsen & Lillie, 2016). This complicates traditional working-class resistance such as strikes, at least in a European context.

Much previous literature on migrant workers' struggles has been concerned with 'when the unorganisable organise' (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016) and treated migrant workers as an unlikely case of collective action. The literature has accordingly been focusing on migrant-union relations and integration (Adler et al., 2014; Marino et al., 2017). Others have looked at broader perspectives like community unionism (Holgate, 2015), organising perspectives (Martínez Lucio et al., 2017; Milkman, 2019) and so called 'indie unions' that are more grassroots-based and driven by activist and the migrant workers themselves (Però, 2020). Finally, scholars have emphasised migrant workers' mobility power as a way of expressing migrant agency and coin perspectives of individual and collective action (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024). Nonetheless, there are only few studies that explicitly focuses on strikes among migrant workers (for exceptions, see Berntsen, 2015; Kuge & Schaupp, 2025). Although there are numerous examples of migrant workers resisting the often-inferior working conditions and wages they are offered and taking on collective action, their protest mostly materialises in subtle forms like everyday resistance and disobedience (Birke, 2022). While material conditions are typically the core concern for protesting among migrant workers, these are often interwoven with feelings of injustices, sometimes partly based in the material conditions (Borello, 2025; Kelly, 1998). Consequently, worker organisation and strikes are not only about improving the material conditions but also about securing and restoring human dignity for workers (Flanders, 1970; Hyman, 1977; Knowles, 1952).

While it is not always possible to fully determine why workers strike, it has been argued that certain pre-conditions are important to explain why the migrant workers take on industrial action in the first place. These include workers' closeness, feelings of unity, a shared problem perception and some alignment of reference groups (Refslund & Sippola, 2022). These are not universal conditions automatically leading to collective action, but their presence strongly increases the likelihood. First off, workers need to engage with each other and meet, and while this typically means meeting psychically, online meetings may stipulate some of the same closeness (Hau & Borello, 2024). Next, there must be some feelings of unity, and then, some antagonistic feelings over a shared problem directed at the employers (Lysgaard, 1972; Refslund & Sippola, 2022). Grievances may stem from underpayment and missing wages but also more general feelings of lack of dignity (Borello, 2025). Finally, the migrant workers need to compare wages and working conditions with the same reference group (Merton, 1968; Piore, 1979; Scott & Rye, 2025). If some workers compare with conditions in their home country while others compared with the host country, it may be difficult to get them to join in collective action.

Overall, these complex conditions suggest that overt migrant worker strikes happen rarely, and when they do, they tend to achieve less attention. This may be owing the difficulties with accessing and interviewing migrant workers and because migrant worker strikes often fall outside the traditional strikes statistics as they make take on more informal forms and therefore are less visible (Birke, 2022). We contribute accordingly through the case of the Femern as a showcase of a prominent migrant strike in a union-dense setting.

Unity and collectivism during strikes - interests, preferences and strategies

A core element that has not been developed much in the research literature is the demanding task of creating cohesion among the striking workers, both before and during the strike (Batstone et al., 1978; Karsh, 1958). This is not always straightforward as there can be different positions on numerous dimensions related to the strike, even basically down to whether it is a good idea to strike or not (Hyman, 1977; Waddington et al., 1994). Even if the workers agree on the preference to improve the wages, they do not necessarily agree on a strike as the strategy to achieve this. Different workers may thus have different interests, preferences and strategies and these needs to be balanced during the strikes. We therefore need to pay attention to the social formation of interests, preferences and strategies when analysing class cohesion, worker resistance and collective actions (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024; Nowak, 2025). So, while workers may have a joint interest in increasing wages, it is far from certain that these interests are transformed into preferences, which again are shared among the workers. Obviously, there is a risk associated with taking industrial action, which may, in turn, affect the preferences as well as the strategy. This risk calculation is particularly important among groups migrant workers given the multiple vulnerabilities they face (Tapia & Alberti, 2019).

The divergence of preferences and strategies may cause a lack of internal cohesion between the workers, which the workers actively need to balance and redress. Employers often try to utilise these intra-worker cleavages to create and amplify divides between workers. This may be a more fruitful strategy among migrant workers as they have more at stake and hence may be more prone to accept offers from the employer to break up the strike (Refslund et al., 2026). The cohesion and collectivism of the strikers are shaped and impact by the social life of strike itself and how it unfolds (Fantasia, 1988; Karsh, 1958). Strikes can thus be seen as specific formation and expression of class formation and class interest. Like collectivism and collective action at a more general level the collectivism of the striking workers is shaped through the daily interaction among workers as highlighted in the classic literature on sociology of work (Brody, 1993; Fantasia, 1988; Katznelson, 1986; Lysgaard, 1972; Thompson, 1968). Here, the norms of solidarity and joining the strikers are often core and diverging from the these norms through not participating or breaking the picket line, can lead to strong repercussions both during and after the strike ranging from verbal abuse to physical intimidation and even violence as seen in historical accounts of strikes (Chinguno, 2015; Darlington, 2022; Thommes et al., 2014; Waddington et al., 1994). These risks may be particularly important in the context of a construction site characterised by ‘macho and masculine environments’ (Oswald & Dainty, 2020, p. 3; Thiel, 2007). Ideals of masculinity tied into poverty and strong urges to sustain a family in the country of origin has been noted to shape male migrant workers’ survivalist mentalities upon migration (Borello & Hau, 2026). These expectations of masculinity, coupled with an already hostile and dangerous working environment at a construction site (Iacuone, 2005) may, in turn, amplify during a strike. This leads us to examine how the social dynamics of collectivism is shaped in such a context as we scrutinise in the analysis.

Methodology and research design

The article’s research design draws inspiration from Michael Burawoy’s (2009) extended case study, originating in industrial ethnography. Burawoy argues that we must investigate macro-level phenomenon (such as interest formation and workers’ cohesion) at the relevant lower analytical levels (which often is the workplace or work site), potentially at multiple sites at the same time. Only then can we extend the observed results to the broader discussion of the phenomenon. The extended case study framework thus helps link the lower-level analyses with the societal and theoretical reflections on the phenomenon under scrutiny. Additionally, we draw inspiration from the ‘slow comparative’ approach (Almond & Connolly, 2020). Inspired by these approaches, we explore one workplace, the Femern construction site. Besides traditional interviews, we draw on informal conversations and ethnographic presence. We combine this presence with broader interaction in society following advice from Almond and Connolly (2020) for a close field ‘immersion’ (Almond & Connolly, 2020, p. 69). Our empirical data from the construction site is thus complemented with media coverage and formal and informal interaction with unionists across different union departments. This data is anchored in an overarching research project where we scrutinise migrant workers’ collective resistance across three European countries, within and beyond construction sites. From this large dataset, we selected the data for the present article directly concerning the Femern construction site. The data for this article consists of ten individual and group interviews with a total of 27 participants, along with three participant observations. We interviewed a total of 19 migrant workers, most of whom participated in the strike, as well as eight central unionists who were involved in the strike (see Appendix A for details). For the migrant interviews, we either used a Polish translator or interviewed the migrant workers in English depending on their language skills. The three participant observations were carried out in the unions' office adjacent to the construction site, with the first observation occurring the day after the strike ended and the last a year later. We were unable to visit the construction site itself due to safety restrictions but instead visited the migrants' housing area nearby. The Danish industrial union mainly involved in the conflict was 3F covering many construction workers, in particular construction workers like masons, carpenters and concrete workers. We followed the construction project over one year, from the strike was initiated and until it was clear that another strike would not occur. We further conducted two additional interviews two years later with selected key individuals within the union who played an active role in the strike, to post-reflect on the strike dynamics from a less emotionally involved place.

The Danish context

To familiarise the reader with the context of the strike, we here briefly introduce the Danish industrial relations context. Denmark has enduring strong trade unions and employers' association, with a very high union density around 68% (Arnholtz & Navrbjerg, 2021). Wages and working conditions are regulated by collective agreements covering the vast majority of the economy. The collective agreements are negotiated between the unions and employers' association in a largely voluntaristic system based on a balanced power configuration between the two, with minimal interference of the state. The main collective agreements are multi-employer agreements with the exporting manufacturing sector collective bargaining setting the standards for wage developments in the other sectors (Andersen, 2024). However, some sectors are less covered by collective agreements than others, such as cleaning, agriculture and part of the construction industry. These are mainly the sectors in which migrant workers are employed. Working in these contexts, migrant workers are more often exposed to inferior working conditions compared to nationals, lower wages and general poor levels of health and safety (Hooper Overgård et al., 2023; Spanger & Hvalkof, 2021).

Following this industrial relations model, strikes can only be initiated during times of collective bargaining negotiations if the parties fail to agree on wages and working conditions, or if no collective agreement is in place. Besides these situations there is a 'peace obligation' in the model. Accordingly, if workers decide to strike outside these situations, they breach the 'peace-clause' making it a wildcat strike. Workers (and employers) breaching the peace obligation is penalised in the labour court system, and the financial penalties are substantial. The Femern strike took place against the peace obligation, wherefore the unions could not formally to support the striking migrants. Yet, as we show in what follows, the unionists were unofficially involved in the conflict, which affected the migrants' possibilities, strategies, social relations and the outcome of the strike.

Empirical analysis

Initial enablers for the strike: Preconditions and feelings on injustices

A range of important preconditions combined with feelings of injustice laid the ground for the strike. The majority of migrant workers were from Poland, but there were also other nationalities on the construction site, primarily Eastern European workers for instance Romanians. The migrant workers were quite divided along the job tasks as often seen in construction (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020), with the Polish workers dominating the concrete-works casting most of the core structures of the tunnel, which will connect Denmark and Germany once finalised. The workers were employed by the joint venture Femern Link Contractors, dominated by the French company Vinci. One main source of frustration was unclarity regarding payment in the new local wage agreement, with the Danish workers receiving a higher salary than the Poles (INT1, INT2, INT3, INT10). This divergence was due to the Danish workers not paying for the company's accommodation where the migrant workforce was accommodated, as they would live at home. The company's accommodation is a barrack housing area called 'the village' next to the construction site (INT10). Furthermore, it was not clear to the migrants how the payment for accommodation was calculated (INT2).

The migrants would work long hours for four weeks followed by two weeks of leave, where they could return to Poland and see their families. While this system worked well for most migrant workers (INT1, INT2, Fieldnotes3), problems occurred in relation to accommodation standards and privacy. Every time the workers returned from Poland they were assigned to new housing units, and they had nowhere to store their personal property, which often caused lost personal belongings. Moreover, they reported that the mattresses were not cleaned or changed (INT1, INT10). The barracks were quite simple and without kitchen facilities, which lead to frustration among the migrants as they did not perceive the canteen food as decent, which was one of their main criticisms (INT1, INT2, INT4, INT5, INT10, Fieldnotes3). Overall, these dimensions tied to housing and food caused a sense of disrespect and indignity (INT1, INT2, Fieldnotes3). This was coupled with a high work pressure and what was felt as differential treatment between the Polish workers and the Danish workers on the site and a general lack of respectful treatment (INT2). All in all, these feelings of injustice contribute to the strike (Kelly, 1998). The Polish workers had formally tried to raise their voice by handing in written complaints to the HR department, with multiple workers signing the letters, but apparently the complaints were somehow 'lost' (INT2). The migrants summed up their experience in a group interview conducted with the help of a Polish translator:

> *It was something that grew. And then there came a day. It took a long time; it took several months. It was not a decision they made from day to day (...) The worst thing was the sense of injustice, because they were not paid more (...) They were disappointed – why was it this way? They perceived it as a huge injustice. And they tried to talk to the company, and they were just not heard (...) And a strike is the last word, or the last tool, one can activate. So, (...) they started talking informally different places. In the changing rooms, the canteen. And they agreed to meet in front of the main office and show that: 'We are serious about this! We are serious about what we are saying!'. And then the strike came, eventually. But the way they were treated, the lack of basic respect fuelled the conflict (INT2).*

Clearly, the migrants frame of reference was aligned with the 'native workers' (Piore, 1979), as they compared their wages with the wage in Denmark rather than wages in Poland. They further experienced a shared problem perception regarding their accommodation, food and a general antagonism against the site management. Moreover, they were working and living closely together at the site which facilitate the closeness needed for collectivism to develop. Finally, (at least at first sight) there was a shared feeling of unity among the Polish workers partly based on nationality. Combined, these dimensions coupled with the profound sense of injustice led to favourable preconditions for the strike to take off (Refslund & Sippola, 2022). However, as we will discuss below, there were some severe limitations to the unity, which challenged the general cohesion of the workers as well their unity during the strike.

The strike and its dynamics: Interests, preferences and strategies

The strike began on June 23rd after a spokesperson for the Polish workers had cautioned management in several meetings to take the migrants' demands seriously, otherwise they would go on strike (INT1). A group of Polish workers walked to the managements' office. Then a manager came with a megaphone telling the workers to return to work, some of them took it and put on Polish music (INT1). The migrants (mainly Polish workers but including some Danes as well) walked to the entrance of the construction site in a long line and ended up blocking the site for five days (INT1, Fieldnotes1). One of the Polish leaders explained the process and unity among the workers at the site:

> *They* [the migrant workers] *say: 'okay, guys, fuck the rules. We must do something. We must take this in our hands'. The simple voice from the people. (...) This is not just somebody's idea. This is* [the] *voice of every guys (...) And when the Danish guy do that, everyone say, 'oh, if they stop with us, we are strong because they, they, they know what to do. Yes. And then we must help these guys' (...) And then we have a big, you know, something like a collective. Big support together (INT1)*

The blockade of the access to the entire construction site provided the migrant workers with strong structural power. Besides bringing the production to a halt, the workers also stopped the trucks that supplied fuel for a big underground water pump from accessing the site. The pump secured the tunnel from flooding, and if flooded, it would damage the construction site for billions of DKK (INT1, INT2, INT8, INT9, INT10). At a group interview conducted with a Polish translator, the migrants explained:

> *The first few days the company seems uninterested in talking to them and solving the conflict. Such things may disappear by itself. And they* [the migrants] *showed good will so the diesel pumps, they wouldn't – so, if they did not let in a truck with fuel on the construction site, everything would be flooded. So,* [polish shop steward] *is saying that they showed good will. And they feel ticked because that truck was only meant to provide fuel to the pump, but they also filled up other machines. Crane and excavators. So, they believe this is another sign of disrespect (INT2).*

The strategy of blocking the construction site was clearly militant, and management accordingly contacted the police to ask them to intervene, which the police rejected as it was a labour conflict. This rejection is normal for labour dispute, but the severity of the industrial action and the potential consequences should the tunnels be flooded made the decision whether or not to intervene more ambiguous here (Fieldnotes1; Fieldnotes2; Fieldnotes2a). While it was a wildcat strike that breached the peace obligation, there is no (judicial) term of an 'illegal strike' in Danish law. Rather such an act is termed 'opposing the collective agreement' strikes (overenskomst-stridig). The fact that the police did not intervene, despite the quite obviously disproportionality between the means (potentially destroying critical infrastructure for billions) and the goal (a two-euro hourly wage increase), demonstrate the labour-friendly institutional setting, which is a power resource for the workers (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024). Thus, the migrants' interests in the wage increase remained strong throughout the strike, and they appeared to share a strong preference in using militant strategy to achieve this – at least on the surface. The intense setting following the migrants' strategy led to unofficial negotiations between management and union representatives (Fieldnotes1, INT10, INT11). Although the unions are in general penalized for intervening in strikes due to the peace clause in the Danish industrial relations system, the union regardless supported the migrant's interest by entering into dialogue with the management advocating for collaboration (at least unofficially). The migrants received strong support not only from the local trade unionists, but also from an anonymous solidarity fund with international contributions set up to pay the penalty for breaching the peace obligation[2] (INT10). A former unionist involved in the strike fund explained:

> *They* [the migrants] *get a fine because they have breached the collective agreement, and their union cannot cover that* [or they will be penalized for that]. *So, this means that if you want to support them, you will have to do it yourself – just from ordinary workers to workers. And so, so we were some who did that, tried to show our solidarity from worker to worker (INT8)*

Although the penalty could pose a problem for the migrants, the migrants did not seem to care much about the money. As one of the leaders of the strike said: ‘we just pay, we don’t care’ (Fieldnotes_2a). With the tense mood and faced by an aggressive employer, several radical union members from other fractions of the same union drew from Copenhagen to the local area at Femern ready to support the migrant workers if the conflict should escalate (Fieldnotes2, INT9). Here, the environment was described as intense and virile, and with a potential violent outcome (Fieldnotes2). However, as management decided to enter into dialogue with the workers shortly after, these tensions did not upsurge into open conflict.

Put succinctly, the migrants’ interests and strategies appeared overall aligned in the initial phase of the conflict, and their structural power greatly affected the dynamics of the strike.

Towards the end of the strike: Internal coherence and intra-worker tensions

While the strike at Femern at first glance showcase coherence and unity among the workers, it was less present among the striking workers behind the scenes. Towards the end of the five-day strike, the apparent unity among the migrants started to fade, as some of the migrants began worrying about losing their jobs. Simultaneously, the company was trying to convince some of the workers to leave the strike by sending an e-mail offering full pay while away and guaranteeing them there would be no retaliation from the employers’ side after the strike. Management deliberately only sent the e-mail to selected individuals to split up the striking migrant group (Fieldnotes2; Fieldnotes2a). This management strategy intensified the intra-worker tensions that was already lurking as not all migrant workers were supportive of the strike, as they risked potentially losing their well-paid job. Ultimately there were reports that some of the migrant workers who have not supported and participated in the strike were beaten so badly by other migrants in the aftermath of the strike that they ended up in the emergency room because they did not support the strike (Fieldnotes1). One of the strikers later said: ‘*Now we know who are good colleagues we can trust next time*’ (Fieldnotes2a). This intra-worker tension along with the general tough work of being on strike meant that the striking workers were starting to get worn down. They were not used to striking, they were increasingly fewer in the picket line, and the remainders of the strikers ultimately also wanted to end the strike. Being on a strike requires a lot of the workers (McBride et al., 2013). This includes organising, planning and carrying out the strike activities, but also, and not least, securing the internal coherence among the strikers. At the end (and despite internal disputes and a very reluctant French main constructor) the migrant workers were successful in at least partly securing their demands. The hourly wage was increased in a new local agreement that was negotiated

[2] https://www.firefund.net/strikefundfemern

afterwards (INT10). This wage claim is interesting since the wage was already comparatively very high for low-skill migrant work. This shows how the migrants' reference group mattered as a precondition for the strike since they compared their wage with their Danish co-workers rather than the wages in Poland or elsewhere in Europe (INT10). While the initial reception of new local agreement was positive, it also caused frustration (INT10, Fieldnotes2). In particular because the net wage raise turned out to be quite small. The new agreement meant that the workers would have to pay for the accommodation partly with the wage increase (earlier they were staying for "free" but with a lower wage). But the wage increase was taxable, which meant that the overall hourly net wage increases (after paying for the housing and after taxes) was rather low (around 0,5 euro according to the interviewees), which frustrated the migrant workers (INT10).

Nevertheless, the migrants we talked with just after the strike had ended perceived the strike as 'a moral victory' and took pride in the strike stating: *'We have changed the world' (INT1)* and *'Denmark is not the same*' (INT2). As one Polish foreman reflected:

> *I think this is not our - this is not only our war, I can say. Or fight - now it's for everyone (...) this is an international problem (...) This is the first time in all Denmark's history* [that there has been such a large migrant strike], *I think. And that is something big! That's why we say we change our history. Maybe not change the history, but we create a new history*. (INT1)

When asked whether the strike was a success, the migrants likewise said: '*yes, because we spoke!'* (INT2). This suggests that the strike was not only about the wage, but also about being heard and recognised. This relates to equal treatment and dignity, as they voiced their dissatisfaction with the unequal treatment they faced. However, over time, this narrative was challenged and even turned around as some migrants said the strike was 'stupid' and 'that no gains were achieved' (INT5, Fieldnotes3). Determining the outcome of the strike as either successful or unsuccessful is hence an ambiguous endeavour. The migrants came to perceive the gains achieved in the strike as rather minimal, again since paying the housing only after taxes greatly reduced the gains of the new agreement (INT10). In the aftermath of the strike, mistrust prevailed both towards other migrants as well as the trade union who the migrants felt were (partly) responsible for the less victorious outcome of the strike (INT10, INT11). Furthermore, threats were even exercised to at least one migrant shop steward:

> [Name of migrant shop steward] *has been exposed to both threats and vandalism of his car and so on in relation to that* [the strike]. *And rumour has it that he also paid some money to those who did not receive money from the strike found. Because those money do not cover* [the penalty] *(INT11).*

This suggest that the migrants had a difficult time understanding the role of the union and the shop stewards and felt disappointed with the gains from the strike. Many of the migrants who participated in the strike had left the construction site within a year, and when we conducted a follow-up interview three years later, there were only a few of them left (INT10). This suggest that although the migrants' formal demands were met, it was not possible to rebuild a sense of community and coherence after the intra-worker tensions they had experienced during the strike (INT10, INT11). This somewhat waters down the gains achieved in the strike and make the strike outcome ambiguous.

Concluding discussion

The strike at Femern is in many ways a hallmark case of a strike among a group of workers in a more vulnerable position in contemporary capitalism. The strike illustrates how the migrant workers managed to achieve a successful outcome in securing their wage claim despite the intense setting and ongoing intra-worker tensions challenging the unity among the migrants. It further highlights how migrant workers can successfully claim their rights and secure their demands trough strike activity when the right preconditions are in place, despite their vulnerable labour market position. Yet, it is important to note here that the Polish migrant workers were not in as a precarious situation as most low-paid migrant workers often finds themselves in (Scott & Rye, 2025; Theodoropoulos, 2025). Rather, they had higher wages and a safer material setting, including the ability to find alternative employment elsewhere. Reflecting on the selected analytical anchor points, we have shown that certain preconditions (Refslund & Sippola, 2022) along with feelings of injustice tied to practices of indignity and disrespect (Borello, 2025) increases the likelihood of strikes. Particularly, the reference group appeared important here, as the migrants did not have a dual frame of reference of Polish wages but was well-aware of the wage level in Denmark and claimed to be paid accordingly. This challenges the core assumption that migrants tend to accept inferior wages because their reference group remain in the home country (Piore, 1979) and illustrate that the frame of reference is dynamic (Clibborn, 2021; Refslund & Sippola, 2022; Scott & Rye, 2025). We stress how the perception of unfair and unequal treatment served as a trigger for the collective action, along with other organisational and associational factors impacting the outbreak of the strike. However, while the strike was successful at the first glance it also clearly illustrates the challenges of forming class-coherence in an industrial conflict, particularly among migrant workers with more at stake. An important related point is that the intra-worker tensions and general tension on the site during the strike led to increased mistrust and workers leaving the site. This suggests that a strike that secures a wage claim may not lead to more unity among workers in the long run. Rather, social relations may need to be rebuilt, suggesting that a successful strike is not necessarily perceived as a success, nor does it cause increased union membership rates and prevent turnover among the workers. This suggests that we cannot determine the success of a strike by looking merely at the material gains achieved or claims secured. Rather, we need a more nuanced understanding of whether a strike is (un)successful that takes into consideration the longer-term social dynamics and sense of justice and dignity in its aftermath.

That being said, our empirical material shows how alignment of interest, strategies and preferences is important in planning, organising and carrying out strike activities, including how militant approaches the striking workers may choose. By blocking the pump and not deviating from their claims even when the construction site could potentially be shattered, the migrants won the strike. Yet, this militant stance definitely also challenged worker cohesion. Moreover, intra-worker tensions and employer strategies aimed at splitting up the migrant group challenged the cohesion to an extent where some migrants were beaten up by others. In a strike, a macho environment like a construction site marked by hazardous work environment may be inherently exposed to amplifying such tensions (Iacuone, 2005; Oswald & Dainty, 2020). This intense setting may partly explain why most of the striking migrants had abandoned the construction site a few years after the strike.

Importantly, the case of Femern may in many ways be exceptional. The Danish industrial relations system is internationally somewhat unique along with industrial relations systems in the other Nordic countries with the enduring strong unions (also in construction) as well as a strong institutional setting with labour-friendly institutions. Despite some declines in the power resources of the workers and unions this setting provided the migrants with a powerful position to claim their rights. The migrants received heavy union support despite the difficulties the union faced with intervening due to the peace clause, and the police decided not to intervene in the conflict even though the strike breached the collective agreement. Moreover, the material safety of workers seems to have played a role, where the construction workers were comparatively well-off and could most likely easily find employment elsewhere. Nevertheless, the Femern strike shows the importance of the migrant workers' agency and suggests that we need to understand migrant workers' resistance as a dynamic concept that is interwoven with the national industrial relations system, the actors engaging in the conflict, and the internal social dynamics within the migrant group.

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Appendix A: Overview of interviews and participant observations

Migrant workers:

Interview number	Date of interview	Age	Gender	Country	Sector	Interview Type	Translator used	Interview length
INT1	04-07-2022	40-45	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	60 min
INT2	14-11-2022	Mixed (group interview with 7 participants)	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	Yes	80 min.
INT3	13-05-2023	50-50+	Male	Romania	Construction	Physical	No	30 min.
INT4	13-05-2023	40-45	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	43 min.
INT5	13-05-2023	Mixed (group interview with 7 participants)	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	38 min.
INT6	13-05-2023	Two participants 25-30	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	34 min.

Other actors:

Number interview	Date	Age	Gender	Country	Sector	Interview type	Organisation	
INT7	26-01-2022	55-60	Male	Denmark	Construction	Physical	National union, construction	90 min.
INT8	07-11-2022	35-45	Male	Denmark	Construction	Physical	National Union, construction	39 min.
INT9	14-11-2022	35-45	Two Female	Denmark and Poland	Construction	Physical	National Union, construction	90 min.
INT10	01-10-2025	Mixed	Three male and one Female	Denmark	Construction	Online	National Union, construction	90 min
INT11	29-10-2025	40-45	Male	Denmark	Construction	Online	National Union, Construction	82 min.

Participant Observations				
Number	**When**	**What**	**Who**	**Where**
Fieldnotes 1	04-07-2022	Field trip and interviews leading the strike the day after the strike ended	Unionists and migrant foreman / migrant leader in the strike	Union office and migrant ‘village’

Fieldnotes 2	14-11-2022	Field trip and interviews with migrants and unionists	Interviews with migrants who participated in the strike and unionists	Union office
Fieldnotes 2a	14-11-2022	Field trip and interviews with migrants and unionists	Interviews with migrants who participated in the strike and unionists	Union office
Fieldnotes 3	13-05-2023	Field trip during migrant party	Interviews with migrants and informal conversations with unionists	Union office

The Feminist Awakening of the St. Louis Teamsters

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Abstract

The Teamsters have a mixed reputation in the realm of organized labor. Known in the popular imagination for a legacy of corruption and autocratic management, the group is rarely named as a source of progressive advocacy. Known too as a union of truck drivers, the Teamsters are not often recognized for their organization of women workers. This case study of a rank-and-file movement in Teamsters Local 688, a historically prominent St. Louis, Missouri, union, challenges such assumptions. By the early 1970s, the local became a left-liberal font of activism that extended to feminist issues. Detailing 688's mission, its support for abortion rights and the Equal Rights Amendment, the creation of collective organizing spaces for trade-union women, and the launch of an on-the-ground feminist day care project, this paper addresses the synergy between the labor and feminist movements in the 1970s. It inquires into the relationship between union leadership and working-class initiative on matters of gender inequity as it documents a little-known dimension of the politics of the Teamsters Union. In a time of new possibilities for organized labor and renewed urgency for progressive social movements, looking back at the feminist awakening of the Teamsters Union shows both the possibilities and the impediments facing wage-workers' efforts for social change.

Keywords

Teamsters Union, feminism, St. Louis, reproductive rights, Equal Rights Amendment

In common parlance, the Teamsters Union is a punchline, a shorthand reference to racketeering, the unsavory collusion of organized crime and organized labor, and the disappearance of Jimmy Hoffa. This history of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen and Helpers of America (IBT) has been well documented in the popular media, which has made a cottage industry of Hoffa's downfall. Known too as a union of truck drivers, the Teamsters are rarely recognized for their organization of women workers. [3]

That these perceptions have such purchase makes all the more remarkable the progressive history of Local 688 of the St. Louis, Missouri, Teamsters. With a membership of around fourteen thousand members in the early 1970s, it was the state's largest union local.[4] Capping

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[3] Historian David Witwer documents the historical path that forged this legacy in *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). See also John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), chap. 3; Robert C. Donnelly, *Dark Rose: Organized Crime and Corruption in Portland* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); and James B. Jacobs and Ellen Peters, "Labor Racketeering: The Mafia and Unions," *Crime and Justice* 30 (2003): 236–50. Popular press accounts that have emphasized the IBT's unsavory reputation include Steven Brill, *The Teamsters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); and Allen Friedman and Ted Schwarz, *Power and Greed: Inside the Teamsters Empire of Corruption* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1989).

[4] Mike Ryan, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973], Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Harold J. Gibbons Collection, University Archives and Unique Collections, Lovejoy Library, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Edwardsville, IL, (hereafter Gibbons Collection).

a decade of liberal institution-building, this sprawling local's forces faced the crises of the 1960s and early 1970s with a forthright commitment to advocacy and innovative ideas for institutional change. It does not stand alone as a pocket of left-liberal activism among Teamsters. Though their work has not displaced popular perceptions of the Teamsters, scholars have highlighted these progressive moments, such as the radical insurgency of Minneapolis Teamsters from the 1930s to 1940s (Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* [Leiden: Brill, 2013], especially 1–2, and Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, "The Punishment of Mere Political Advocacy," *Journal of American History* 100, no. 1 [2013]: 68–93); civil rights and progressive postwar political organizing in the locals of Little Rock, Arkansas, and Chicago (Michael Pierce, "Odell Smith, Teamsters Local 878, and Civil Rights Unionism in Little Rock, 1943-1965," *The Journal of Southern History* 84, no. 4 [2017]: 925-958, and Liesl Miller Orenic, "The Base of the Empire: Teamsters Local 743 and Montgomery Ward," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 15, no. 2 [2018]: 49-75; a reform movement in IBT locals during Hoffa's reign (Witwer, *Corruption and Reform in the Teamsters Union*, 217–34); and the rise of the "militant rank-and-file movement" of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union in the 1970s and 1980s (Lon W. Smith, *An Experiment in Trade Union Democracy: Harold Gibbons and the Formation of Teamsters Local 688, 1937–1957*, [Doctor of Arts diss., Illinois State University, 1993], 51, and Samuel R. Friedman, *Teamster Rank and File: Power, Bureaucracy, and Rebellion at Work and in a Union* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1982], chap. 10). Notably, there is minimal scholarship on Teamster women's history, excepting Leah F. Vosko and David Witwer, "'Not a Man's Union': Women Teamsters in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s," *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 3 (2001): 169–92.

In the vein of such scholarship, this article gives close examination to a short-lived moment of progressive possibility that blossomed in Local 688 before being cut down suddenly with the removal of its dynamic secretary-treasurer Harold Gibbons. It takes as its particular focus the foray of rank-and-file 688 members into feminist issues at a time when the local, perhaps incongruously in light of the international's pronounced drift into corruption and racketeering under the presidency of Frank Fitzsimmons, stood at a height of regional influence as a force in community development and public advocacy. Its turn to feminist activism also provides a perspective on how the putatively masculinist culture of the Teamsters made space for on-the-ground women's issues at the level of the local during this critical era of the mainstreaming of feminist politics.

Local 688's awakening to the relevance of women's issues to its own political ambitions came suddenly after decades of quiescence regarding its female wage-workers. It moved from the grassroots up as women seized opportunities to launch their own social movement activities from the base of the union. Men, who dominated the leadership, produced institutional opportunities for these activities to flourish. The working-class activists invested in feminist issues pursued reform that sought equality in the political sphere, with adamant endorsement of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) as a beneficial measure eliminating gender distinctions on the job and in the wider political sphere at a time when other union women struggled over support of the issue. At the same time, Local 688 activists were sensitive to inequities driven by class-inflected gender differences. They emphasized the toll of the criminalization of abortion on women; they organized women-only conferences to effect a form of consciousness-raising shaped by the organizing methods of the labor movement; they couched their ERA advocacy within the distinctive burdens borne by working women; and they built a day care center as a means of relieving gendered responsibilities in the domestic sphere. In producing this "mixed methods" feminist praxis, politicized leaders and members of 688 drew upon the traditions of labor feminism—the pursuit of what Dorothy Sue Cobble (2004, 56-57) named "economic rights and equality *broadly*"—while they assimilated the influences of a liberal feminism—defined, in the words of historian Kirsten Swinth, by the tendency "to work through established channels to reform institutions, laws, policies, and union contracts"—that was then transforming political and popular discourse (2018, 7).[5]

While the feminist awakening of the St. Louis Teamsters was brief, it was notable for its partnership between on-the-ground union members and the staff of their local in advocacy efforts and commitment to institutionalization of feminist reforms. It was a give-and-take between the two sustained by both membership-driven forces of representation and the leadership structures helmed by of Harold Gibbon. The speed with which these progressive elements dissipated upon the ouster of Gibbons over 1973 gives evidence of how tenuous the project was.

The article proceeds by examining four intertwined aspects of the feminist agenda of St. Louis Teamsters' working women in the early 1970s. First, it examines the state of Local 688, identifying how this moment reflected the evolution of Gibbons' visionary leadership and the responsiveness of the union's membership to progressive perspectives on social change amid the workaday tasks of organizing and collective bargaining. Next, detailing the role of women in the rank-and file, it reviews advocacy work in support of the legalization of abortion alongside the emergence of women's assemblies. These gatherings created collective spaces in which Teamster women and a broader coalition of women union members responded to both the feminist transformations affecting organized labor and the local manifestations of feminist policy initiatives. This space gave rise to action supporting the decriminalization of abortion and ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. Finally, it looks into the union's most on-the-ground—and ultimately unsustainable—commitment to feminist reform: the creation of a day care center at its union headquarters in midtown St. Louis.

One cannot recount the story of Local 688 and its progressive programming without noting the leadership initiatives of Harold Gibbons. Gibbons came of age in a radical period of trade-union organizing during the 1920s and Great Depression. He steadily ascended from his proletarian roots into well-compensated positions in the hierarchy of the IBT, holding several officer positions in the "occupationally and racially diverse" Local 688 (Bussel, 2015, 2).[6] Mellowing with age, Gibbons was a leader much like Walter Reuther, likewise a former socialist, who saw the "labor movement…as an essential lever with which to reshape society," in the words of historian Nelson Lichtenstein (1995, 439). Eventual union president Jimmy Hoffa, by contrast, made his reputation through a cutthroat pragmatism, launching aggressive jurisdictional fights and making shadowy alliances. While Gibbons was not aloof from the penchant for union-raiding and shady election practices that made the IBT a pariah from the AFL-CIO, his dedication to an idealistic vision of institution- and community-building was rare in the international (Bussel, 2015, 6-7).

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[5]Cobble names this expansiveness "social justice feminism" in "More Than Sex Equality: Feminism after Suffrage," in *Feminism Unfinished: A Short, Surprising History of American Women's Movements*, ed. Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2014), 4.

[6] Bussel's biographical account provides an indispensable history of the IBT in St. Louis., 2. See also Lon Smith, "Harold J. Gibbons and Teamsters Local 688: Progressive Unionism and St. Louis, 1941–1973," in *The St. Louis Labor History Tour*, ed. Rose Feurer (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Bread and Roses, 1994), 39–41.

Local 688's multifaceted organizing efforts contribute to a broader story about how the IBT was not simply a union of truck-driving white men.[7] Early in the Local 688's history, first making inroads among the warehouse and distribution sectors, the union reached out to Black and white workers, fostering an enduring interracial solidarity. This paralleled the efforts of Little Rock, Arkansas's Local 878 to "support black voting, school integration, and fair employment laws and to form alliances with African American activists," as well as the interracialist work of Chicago's Teamster Local 743 upon its organization of the Montgomery Ward Company.[8] From there, Gibbons and his colleagues expanded their efforts outward. Regardless of its transportation origins, the IBT organized shop by shop, taking an organic view of wage-workers. It targeted manufacturing, retail, and clerical sectors—with their substantial female workforces—alongside warehousemen and drivers (Witwer, 2003, 237). Gibbons's early, and ultimately unsuccessful, campaign to unionize the retail workers of the St. Louis's flagship Famous-Barr department store compelled him to look further than male-dominated workplaces, forcing him to recognize that "any attempt to organize the retail industry …would necessitate the drafting of a campaign that reflected the goals and aspirations of a largely white-collar, female work-force," according to historian Lon W. Smith (1993, 81). This laid a foundation for his sensitivity to the restiveness of women workers in the late 1960s.

The local's early exposure to the organizing needs of women portended an ongoing institutional identity of 688 as an alternative to the vision of roughneck masculinity that dominated the wider culture of the IBT: tough, ruthless in organizing strategies, and committed to the advancement of blue-collar white males in traditionally gender-segmented occupational sectors (Vosko and Witwer, 2001, 171-74). Early on, the culture of 688 advanced a masculinity that could be read as less individualistic and domineering, more receptive to collective democratic initiatives that elevated the value of community and cooperation.

While the men who were the public face of 688 would be slow to harness the energies of the female membership, they crafted the local into a vehicle for progressive advocacy, even as the union "focused its primary attention on contract negotiations and new member recruitment programs." (Smith, 1993, 156). Gibbons's strength at the regional level—he was named "St. Louis's most powerful labor leader" by scholar George Lipsitz in 1973—created paths for the local to engage the spirit of New Deal workers' citizenship and Great Society-era yearnings, even as the era of labor-management accords smoothed out the rough edges of organizing and negotiating. While the IBT accrued a reputation as a "coercive" business union, Gibbons cultivated a staff motivated by the spirit of social democracy and worker's rights.[9]

The local inaugurated neighborhood development work in the 1950s with a community stewards program, which organized union members to become involved in municipal advocacy (Bussel, 2015, 90-95). In the late 1960s, animated by the spirit of the Great Society and Saul Alinsky-style neighborhood movements, 688 incorporated antipoverty and housing advocacy into its social programming. Claiming a new role in forging urban policy, the union was uniquely thrust onto the national stage for its role in mediating the country's first rent strike staged at public housing and its involvement with the Labor for Peace coalition, an antiwar

[7] For an earlier generation of women Teamsters, see Vosko and Witwer, "'Not a Man's Union.'"
[8] Pierce, "Odell Smith, Teamsters Local 878, and Civil Rights Unionism in Little Rock, 1943-1965," 958; Orenic, "The Base of the Empire: Teamsters Local 743 and Montgomery Ward."
[9] George Lipsitz, "Beyond the Fringe Benefits: Rank and File Teamsters in St. Louis," *Liberation* 18, no. 1 (Jul.–Aug. 1973): 32; Ahlquist and Levi, *In the Interest of Others*, 56–71; Aaron Brenner, "Rank and File Rebellion, 1966–1975," (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996), 231.

labor consortium that held its inaugural conference at 688's headquarters in June 1972, infuriating IBT president and Nixon-ally Frank Fitzsimmons (Bussel, 2015, 172-74).[10]

These developments set the stage for the emergence of a rank-and-file feminist agenda that was, like the rent strike mediation and Labor for Peace, distinctive among activist ventures at the level of the Teamster local, not to mention the international. Local 688 had not made a sustained effort to speak to the 26 percent of its members who were female (a percentage that mirrored the proportion of IBT female membership more generally), and in this period, pressure emerged from within the union to give women's issues a place within its reform efforts (Deslippe, 2000, 142). The leadership was slow to provide these members access to staff positions in the local's administration, but it enabled their voices to be heard and amplified in its advocacy agenda. Contrasting with an earlier era in which working-class Teamster women had to rely on a conciliatory "incrementalism" in making workplace gains, women activists in 688 significantly expanded the purview of the union's reform agenda (Vosko and Witwer, 2001, 171). In so doing, the local contributed to a wider development in organized labor, which harnessed the momentum of the liberal feminist movement. In this atmosphere, 688 produced a handful of initiatives between 1970 and 1973 that brought them closer to labor counterparts like the United Auto Workers, whose women's department had been involved for decades with women's political mobilizations that stretched from the shopfloor to Capitol Hill (Cobble, 2004, 19).

These initiatives developed in intertwined ways. It was a give-and-take between the local's bureaucracy and the agitation of workers. Rank-and-filers pressed for attention to women's issues from the grassroots, and Harold Gibbons and his team opened institutional spaces for this to take place. The resulting projects—declarations of organizational commitments, special assemblies, lobbying efforts, and the day care center—nurtured each other; that is, until the purge of 688's leadership structure undercut the local's advocacy and community development efforts.

Local 688 veteran Donna Steininger took a leading role in advancing this work. A white woman who had been employed in a middle-class job, Steininger unexpectedly made the transition into the pink-collar clerical workforce upon a divorce that left her responsible for the support of her children. She initially joined Local 688 as a rank-and-file member employed in the offices of General Grocer. She would eventually join the staff as Assistant Education Director and business agent. Steininger can be termed what Dorothy Sue Cobble named a "labor feminist," for she "articulated a particular variant of feminism that put the needs of working-class women at its core." (Cobble, 2004, 3). Steininger recollects that the union's 1960s civil rights initiatives, which included promoting Black men to business agents and education department staff, inspired women, both white and Black, to become "more vocal to also be considered for promotion at their work sites and union." [11] This echoed changes in the UAW, in which women union members shifted their attention away from club and auxiliary activities, instead seeking greater empowerment as workers (Gabin, 1990, 222).

Steininger may have helped set the stage for more general advocacy on women's issues at 688 by putting labor feminism on the radar of Harold Gibbons. In 1969, she organized a group of seven women members to send him a brief letter challenging the union to address issues of

[10] See also Smith, 1993, 249–50.

[11] Donna Beattie Steininger, typed reminiscences, May 2024, in possession of the author. Ernest Calloway testifies to the participation of Black men in 688 leadership in "An Anniversary Special: Negroes in St. Louis Trade Union," *St. Louis American*, Mar. 28, 1968, 12.

discrimination against women. (Unfortunately, the personal stories of Steininger's comrades who were signatories are largely lost to time, reflecting the difficulty of documenting the lives of working-class women).[12] The letter noted that he cared "about so many inequities within the community" and asked him to "care about this one right here in Local 688." "The Teamster's Union (and everyone else) discriminates against women," it continued, highlighting that "women are generally paid less and fill less desirable positions both within the union and the shops covered by the union."[13]

The appearance of the letter is a suggestive, though not decisive, explanation as to why 688 fired its first collective salvo on liberal feminist issues at the 1970 City Wide Shop Conference, a biennial meeting of delegates elected from the rank-and-file membership. That year, the local had a membership of about 13,500 people, out of which 750 delegates had been elected to draft, debate, and pass resolutions on a wide range of social and economic issues. Building on an officers' report on "The Crucial 70s," which touted the union's community development activities, conference delegates called for an attention-getting slate of reforms connected to the local's broader social mission.[14] Resolutions included the group's first official call for an end to the war in Vietnam, but the scope of the conference's political interests extended in multiple directions. A resolution adopted on the topic of "abortion laws and day care centers" marked a dramatic new turn in speaking to a collection of reproductive justice-related concerns that affected working-class families.[15]

The preamble to the resolution contended that "present Missouri and Illinois abortion laws are unfair…, lead to the slaughter of many women, [infringe] on the rights of women, and…[discriminate] against the poor and working class." The resolution itself called for the legalization of abortion, the establishment of a birth control information center at the local's health care facility, the provision of abortions at the facility upon decriminalization, and the union's support of day care centers in the metro area.[16] The feminist thrust of this resolution was rooted in recognition of the inequitable burdens shouldered by working women in their reproductive capacity. The assembly called for a structural policy change of legalization, the establishment of a comprehensive community health center, and the provision of services that would enable working families to raise children in a safe environment. This was a capacious perspective on women's issues that grew out of the realities of working peoples' lives. It encompassed the desire to control fertility, to have access to resources to do so, and to give wage-workers the right to nurture families.

By presciently enunciating a reproductive justice agenda in the 1970s, Local 688 distinguished itself from the efforts of other unions invested in feminist issues, which addressed workplace equity more strictly defined: matters such as job classification discrimination, wage inequities, and comparable worth (Turk, 2016).[17] The abortion resolution instead drew from a broadly organized movement supporting legalization that emerged around the country and indeed in

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[12] Attempts to reach out to other participants and their survivors have been unsuccessful.
[13] Steininger et al to Harold Gibbons, Dec. 3, 1969, in possession of Donna Steininger.
[14] *The Crucial 70s*, Officers' Report, 22nd City Wide Shop Conference, [1970], Box 41, Gibbons Papers.
[15] "Abortion Laws and Day Care Centers" in Teamsters Local 688, "Resolutions Committee Report: Twenty-Second City Wide Shop Conference," Sep. 27, 1970, Box 41, Gibbons Papers.
[16] "Abortion Laws and Day Care Centers" in Teamsters Local 688, "Resolutions Committee Report: Twenty-Second City Wide Shop Conference," Sep. 27, 1970, Box 41, Gibbons Papers.
[17] See Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 9, for an elaboration of reproductive justice, which has "three primary principles: (1) the right *not* to have a child; (2) the right to *have* a child; and (3) the right to *parent* children in safe and healthy environments."

Missouri. Aside from the Jane Collective of Chicago, midwestern locales rarely appear in the histories of agitation for abortion rights, but by 1970, abortion had become a subject of media interest and advocacy in communities that included St. Louis.[18] In the state, abortion was illegal except in circumstances in which the mother's life was in danger. In response to these restrictions, and building on the momentum of state-level legalization efforts that had blossomed around the US since 1967, activists worked from grassroots organizations such as the Committee for Legal Abortion in Missouri and the Clergy Consultation Service. They spoke out for policy change and provided on-the-ground counseling that facilitated interstate travel for abortion-seeking women.[19] In 1971, DeVerne Calloway, the first Black woman Missouri state representative and spouse of Local 688 researcher Ernest Calloway, took the legalization struggle to the state capitol. She introduced a modest bill that proposed that the procedure be allowed in cases of fetal non-viability. In the subsequent year, Teamster women rallied behind Calloway as she became a figurehead of the legalization movement in Missouri.

The inauguration of a 688 women's conference created a further venue for the examination of women's issues within the union, and this became the vehicle for grassroots political involvement around abortion decriminalization and the Equal Rights Amendment, two paramount issues often identified with liberal, middle-class, white feminism. Rank-and-file women, including Donna Steininger, organized and convened the women's conference in February 1972. Reflective of the time and the likely racial composition of the organizing committee, they inadvertently designed the agenda around a "color-blind" slate of women's union issues, not attending to the intersectional concerns faced by Black women members.

The conference was a response, and a contribution, to an efflorescence of women's assemblies among labor organizations, which were coming to terms with more general calls for female solidarity and partnerships with feminist policymakers.[20] The St. Louis conference took an expansive view of its agenda, synthesizing traditional labor concerns with issues more commonly associated with liberal feminism. Organizers emphasized that on-site childcare would be offered, with men staffing the facility. Initial publicity highlighted workshops on such bread-and-butter issues as pensions, job and contract discrimination, and women's representation in union leadership, but the conference ended up garnering headlines for its wage-working delegates' passionate call for the legalization of abortion.[21]

Reportage from the newspaper of the regional council of Teamsters underscored that "legalized abortion, an adequate childcare system, and an end to stereotyped thinking about women only as mothers, nurses, teachers, secretaries, or maids are not only the demands of radical feminists." Even as the newspaper distinguished rank-and-file concerns from the broader feminist movement, it described the alignments. At the assembly, attendees heard from panelist DeVerne Calloway about the progress of her legalization campaign. They also heard from an in-house obstetrician who advocated abortion reform.[22]

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[18] Cynthia Gorney's *Articles of Faith: A Frontline History of the Abortion Wars* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) defies this tendency and documents this history. Ruth Rosen likewise describes the geographically broad coalition that emerged among "underground network of ministers, women activists, and doctors." *The World Split Open: How the Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 53.

[19] Committee for Legal Abortion in Missouri files, folders 14–22, Dorothy C. Roudebush Papers (S0465); and Rose Jonos [M. Rose Jonas], Judith Widdicombe oral history, May 3, 1974, Box 1, Reproductive Health Services Records, (S0197), SHSMO.

[20] Harold Gibbons to all Female Members, n.d., Joint Council 13, Box 3, folder 2, Gibbons Papers; Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 202–203.

[21] "Preparations Now Under Way for 688 Women's Conference."

[22] "Local 688 Women Members Voice Concerns about Women's Rights," *Missouri Teamster*, Feb. 18, 1972, 1.

The rank-and-filers who attended and added their voices by organizing and serving on conference panels to the cause were not a passive audience to the outside experts. They took initiative in this window of opportunity to identify themselves publicly as wage-workers with their own rationale as to why abortion and women's autonomy deserved a place on the Teamsters' political action agenda and in the policy-making of Missouri legislators. They spoke from their experiences of structural injustice, placing a working-class spin on the consciousness-raising phenomenon highlighted in feminist intellectual life. Attendee Mary Fedak, employed by the Missouri Candy Company, put abortion access in terms of resistance to male domination. "We've had nothing but men for the last 100 years," she insisted. "Men have decided what a woman is going to do. They keep us pregnant and barefoot and can walk out on us and leave us with children. It's time we decided whether or not to have them."[23]

Some of these women became further involved in the legalization fight as they joined a lobbying delegation supporting Calloway's bill at a hearing in March 1972. Rose Roberts, employed by General Grocer, offered testimony publicizing the union's resolution supporting the elimination of legal restrictions on abortion.[24] The bill was not successful, and Missouri would have to wait until the January 1973 *Roe* decision of the US Supreme Court to secure a supersession of its criminal statute. With this development, rank-and-file activists turned their attention elsewhere.

For one, the 1972 women's conference planted seeds for future women's labor conferences. In so doing, the Teamsters further contributed to the movement taking shape in a variety of union internationals and locals. This movement grafted the consciousness-raising impulse that developed out the feminist movement on to the representative assembly structures of organized labor. Historian Dennis A. Deslippe (2000, 116) explains that after infighting over the repeal of protective labor laws sorted itself out over the late 1960s and early 1970s, "working-class feminists around the country forged interunion coalitions to demand gender equality." In such fashion, the Teamsters joined forces in 1973 with other women union members of the region to convene St. Louis Women's Labor Conference. It was sponsored by 688 but open to all women union members. Conference organizers enlisted legendary St. Louis union leader Ora Lee Malone, a one-time garment piece-worker and eventual business representative with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America whom historian Keona K. Ervin named "one of St. Louis's most important black freedom and economic justice advocates," in the chair role (2023, 163). In an invitation letter, Malone appealed to union women's potential for solidarity across lines of occupation and organizational affiliation to encourage them to be aware of "the talent, ambition, and potential ability lying dormant in our society, particularly among working people." The conference aimed to "generate this stored energy into action."[25]

The 1973 conference saw attendance increase from the roughly 75 people who attended the 1972 meeting to around 400 participants, mostly women, representing 30 different unions. Addie Wyatt (Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workmen) and Florence Criley (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers) gave keynotes. These speakers, luminaries in the realm of women's labor, represented internationals that had an exceptional commitment to civil rights

[23] Lois Timnick, "Give Women a Say in Abortion, Female Teamsters Demand," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, n.d. in Reproductive Health Services Records, SHSMO.
[24] "Women Testify for Abortions," *Missouri Teamster*, Mar. 17, 1972, 3.
[25] Ora Malone to Ellenor Tiffany, Jun. 7, 1973, St. Louis Women's Labor Conference Collection (S0110), SHSMO.

and related progressive causes.[26] They delivered messages rallying support for the machinery of labor by advocating the organization of unorganized women workers and an increase in women's involvement in union leadership. They additionally called for ratification of the ERA.[27] The conference took a wide view of the issues affecting working women and showed sensitivity to Black women's presence in organized labor, reflected in the programming and evoked in a conference emblem of a black hand clasping a white hand.[28]

The St. Louis Women's Labor Conference occurred concurrently with a series of regional meetings that led to the creation of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW). Sources are murky on the relationship of the former to the latter. The St. Louis Labor Conference was not organized by the national founders of CLUW and, judging from the archival records of the national CLUW, it bore no formal connection to what the national group named as its predecessor meetings. Founding CLUW president Olga Madar went so far to say that one of these official predecessor meetings "was the first of its kind in the history of the labor movement!"[29] Yet, Donna Steininger recollected that she was in contact with Madar as those predecessor meetings were being planned concurrently with the St. Louis conference. Madar, she noted, "got me on board with her great idea for an organization of union women to organize the many women workers into unions to improve their wages and working conditions and get them pensions. I sent out the call in our area."[30] The St. Louis assembly created a continuations committee to establish its conference as the starting point for a new organization, suggesting there were linkages among the efforts, an assertion affirmed in secondary scholarship.[31] At any rate, there was synergy: shortly after Chicago hosted the inaugural national CLUW convention in April 1974, a Saint Louis chapter of the Coalition of Labor Union Women was founded, with Steininger initiating the group's founding charter and 688's headquarters hosting its meetings.[32]

The founding of CLUW, and by extension, the St. Louis Labor Conference, marked a high point of optimism in the power of working women to transform organized labor from within with ambitions to bridge labor organizations to local and national political struggles. Organizers and delegates aimed to raise women's participation in their own unions as well as to shape policy issues affecting all workers. Though, as Cobble (2004, 201) asserts, union women were not "latecomers to the new feminism," but rather "initiators," this moment reflected a new development in interunion organizing as it put an indelible trade-union stamp

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[26] For these unions' commitment to progressive women's issues, see Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*; and Rosemary Feurer, *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 151–52. Malone supported the ERA in advance of the wider union's support of the issue (Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement*, 194).

[27] "Women Labor Meeting," *Missouri Teamster*, Dec. 21, 1973, 8.

[28] Myrna Fichtenbaum to Florence Criley, correspondence, Oct. 8, 1973, in Ora Lee Malone Papers (S0670), SHSMO.

[29] Olga Madar to Myra Wolfgang, correspondence, Jun. 30, 1973, box 2, folder 5,Coalition of Labor Union Records (LR000664), Part 1, Series I, Walter Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI (hereafter, CLUW-WSU).

[30] Steininger reminiscences.

[31] Silke Roth, "Political Socialization, Bridging Organization, Social Movement Interaction: The Coalition of Labor Union Women, 1974–1996," (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 1997), 68; Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement*, 226; Diane Balser, *Feminism and Labor in Modern Times* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1987), 154

[32] St. Louis, Missouri Chapter, "Application for Charter," Nov. 10, 1974, box 55, folder 17, Coalition of Labor Union Records (LR000664), Part 2, Series VIII, Walter Reuther Library. For a broader introduction to the St. Louis Chapter of the CLUW, see Gretchen Arnold and Ilene Ordower, "'We Were on a Mission": Feminist Activism in St. Louis in the 1960s and 1970s," in *Left in the Midwest: St. Louis Progressive Activism in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. Amanda L. Izzo and Benjamin Looker (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2022), 184–87.

on the liberal feminism of the 1970s. "CLUW identified with the women's movement from the very beginning," writes scholar Diane Balser, and representatives of Local 688 identified themselves closely with CLUW in its early years (Balser, 1987, 160). The St. Louis chapter sent two members of Local 688 to the national governing body soon after its founding: Donna Steininger as an executive board alternate and Rose Bode, a rank-and-filer employed by Yellow Freight, as a convention convener.[33]

Teamster women became part of the vibrant national and local CLUW groups. Indeed, a Teamster helped stage one of the most powerful moments at the Chicago conference. Local 743 trustee Clara Day embraced United Farm Worker (UFW) organizer Josephine Flores on the stage, making an emotionally charged gesture of solidarity across the fractious relationship between the unions occasioned by the Teamster raids of UFW constituencies. Though organizers sought to involve the UFW's Dolores Huerta in the group, the assembly struggled whether to issue a statement in support of the UFW's grape, wine and lettuce boycott, ultimately demurring in an apparent attempt to court IBT involvement.[34] Day distinguished herself among the Teamsters for her visible leadership and mentorship in a local that, like 688, "developed an extensive service apparatus, instituted internal organizing and education, fostered a presence in public life, and followed a constant and creative organizing agenda that managed a changing metropolitan economy and workforce in terms of both types of work as well as racial justice and comity." (Orenic, 2018, 50). Early on, she reached out to Malone and Steininger, thanking them for the "work you are doing in St. Louis."[35] Later, Steininger and Bode would successfully wage "an intense campaign" for the election of Day to a vice-presidency position in the national organization.[36]

Scattered 688 women helped build the St. Louis CLUW and, for a time, the national organization. Grace Maglione served as treasurer of the local group in the mid-1970s and handed the baton over to another 688 member, Marinda Wright, in the latter part of the decade.[37] Donna Steininger, briefly a member of the national group's Coordinating Committee, remained only peripherally involved. Steininger explains that this was because CLUW's organizing efforts were "complicated and formidable." Success at organizing traditionally female sectors—which was her priority issue and that which was articulated as a central emphasis at CLUW's founding—was "time-consuming and rare." She was not satisfied with the progress made at this goal, and she identified jurisdictional disputes, such as that which divided the IBT and UFW, as a source of this difficulty. Though centrally involved at the beginning, she drifted from the groups.[38] While Teamster women were not as front-and-center

[33] "Teamster Elected to CLUW Office," *Missouri Teamster*, Oct. 21, 1977, n.p. in Newsclippings, box 4, folder 23, Coalition of Labor Union Women, St. Louis Chapter Records (S01016) (hereafter, CLUW-STL), SHSMO; Steininger reminiscences.

[34] Olga M. Madar to Edie Van Horn and Addie Wyatt, Oct. 22, 1973, box 2, folder 5, Part 1, Series I, CLUW-WSU. Roth, "Political Socialization, Bridging Organization, Social Movement Interaction," 278–80; "Labor Union Women Form Coalition," *The Militant*, Apr. 5, 1974, box 4, folder 23, CLUW-STL, SHSMO; Balser, *Sisterhood and Solidarity*, 163-164. An account that more fully examines the relationship between the CLUW and IBT would be a valuable addition to the literature, one that further amplifies the IBT's willingness to engage in left-liberal projects.

[35] Clara Day to Ora Malone, Mary Bolden, and Donna Steininger, Aug. 29, 1974. Box 1, folder 5, Ora Lee Malone Papers, SHSMO.

[36] "Teamster Elected to CLUW Office," Oct. 21, 1977.

[37] "WE want to tell you about," press release, n.d., box 4, folder 24, and General membership meeting minutes, Feb. 18, 1978, box 3 folder 18, CLUW-STL, SHSMO.

[38] Steininger, reminiscences.

at the St. Louis CLUW in the later 1970s as they had been at the chapter's founding, Local 688's headquarters continued to host CLUW meetings.[39]

St. Louis's CLUW shared a trajectory with the national organization, placing emphasis in the earliest years upon organization-building; "equal pay, equal rights, and equal opportunity"; organizing unorganized workers; and encouraging "women to take leadership and policy making roles within their own unions at all levels."[40] Both groups lobbied intensively for the ERA. Disappointing some who "wanted more attention to sexual politics and gender roles," the national organization initially placed an "unrelenting focus on economics and on policy linked to jobs and unions"—pay discrimination, job classifications, livable wages, pension and maternity benefits, and occupational safety (Cobble, 2004, 203). It expended considerable effort establishing an organizational structure between 1974–77. This period was marked by internal struggles over the direction of its advocacy: whether it should prioritize the existing realm of organized labor or branch out into more expansive leftist concerns. It supported chapter-level work, but until the late 1970s when it found its footing, its direct programming was most visible in the form of conventions and a national newsletter (Balser, 1987, 175-193). In its early years, the St. Louis CLUW was able to launch more on-the-ground ventures, in both the realm of organized labor and beyond. It successfully fought a right-to-work measure, rallied behind the unionization of public employees, and started a coalition to stop runaway shops. Members also participated in demonstrations in support of imprisoned rape victim Joan Little and became stalwart opponents to the closing of Homer G. Phillips Hospital, which served St. Louis's Black communities.[41]

Teamster-originated women's conferences and the participation of their members in the CLUW coalition created spaces for collective consciousness-raising and public advocacy around working women's issues, but, as with abortion, members of 688 were already primed to participate in policy debates. This was evident in mobilizations around the Equal Rights Amendment, which had become the primary site of organizing in the liberal feminist movement after it was passed by Congress and turned over for state ratification in 1972. In 1973, Missouri became a battleground state upon the eruption of organizing from conservative women, including St. Louis's force-of-nature activist, Phyllis Schlafly.

In 1970, the IBT—not known for [its] advocacy of "women's issues," as Deslippe points out—joined a small group of unions that spoke in favor of the amendment in advance of the AFL-CIO, which continued its opposition to the measure until October 1973. This somewhat shaky claim refers to a statement in support of the ERA submitted by Jimmy Hoffa to the 1970 Senate Equal Rights Hearings (Deslippe, 2000, 141).[42] The IBT does not seem to have advanced this endorsement as a resolution in its national conferences, and its official publication, the *International Teamster*, ignored the issue throughout the 1970s.[43] Local 688, however, took up the fight.

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[39] Pamphlets, Press Releases, Resolutions, and Statements, CLUW-STL, SHSMO.
[40] St. Louis Coalition of Labor Union Women Constitution, 1975, box 3, folder 18, CLUW-STL, SHSMO; CLUW Constitution, 1975, box 87, folder 3, Part 1, CLUW-WSU.
[41] "Coalition of Labor Union Women: 655 Strikes Quick Shops" press release, n.d., in Pamphlets, Press Releases, Resolutions, and Statements, box 4, folder 24, CLUW-STL, SHSMO. For the Joan Little case, see Christina Greene, *Free Joan Little: The Politics of Race, Sexual & Imprisonment* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); for the Homer G. Phillips struggle, see Ezelle Sanford III, "'Save Homer G. Phillips and All Public Hospitals': African American Grassroots Activism and the Decline of Municipal Public Healthcare in St. Louis," in Izzo and Looker, *Left in the Midwest*, chap. 12.
[42] See also Laurie Johnston, "Women Observe Their Franchise" *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1971, 30.
[43] See *The International Teamster*, 1968–1982.

The ERA was a controversial one for labor because for decades, unions had been bedrock supporters of sex-based protective legislation for wage-earners. They linked women workers' health to such restrictions as limitations on hours and job weight-limits. Multiple factors converged to displace this historic positioning. Over the late 1960s, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission initiated judicial actions striking down sex-based protective legislation as a violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and grassroots agitation within the unions pushed against the laws as a barrier to women's advancement in the workplace (Cobble, 2004, 190, Deslippe, 1996, 156). Deslippe asserts that while the AFL-CIO "did not speak for unions" in its ongoing opposition to the ERA, "the federation's position on legislation generally reflected that of the labor movement." (Deslippe, 2000, 136). In such fashion, the IBT, expelled for corruption from the AFL-CIO in 1957, momentarily outflanked the labor alliance in its support of liberal feminist agendas that emphasized equal rights.

Much of the publicity surrounding Local 688's endorsement of the ERA spoke to the philosophical issues of women's equality that inspired a panoply of non-labor liberal feminist groups to rally behind the amendment.[44] As Donna Steininger testified before the Missouri legislature, the ERA would "bring women into the mainstream of American Society and out of the shadows."[45] A 1972 City Wide Shop Conference resolution promised that the ERA would "provide us all with the opportunity to share in rights, responsibilities, and rewards of our society without legal restrictions based on sex." This statement enumerated the impact of the application of the ERA to legal distinctions such as age at marriage, child custody and divorce laws, and social security benefits.[46]

Still, even as it forged its alliance with feminists outside of the labor movement, Local 688 called attention to the ERA as a solution to workplace inequality as well as a path to social equity for the working class. It put action behind its resolution. In early 1973, the local sent a twenty-two-person lobbying delegation, with five members who provided testimony, to a General Assembly hearing for Missouri's ratification vote. Testimony highlighted that the union local as a whole endorsed the ERA. It also lent the voices of working-class women and men to debates over the amendment. From both angles, Local 688 attempted to disabuse myths that were shaping the ERA fight as Schlafly and her STOP-ERA forces launched their aggressive campaign to halt the ratification drive, initially seen as an easy victory. This was rooted, according to Kirsten Swinth, in an economic commitment to the increasingly obsolete male-breadwinner model of wage-work. While anti-ERA forces centered their struggle on protecting the "'endangered' housewife," 688 representatives staked their claim in support of the amendment by highlighting men as supporters of women's wage-work and by deploying the testimony of working-class women who sought to break out of the limitations of "female economic dependence." (Swinth, 2024, 736).

At the hearing, Mike Ryan, director of 688's Community and Political Department, reported on the pro-ratification resolution adopted during the City Wide Shop Conference by calling attention to the demographics of that representative body of members, noting that 75 percent

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[44] Marjorie J. Spruill names these liberal politicos the "feminist establishment." *Divided We Stand: The Battle over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), chap. 2.

[45] Donna Steininger, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973] Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.

[46] *Report of the Resolutions Committee to the 23rd City Wide Shop Conference of Teamsters Local 688*, Sep. 24, 1972, [14], Box 43, Gibbons Collection.

of the conference delegates were men.[47] Joe Randazzo, a rank-and-file member who was also a committeeman in suburban St. Louis County, underscored this strategy of union men as interested parties in the ERA. He explained his position in terms of the problems he saw with how many women in his community had been "the victims of sex discrimination in their jobs." He assured legislators that he was "not a supporter of all the causes of Women's Liberation [and] not a radical," identifying his solidarity with his status as a community leader and worker rather than as a leftist or political activist.[48] While ERA opponents attempted to paint ratification supporters as radical women who would upend gender norms, Ryan's and Randazzo's testimonials showcased working-class men as moderates who were supportive of women's equality claims.

The remainder of the testimony was provided by women who endorsed the ERA as a working women's issue and who also spoke out against the alarmist claims being aired by opponents of the ERA. They pushed back against perceptions that labor was hostile to the ERA, and they added personal accounts which emphasized how economic inequality and uneven burdens of the domestic sphere affected working women. Steininger laid blame for the widening gender wage gap on "government action in maintaining discriminatory laws and in having discriminatory practices in employment and education."[49] She also pointed to the ERA as a solution to unjust sexual assault laws, which recognized only women as victims.

Steininger's union colleagues further highlighted the centrality of divorce to working women's interest in ratifying the ERA, arguing, according to Swinth (2024, 736) that the measure would "enable better economic security for divorcing women". Rose Roberts offered her story of being divorced and responsible for three children to explain her distinctive perspective on "the inequities of our society" as she provided statistical accounts of the gender pay gap, the irrelevancy of protective legislation, and insufficiencies of support from men in divorce cases The remedies, she argued, would be provided by the ERA.[50] Wilma Woodside likewise spoke to the burdens borne by divorced women as she pointed out the ways in which "the cost of living is not bracketed by sex"; not all women had the privilege of being taken care of by a man. For them, pay inequalities meant considerable economic hardship. "Rents are not lowered because there's no man in the household," she underscored.[51]

The women's remarks addressed wedge issues raised by ERA opponents, such as child support and sex crimes at the same time that they deployed the identity politics and economic priorities of working-class women. The testimony was to no avail as the state senate voted to kill the amendment.[52] Undaunted, the local affiliated itself with St. Louis's August 25, 1973, ERA march. Coordinated with other national rallies on the anniversary date of the women's suffrage victory, the demonstration heard from 688's Rose Roberts, as well as US Representative Martha Griffiths (D-MI).[53] With the publication of the city's two daily newspapers suspended due to a strike, the event suffered from a lack of reportage, Still, the socialist newsletter *The Militant* reported that it was the city's largest women's demonstration "for decades," with 350 marchers and hundreds more lining the route. Roberts rallied the crowd to recognize that "women are

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[47] Mike Ryan, typed testimony.
[48] Joe Randazzo, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973], Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[49] Steininger, typed testimony.
[50] Rose Roberts, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973] Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[51] Wilma Woodside, typed testimony, [Feb. 1973] Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[52] Mike Ryan to HJ Gibbons, "Equal Rights Amendment," memorandum, Feb. 9, 1973, Local 688 ERA, box 43, folder 22, Gibbons Collection.
[53] "Women Set ERA Rally," *Missouri Teamster*, Aug. 17, 1973.

still the lowest paid members of the work force and that all women, including organized and unorganized workers and housewives, must unite to win their rights," bearing out Swinth's claim that feminist activists pursued "economic autonomy, whether through properly valued household labour and fairly compensated waged work, or by provision of adequate government benefits." [54]

Despite the Teamster effort to make the amendment a working people's issue, Missouri became one of the states where the ERA went down to defeat. During the decade, the state assembly would consider the ERA several more times, and only once—1975—would it pass the House of Representatives' vote, to be defeated by the Senate.[55] Local 688 did not muster a presence at subsequent lawmaking sessions, but in 1977, the Teamsters would lend their name to the continuing ERA fight by donating their office space to the Missouri Equal Rights Amendment Coalition. This gesture reciprocated for the coalition's participation in a successful effort to defeat right-to-work legislation in the state's 1978 general election.[56] Indicating the ongoing synergy between the feminist movement and organized labor, the Joint Council president explained: "'Leaders of the women's movement threw themselves into our fight and gave 110 percent to help us beat that onerous amendment."[57]

The Teamsters faced insurmountable odds attempting to advocate for abortion rights and the ERA in the face of an implacable state government. Working on the community scale, 688 was able to launch an initiative that had been an ongoing concern of the labor movement, the feminist movement, and their allies in government: day care centers. Day care had become a growing object of interest to elected officials after becoming a demand of women activists of the 1960s. The issue was not new; it had been an area of policy mobilization since World War II brought the matter to the fore, but postwar changes in the workforce made the need particularly manifest (Cobble 2004, 133-34). As historian Deborah Dinner points out, women's participation in the workforce was on a steady increase, but "growth in maternal employment during the postwar decades had far outstripped the rise in women's overall workforce participation: The latter had doubled while the former had increased eightfold" (Dinner, 2010, 587). Between 1969 and 1970, Senator Walter Mondale (D-MN) and Rep. John Brademas (D-IN) lobbied for federal day care funding. Their efforts culminated in a Comprehensive Child Development Act that was passed by Congress in December 1971, only to be vetoed by Richard Nixon with a vehement rebuke that drew on anti-communism to explain his opposition (Dinner, 2010, 614-15, Cobble, 2004, 197).

Despite this bitter disappointment, day care did not drop off the agenda of its advocates, including representatives of business and industry who interpreted the lack of day care availability as a threat to worker availability and productivity. In this atmosphere, unions emerged as a potential source for solutions as providers and funders (Dinner, 2010, 603, Swinth, 2018,168-69). This was the impetus for conferences convened by the AFL-CIO, a major backer of the Comprehensive Child Development Act, across 1971 and 1972, such as that held in Chicago on "Labor's Stake in Child Care." This meeting highlighted a facility operated in the city by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers while calling attention to the shortage of day care availability as well as the need for women's activism in unions to make

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[54] "Women March for ERA, Abortion Rights," *The Militant*, Sep. 7, 1973, 17.
[55] Missouri Equal Rights Amendment Coalition Records finding aid, 2, SHSMO.
[56] William C. Lhotka, "Right to Work Soundly Defeated," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Nov. 8, 1978, 1A.
[57] "Teamsters 'Committed to ERA,' Donate Office to Mo. Coalition," *St. Louis Labor Tribune*, Oct. 11, 1979 , box 2, folder 73, Missouri Equal Rights Amendment Coalition Records (S0437), SHSMO.

child care a priority.[58] Support for union-sponsored day care centers extended to the international work of the AFL-CIO, with a number of programs sponsored by the African-American Labor Council focusing on day care initiatives in African countries.[59]

In so doing, Local 688 was active in what Swinth termed "feminism's forgotten fight": labor's efforts to remake the balance of work and family life through cultural and policy change (Swinth, 2018, 3). It joined this struggle early in the 1970s, as it had tethered day care plans to its abortion resolution in the 1970 City Wide Shop Conference. The conference staked a union commitment to "assisting in the increase of day care centers, where children would be safe and well cared for as parents work."[60] This came about in recognition of an inequitable division of household labor. Harold Gibbons advanced the proposal as a demonstration project, and the facility took shape at 688's headquarters over late 1972.[61] Reportedly over 50 thousand dollars were spent to renovate the space, which, adjusted to inflation in 2025, adds up to over 375 thousand dollars.[62] Concerns about the financial investment emerged early on, even as the union forged on and a staff of two teachers and a director were hired.[63]

From the start, the venture was touted as a "St. Louis first: union-sponsored child care," and its beneficiaries were imagined as working-class families who could avail themselves of a newly accessible resource.[64] But efforts to leverage community resources, rather than those of the union, showed that the center could not be launched primarily as a Teamster project for its wage-earning families. The union called upon nearby Saint Louis University students and the retiree residents of a Teamster housing development as volunteers, and the effort cast a wide net in search of participants, particularly pursuing clientele who could utilize federal day care subsidies. Early newsletters suggest a facility that could have been operated by any day care provider, with reports of art projects, outings, and the hiring of staff members. The location, financial earmarks, and publicity afforded to the venture made the Teamster connection clear; the hiring of a male care provider testified to the active pursuit of gender equality.[65]

"According to chit chat," Donna Steininger asserts, "the short-lived Teamster day care facility was a big bust."[66] Steininger had no association with the project, but indeed the gossip suggests that the day care facility may have been launched without sufficient planning or buy-in from union members who might have used its services. The scope of the investment and the difficulty attracting clients created a financially precarious situation. While the Amalgamated Clothing Workers operated successful day care efforts in Chicago and Baltimore, they had a higher

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[58] Carolyn Toll, "Union Women Tell Need for Day Care Programs," *Chicago Tribune*, Oct. 15, 1972, B6. See also "Day Care Center System Urged," *Missouri Teamster*, Jul. 16, 1971, n.p.

[59] See, for example, Patrick J. O'Farrell to Margaret Johnson, memorandum, Nov. 13, 1979; and "Planning Mission for a Labor Day Care Center Development Program," Feb. 26, 1979 in Patrick J. O'Farrell Files, Accession AR1990-0152-LBR, 1973–1982, Women's Programs, 1980s: Child Day Care Centers Pact, African American Labor Council records, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.

[60] "Local 688 Resolves to Move Ahead," *Missouri Teamster*, Oct. 23, 1970, 5.

[61] "Child Care Center to Open in January," *Missouri Teamster*, Oct. 20, 1972, 12. Local 688 explored the possibilities for creating a second facility in a white working-class neighborhood in the city. See Community/Political Action Department Report, Jan. 1971–May 1971, Box 43, Gibbons Collection.

[62] Jake McCarthy, "The New Teamster Faces," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Nov. 28, 1973, 3A; Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI Inflation Calculator, https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl, accessed Dec. 15, 2025.

[63] America 2000 Board of Trustees meeting packet, Apr. 1973.

[64] "St. Louis First: Union-Sponsored Child Care," *Missouri Teamster*, Jan. 19, 1973, 7.

[65] "News from America 2000 Child Care Center," newsletters, Mar. 15 and Apr. 19, 1973, in America 2000 Board of Trustees Meeting Packet, Apr. 1973.

[66] Steininger reminiscences.

proportion of women members, who presumably utilized the facilities, than the Teamsters (Swinth, 2018, 17).[67] While supportive of the issue from its earliest years, it was not until 1979 that the national CLUW made a formal call for day care benefits in collective bargaining agreements; Local 688 may have simply been ahead of its time (Swinth, 2018, 174).

The day care center's fate was sealed when the venture launched at the same time that the IBT initiated the removal of Harold Gibbons from his union offices. Tensions between Gibbons and international president Frank Fitzsimmons had simmered for some time. Gibbons was a Hoffa loyalist, and Fitzsimmons had no intention of relinquishing his presidency to a rehabilitated Hoffa, who angled to return to his former position after the commutation of his prison sentence in 1971. Gibbons's refusal to endorse Richard Nixon in the 1972 election proved to be a final provocation for Fitzsimmons (Bussel, 2015, 173-74).

There were other instabilities in 688. Distance grew between the affiliations of the rank-and-file and the liberal visions of Gibbons and others empowered in the union hierarchy, including the agents and staff who helped put his politics into practice. Many Teamsters of Local 688 had joined the white-flight exodus from St. Louis city, connecting with a suburban politics of resentment against the type of reforms envisioned by the union leadership during this period (Bussel, 2015, 129, 163-64). Judging from the archival papers of Harold Gibbons or the news disseminated by *The Missouri Teamster* magazine, no other Teamster locals in the region expressed the political consciousness or left-liberal outlook of 688. In fact, Locals 600 and 682 participated in a June 1970 pro-war "hard hat" parade in St. Louis, which became notorious for the violence that was directed at antiwar protestors along the parade route.[68] Moreover, an insurgency within 688 charged Gibbons with absenteeism, neglect of rank-and-file democracy, and personal enrichment from union funds.[69]

Broadly speaking, members' interest in what Robert Bussel names "total person unionism"—the notion that the union was responsible for motivating wage-workers to act as citizens and community activists—was on the wane (Bussel, 2015, 6-7, 123-25). Local 688 faced further challenges wrought by broader trends in organized labor. While public sector and service industry organizing grew over the 1970s, the historic sites of union power, which encompassed the jurisdictional terrain of the Teamsters, struggled amid deindustrialization, automation, and deregulation.[70] In the early 1970s, there were still instrumental forces in Local 688 driving its ambitious advocacy program and turning people out for such ventures as the women's

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[67] Per the calculation of Deslippe, "The Female Membership in Labor Organizations with More than 250,000 Members" in 1978, the Amalgamed Clothing Workers were 66% female, while the IBT stood at 25%. *"Rights, Not Roses,"* 142.

[68] "Teamsters in Hard Hat Parade," *Missouri Teamster*, Jun. 19, 1970, 5; "Some Violence at March Backing War," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jun. 8, 1970, 1A. While letters to the editor in the *Missouri Teamster* praised Local 688 for its refusal to participate in the parade, the local AFL-CIO newspaper celebrated parade participants as "decent Americans [who] marched to show that patriotism is not corny and is not a dirty word," and it vehemently denounced antiwar demonstrators as "professional…agitators" and "stupid young people." "Over 40,000 March in Patriotic 'Hard Hats' Parade Last Sunday," *St. Louis Labor Tribune*, Jun. 12, 1970, 10.

[69] Jake McCarthy, "Gibbons Quits Teamster Post," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 24, 1973, 1A; Robert Wheling, "Key Incidents Are Cited in the Fall of Gibbons," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 25, 1973, 1C.

[70] Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 23–25, 153. Notably, the IBT expanded its organizing efforts into the service, office, and technology industries in the 1970s, yet it faced the same struggles as other unions in mobilizing these difficult-to-organize sectors. See Spencer Hester, *I Am a Teamster*, 2, 62–63; "Teamster Women: Talented, Tenacious and Tough, They're Making the Union Better than Ever," *The International Teamster*, Jan. 1979, 12–14.

conferences and lobbying delegations. Yet these forces were fragile and lacked staying power once Gibbons was no longer at the helm of the local and regional offices.

There was a house-of-cards effect when these pressures forced Gibbons to resign from his offices, save the international vice-presidency, where he was relegated to margins of involvement. Asserting that demand for day care was insufficient to operate the facility successfully, the new Secretary-Treasurer of 688 closed the venture less than a year after it opened.[71] Lon W. Smith explained the broad scope of subsequent changes: Gibbons's "successors scuttled many of his projects, closing Teamster day-care centers, dismantling his community stewards' programs, shutting down two neighborhood service centers….and failing to negotiate increases in employer contributions to the [health care facility], thus threatening its solvency" (Smith, 1993, 251). The feminist awakening quieted. While Steininger remained employed a staffer by 688, other women members who had been visible in the abortion, conference, and ERA initiatives disappeared from the available archival record. A few footnotes to the post-Gibbons years proved to be exceptions on matters of social advocacy. This included 688 members' continuing, if spotty, involvement with the CLUW and the donation of Teamster office space to the Missouri ERA Coalition. Such activity, however, had a much lower profile than earlier efforts.

With Local 688 activists' inability to advance the abortion and ERA fights in Missouri, as well as the failure of their day care center, one might cast the legacy of Teamster labor feminism as minimal. However, despite the tenuous nature of the Teamsters' involvement with feminist issues, there is a significance in this short-lived period of reform. First, it shows that the union had an influence in connecting a working-class feminism with mainstream liberal political developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, belying perceptions that the Teamsters were solely a conservative, even reactionary, organization. St. Louis Local 688 demonstrated that there remained a place for innovation and left-leaning political involvement in the wider culture of organized labor, and that these places were created by women and men working in diverse settings, even in pockets of the IBT. Second, Local 688's advocacy and women's institution-building reveals the power and reach of liberal feminism in the early 1970s. This was not the radical feminism of the leftist theorists of the movement but instead a policy- and solidarity-oriented working women's feminism that reshaped the political scene of the decade, regardless of the fate of the Equal Rights Amendment. It was also a grassroots feminism, one that was influenced by the leadership structure of the union but one that depended upon on-the-ground energy of rank-and-file members who attended conferences, served on lobbying delegations, and assisted in the preparation of a day care facility. And notably, while women took the reins in crafting this alliance with the broader feminist movement, men in the union assumed pivotal supporting roles: they passed resolutions, authorized conferences, organized lobbying delegations, and committed themselves to the launch of a day care center that might have had a profound effect on empowering union parents, especially women, had the logistics not failed.

These conclusions speak to the innovative power of organized labor and the working-class appeal of feminist reform. Our contemporary moment may be one of despair, of even panic over the future of working people and of progressive politics. Local 688's determination to fight for a more equitable society in the early 1970s is a reminder that labor unions, working on the level of community as well as the shop and the state house, are a powerful source of resistance amid overwhelming odds. With drives such as the Starbucks and Amazon organizing campaigns, the twenty-first century brings new possibilities for labor as a working-class social

[71] Jake McCarthy, "The New Teamster Faces."

movement vehicle. Looking back to the feminist awakening of the Teamsters Union Local 688 suggests both the potentialities and the impediments facing collective efforts for social change.

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The Poetic Claim of Labor Law: *Bread and Roses* as a Living Symbol of Workers' Struggles

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Abstract

While different approaches to law have mobilized the role of emotions in legal study, and while the Law and Literature movement has carved out a privileged space for analyzing *Law as Literature* and *Law in Literature*, the vibrant artistic string of emotional expression remains too often overlooked. This string—resonating as much through books as through songs, including protest songs—bears the kaleidoscopic name of Poetry. In this article, I propose to use poetry as an analytical key, as an approach to a major historical event in U.S. labor law: the strike of immigrant women in Lawrence in 1912. This strike is considered not only an important victory for the advancement of social rights of workers but also as a feminist inspiration, with the particularity of bearing a highly symbolic name: *Bread and Roses.* This name—whose attribution remains mysterious—is drawn from a poem by James Oppenheim, which became a popular success after being set to music in the 1960s and 1970s. By taking this poem, and the legacy of its *living* symbols in particular, as resonant chords of claims and metaphorical struggles, I aim to answer this question: In what ways has *"Bread and Roses"* acted not only as a historical slogan of labor enforcement, but as a poetic vehicle for the symbolic transmission of rights across disciplines, movements, and generations—and what does this suggest about the use of poetry as a method to approach law?

Keywords

1912 Bread & Roses strike, law & poetry, labour law & literature, U.S. working-class history

> *"Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" – Shelley, P. B. (1891). A Defence of Poetry.*

Introduction

Reading Labor Law Through Poetry: The Blossoms and Transmission of Legal Symbols

To think that law can be read devoid of emotion would be like imagining love without longing, or comfort without the necessary fear that precedes it. While different approaches to law have mobilized the role of emotions in legal study, and while the Law and Literature movement has carved out a privileged space for analyzing *Law as Literature* and *Law in Literature*, the vibrant artistic string of emotional expression remains too often overlooked. This string—resonating as much through books as through songs, including protest songs—bears the kaleidoscopic name of Poetry. Today, poetry is often regarded as the accessory part of literature, its crumbs no longer of interest to anyone. It seems so distant from the world of law and legal claims. In this article, I propose the opposite paradigm, namely, to use poetry as an analytical key, as an approach to a major historical event in U.S. labor law: the strike of immigrant women in Lawrence in 1912. Supported by the IWW, this strike is considered not only an important victory for the advancement of social rights of workers but also as a feminist inspiration, with the particularity of bearing a highly symbolic name: *Bread and Roses.* This name—whose attribution remains mysterious—is drawn from a poem by James Oppenheim, which became a popular success after being set to music in the 1960s and 1970s.

By taking this poem, and the legacy of its *living* symbols in particular, as resonant chords of claims and metaphorical struggles, I aim to answer this question: In what ways has *"Bread and Roses"* acted not only as a historical slogan of labor enforcement, but as a poetic vehicle for the symbolic transmission of rights across disciplines, movements, and generations—and what does this suggest about the use of poetry as a method to approach law?

To do so, the article is divided into two main parts. The first traces the four historical "seasons" of the strike—from its beginnings, to the imposed amnesia of its narrative, and to the resurgence of its memory. The second part then develops a poetic reading of this event, not so much in terms of the strike itself but of its metaphors and symbols. By considering different perspectives in which the legacy of these metaphoric and poetic symbols can be observed, I examine the transmission of the poem's ideals across several domains: activist, academic, and artistic. Through this incursion into Law and Literature, using poetry, I aim to propose a new way of analyzing the life of law and the metaphoric symbols that survive it—symbols which in turn inspire transmission across other spheres of society.

PART I. From Loaves to Roses: A March Beyond Lawrence, From Labor Law to Living Symbols

Winter: When the Looms Went Silent – A Fictional Testimony of the Strike to Touch a Past Reality

> *"'I think,' she began quietly, 'I think we want… not just bread for our bellies. We want more than only bread. We want food for our hearts, our souls. We want—how to say it? We want, you know—Puccini music… We want for our beautiful children some beauty.' (…) 'We want roses…'"* – Paterson, K. (2008)

For this section setting the historical context of the strike, I chose to draw on the young adult novel *Bread and Roses, Too* by Katherine Paterson, which narrates the Lawrence strike from the perspective of Rosa Serutti, a young girl, the daughter of Italian immigrants working in the textile mills. I recreated a character who experienced a trajectory similar to that described by Rosa, though not actually featured in the novel, in the form of a testimony by an elderly woman looking back on this episode of her life. This section is also factually supported by Watson, B. (2006). *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream.* Penguin. Within an analysis close to the Law and Literature movement, it seemed —though unusual— pertinent to show that another type of narration is possible even in an article dealing with a legal subject. By proposing a theoretical exposition in such a form, I hope to demonstrate that bridges are possible between fiction (including that addressed to a younger audience) and legal history.

The fictional segment is *in italics* to make the distinction even more tangible with the rest of the text, written in a purely academic manner.

My name is Ilenia Paglia and I come from an Italian immigrant family, but in the city I met people of all origins: an extraordinary melting pot of immigrants from all over the world, many of whom had imagined that the streets of America were paved with gold. But gold, we had none. Nor time either, as we worked 56 hours a week.

It has been more than fifty years now, and yet I will always remember the whistle in the morning, marking the beginning of the workday for my mother and me. Being only twelve years old at the time, I had to forge my birth certificate to be able to work in one of the four textile mills along the Merrimack River, frozen in winter and dark in summer. Most of my fellow workers at the American Woolen Company were also young girls like me, or women like my mother. A woman's work was paid less than that of a man, and men could be employed in more qualified positions or those requiring greater physical strength, so we were the majority in the city of Lawrence at that time.

Just a few days before my thirteenth birthday, on January 1, 1912, the State of Massachusetts' legislator decided to reduce the hours we had to spend in the textile mills from 56 to 54, while maintaining the same salary. My mother's voice that evening, in the shabby shoebox flat where we lived with another family of Syrian immigrants[72]*, resounded throughout the street: operatic arias, songs of joy—I had not heard her so happy since Papa's death in a factory accident. "Ilenia, do you realize, two hours less work!" she said; while I remained skeptical. How would the great employer react, he of whom it was said that he had so many automobiles he could no longer count them?*

In the days that followed, we continued to work to the rhythm of the weaving and production machines, in the usual organized chaos of the dirty and dark mills. But I had been right to be wary of Mr. Wood-with-his-millions-of-automobiles; on January 11, when going to collect their weekly pay, Polish co-workers cried out that it had been reduced, in complete violation of what was provided by the newlaw. This salary cut meant three loaves of bread less per week. As the main breadwinners of their households, upon seeing this, tears welled up: how could they manage now? I was told that they hesitated only briefly before reacting, simply yet radically, by shutting down their looms and refusing to resume work. Throughout Lawrence, an uprising rumbled as strongly as the snowstorm raging outside, making the broken panes of our overcrowded yet always cold flat rattle.

[72] Cadinot, D. (2022). Integrated laborers but marginal figures: the untold story of early Syrian-American factory workers. *Labor History*, *63*(2), 234–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656x.2022.2070733.

This reaction of the Polish women nevertheless the first act of a three-month peaceful resistance[73]*, which we, immigrant women*[74]*, began in those short and cold days of the winter of 1912. Around me, I heard singing in those crowded streets that gathered some 20,000 workers at the height of the strike. What struck me most was that everyone sang with a single voice, despite the usual cacophony that reigned among the different communities—more than fifty nationalities and about as many different languages spoken, that is quite a lot. My mother was very active in the logistical and practical organization of the strike: between the picket lines, she asked the local baker to stay open longer in the evening so that women could take refuge there and enjoy the warmth for a while*[75]*; she helped at the soup kitchens in the different tenements and gathering places of the communities; she made arrangements so that the youngest children would be looked after by elderly people unable to march in the streets. I was often afraid for my mother, I must admit: the militiamen carried bayonets, they poured water on the protesters' clothes that froze instantly, and Mr. Wood seemed determined to put an end to what he considered a foolish insurrection.*

At church, the priest condemned the people who went on strike and said it was legitimate for Mr. Wood to respond with violence. From mid-January, everything seemed to accelerate and my mother no longer wanted me to go out into the street: dynamite had been discovered in the city's tenement district, and although the protesters remained peaceful for the time being, they were more and more determined despite hunger, fear, and cold. Local leaders called upon the IWW to come and support the strike, and my mother took me at the Lawrence train station to welcome "Big Bill" Haywood—a radical whose arrival surely made Mr. Wood shudder—and also Elizabeth Gurley Flynn[76]*, Joseph Ettor, and Arturo Giovanitti. In their speeches, they explained to us that our sympathizers were sending money to support us and to finance the soup kitchens, and that fundraising campaigns were being organized outside the state. Following police violence and especially the death of Anna LoPizzo, public opinion was gradually shifting*

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[73] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/ : "To suggest that the 1912 strike started in a flash over a wage cut diminishes the purposeful behavior of hundreds of immigrant laborers who built unity out of diversity. It also diminishes the importance of organized labor today and organized efforts to challenge injustices from climate change to the criminal justice system. If students learn the textbook lessons about the Bread and Roses Strike, they'll be led to believe that we just need to wait for the next spontaneous reaction to injustice. It's time to teach outside the textbook about the real history of the Bread and Roses Strike". Indeed, it remained a myth for a long time that the movement was born from a kind of spontaneous revolution that gathered all the workers. In reality, there were already twenty active foreign-language chapters of the IWW, as well as the Italian Socialist Federation, called "ISF." These organizations cultivated links with others across Europe and Italy. Several co-operatives had also been created following the model people knew from their countries of origin, such as the Franco-Belgians who had established co-operatives with their own bakeries and meeting halls. You see, a whole fabric had already been woven outside the textile mills, a fabric of organization and solidarity that explains why, at decisive moments, there was relatively rapid consensus among the workers to go on strike. Not to mention the women who already had networks among themselves, for example between neighboring tenements.

[74] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/ : "IWW organizer James P. Thompson stated in the October 1912 issue of *Solidarity*: "It is absolutely foolish to say the strike 'happened without any apparent cause'; 'that it was lightning out of a clear sky,' etc. As a matter of fact, it was a harvest, it was a result of seeds sown before. . . ".

[75] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/. See also Cameron, A. (1993). *Radicals of the worst sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912*. University of Illinois Press.

[76] Flynn, E. G. (1973). *The Rebel Girl: An Autobiography, My First Life (1906-1926)*: "This was more than a union. It was a crusade for a united people-for Bread and Roses".

in our favor. Later on, the caricatures in the newspapers following the arrest of Ettor and Giovanitti were unequivocal: a sham trial, and we refused to believe it!

It did not take long for me to see the concrete effects of the IWW support, since until the end of the strike on March 14, 1912—when Mr. Wood yielded, ah! Finally the law was respected!—I was sent by train to Barre, Vermont, with other children. Because of the famine, our mothers decided to do as in the European strikes by sending us far from their arms so that our hands might be filled with bread: the famous "Children's Trains" or "Children's Exodus" to cities such as New York or Philadelphia. Ah! How I missed my mother, who could not even write to us, and how I trembled at each dawn, knowing that she was preparing to go out into a winter clinging to the skin, leaving behind shards of frozen glass.

To console myself in my Vermont room, after the parades and the welcome by families whose comfort I hoped my mother might one day know as well, I heard their voices singing. I remembered Anna LoPizzo, the long evenings talking while huddled close together, the crumbs gathered from the table down to the very last. I too would be willing to die if my whole life had to be spent in that factory. I too would be willing to die if I were not given those two hours that meant far more than two times sixty minutes, that meant, I have the right to live. And I have lived until now to tell you this.

Autumn: An Imposed Amnesia – Withered Petals of a Decisive Strike

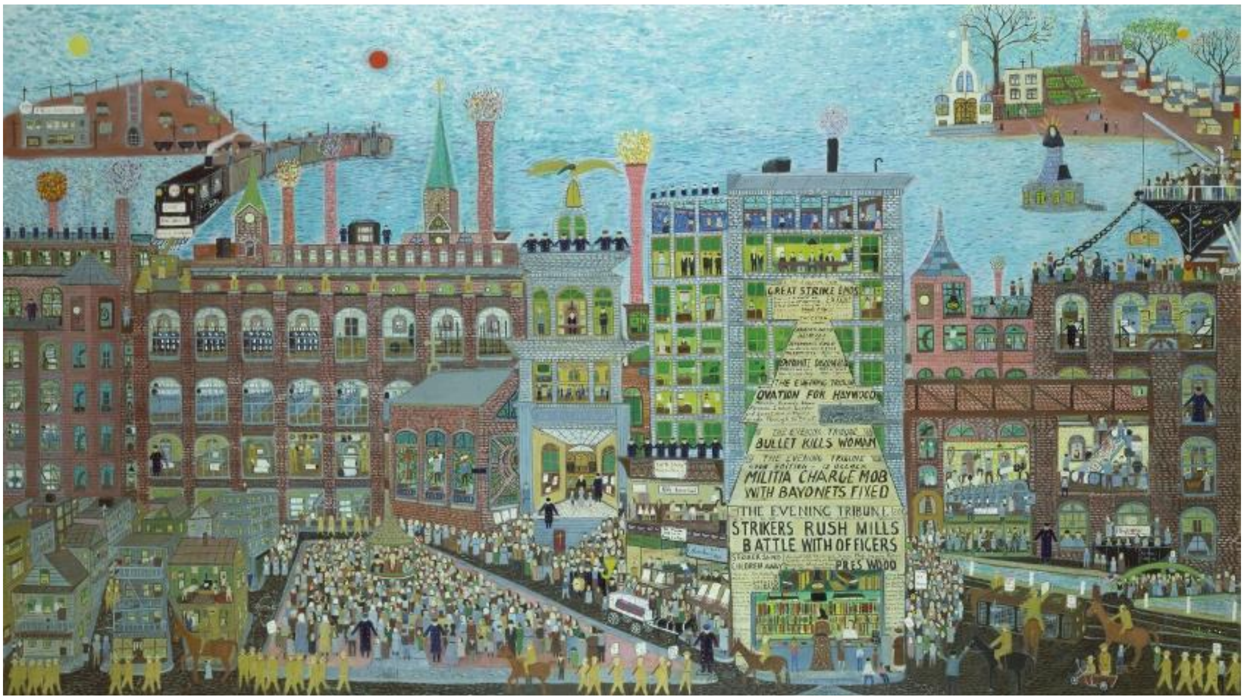
The victory of the Lawrence strike appeared as a threat to the authorities in power and to the employers of other industrial cities in the United States (Shackel, 2025). The industrialists were therefore supported both by civic authorities and by the Catholic Church in their attempt to erase all traces of this strike. Its memory was consequently actively repressed, with the strikers branded as godless anarchists (Shackel, 2025). In 1912, an official parade was organized by the Lawrence authorities under the title *"For God and Country"* in order to change the narrative of the strike: erasing its character as a workers' struggle and reframing it as a patriotic fight (Shackel, 2025). The AFL, then the dominant union, encouraged these efforts in order to undermine an IWW victory. As a result, the families of the strikers long kept secret their participation in this historic event. Until the end of the 1970s and the *rebranding* of the Lawrence strike, a forced amnesia thus afflicted Lawrence and its history, marginalized by dominant narratives (Shackel, 2025).

Carried later by the power of the symbols contained in the poem *Bread and Roses*, the memory of the strike re-emerged through the rediscovery of this poem by second-wave feminist movements as well as labor movements (Green, 1989). In addition, committed historians and journalists such as Paul Cowan undertook a work of memory-rehabilitation, notably through the *Bread and Roses Cultural Project* sponsored by a New York City labor union in the 1970s and 1980s[77]. Equally important in this rediscovery of memory was the work of Ralph Fasanella,

[77] Green, J. R. (1989): "We also wanted to follow up on the initial efforts made to publicize the history of the Bread and Roses strike of 1912. The Bread and Roses Cultural Project, sponsored by a New York City labor union to "restore public memory of the strike," began in Lawrence several months before our project in 1980. This effort was stimulated in part by an article by Village Voice journalist Paul Cowan, who visited Lawrence and made contact with the working-class painter Ralph Fasanella, who had been working there for several years. Cowan also interviewed the daughter of Camella Teoli, who had testified before Congress in 1912 about being scalped in a cotton twisting machine. The daughter knew nothing of her mother's "political past" and when Cowan told her about it and gave her Camella's testimony to read, she said: "Now I have a past. Now my son has a history he can be proud of." Cowan's story dramatically underlined how official repression could create fear of

a worker-painter who lived in Lawrence for some time and painted canvases that contributed to the cultural project of historical recovery of the strike (Green, 1989).

These initiatives resulted not only in the liberation of speech among the strikers and their descendants, but also in a public recognition of the strike, which has since been commemorated in particular by the *Bread and Roses Heritage Committee*[78], which each year brings Lawrence to life to mark the anniversary of this victory. This amnesia, which lasted so long over the Lawrence strike, demonstrates the determination of dominant elites to silence not only the victory itself but also the culture of memory of the working class. Still, a 2011 study demonstrated that in 10 out of 12 major U.S. history textbooks, the Lawrence strike remained unmentioned, even though it represented a pivotal moment not only for the workers of the textile mills but also for women in the labor rights movement and for the strikes that followed[79].



Ralph Fasanella, Lawrence 1912—The Bread and Roses Strike, 1977 (oil on canvas, 45 x 90 in.) Lawrence Heritage State Park, Department of Environmental Management, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and the City of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Image courtesy of Museums.Co. © Estate of Ralph Fasanella.

historical memory. The son of the Italian printer who made leaflets in 1912 was still afraid in 1979 that the memory of his father's role would be harmful. He "insisted on concealing his name for fear that his business would be boycotted, that his family would suffer reprisals"".

[78] *2025 Festival | Bread & Roses*. (n.d.). Bread & Roses. https://www.breadandrosesheritage.org/.

[79] *The Real Bread and Roses Strike Story Missing from Textbooks*. (2024d, July 8). Zinn Education Project. https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/bread-and-roses-strike-story/ : "Despite this incredible organization, the pivotal 1912 Bread and Roses Strike is not mentioned at all in 10 out of 12 major U.S. history textbooks in a 2011 survey conducted by the Zinn Education Project. The two books that reference the strike describe it as "erupting . . . in the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts" (*A People and a Nation*, Houghton Mifflin) and "Workers spontaneously went on strike" (*Give Me Liberty!*, Norton*)*. The image of workers spontaneously saying "enough is enough" is inspiring. But it is not true. Workers weren't passive until the minute they could take no more. A deeper understanding of events leading up to the strike in Lawrence challenges this facile history".

Spring: A Poem as Symbolic Weaving – From the First Threads to the Embroidery of Roses

Bread and Roses (1911) – James Oppenheim

As we come marching, marching in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: "Bread and roses! Bread and roses!"
As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!
As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead
Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for — but we fight for roses, too!
As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days.
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler — ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

This poem, brimming with symbols, was written by James Oppenheim one month before the Lawrence strike and published in the *American Magazine*. Before turning to the history of its association with the strike, let us take a moment to examine the richness of this poem from the perspective of the symbols it contains (Watson, 2006).

"Bread": Since time immemorial, bread has been the symbol of survival achieved through labor. Even today, common expressions such as *"breadwinner"* recall the central place of bread as a symbol. In Lawrence in 1912, bread constituted the basis of daily sustenance, and the wage cut suffered by the workers was measured in loaves of bread fewer per week that they could afford.

"Roses": Roses symbolize leisure time, time as an accessory, that which has no direct utilitarian function but is just as essential to survival—namely, leisure, dignity, a life that is not merely survival but possesses quality. It is time flowing like dew upon the petals of life's roses.

"Marching, Marching": These verbs of movement evoke both the nonviolent character of the strike and the historical feminist struggles that were also accompanied by marching—for instance, the Women's March on Versailles on October 5–6, 1789, during the French Revolution, which likewise centered upon the people's demands for bread.

These symbols constitute a true crystallization of the claims of the women of Lawrence, and thus of the social rights underlying the enforcement of labor law and, in this case, the statute enacted by the State of Massachusetts—despite the anachronism of associating this poem with the strike. Their evocation immediately calls to mind the memory of that feminine and immigrant struggle; but more than that, these symbols ensured the endurance of that struggle through their transmission and diffusion (as will be analyzed below).

The Lawrence strike today is inseparable from its *nom de plume*, *"Bread and Roses"*, and legend would have it that the strike itself inspired the poet James Oppenheim to write it. Yet we know that Oppenheim not only wrote his poem before the strike took place, but also that no trace of the use of this slogan during the strike has ever been demonstrated (Juravich, 2021)[80]. The association between the poem and the strike would appear to derive from Upton Sinclair's edition of the volume *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest*, in which he wrote, accompanying Oppenheim's poem: *"In a parade of the strikers in Lawrence, Mass., some young girls carried a banner inscribed, 'We want Bread and Roses too."* (Juravich, 2021).

However, American Studies and History scholar Jim Zwick has shown that the poem was more likely inspired by feminist movements of 1911, particularly in Chicago, whose leading figure was the feminist Helen Todd (Davis, & Sasaki, 2019). The original inspiration for Oppenheim should therefore be traced back to a speech delivered by activist Helen Todd in June 1910 during an automobile campaign in Illinois in favor of women's suffrage (Ross, 2013). At the time, Todd was a factory inspector and developed an argument for the right to vote for working-class women: *"Not at once; but woman is the mothering element in the world and her vote will go toward helping forward the time when life's Bread, which is home, shelter and security, and the Roses of life, music, education, nature and books, shall be the heritage of every child that is born in the country, in the government of which she has a voice"* (Ross, 2013). Following this speech, she became involved in numerous campaigns and strikes, particularly those led by the Women's Trade Union League of Chicago (affiliated with the AFL, but which partially participated in the Lawrence strike through the organization of food relief stations). During these strikes and movements carried forward by the Women's Trade Union League—particularly in California—placards were reportedly used bearing the slogan *"Bread for all, and Roses, too!"* Ross even emphasizes that it is notable that the poem was not associated with the Chicago strike of apparel workers in 1910[81].

It thus appears that, although the slogan cannot be traced specifically to the Lawrence strike, it clearly emerged from a militant and feminist vocation. This association has since endured to the point that today it is inseparable from that historical event in labor law.

Some scholars had suggested that the expression *"bread and roses"* might be explained by a song written in Italian by Arturo Giovannitti, one of the strike's IWW organizers, entitled *"Pane e Rose."* Giovannitti was indeed considered a *"poet of the judicial system*" (Furey, 1994*)*, and his poems played a certain role during the Lawrence strike, gaining popularity while he was

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[80] Juravich, T. (2021): "If Oppenheim had not based his poem on a banner carried by striking women in Lawrence, then the question becomes whether the phrase "bread and roses" had any other connection to the Lawrence strike. Gerald Sider reports that he "looked through a very substantial number of photographs of the strike, looked through all the testimony, and a great many newspaper accounts. The slogan 'Bread and Roses' never appeared once, nor even the word 'roses.' " Even after extensive research conducted as part of the strike's centennial, no evidence has been found that the Lawrence strikers adopted the phrase. See also Ross, R. J. S. (2013). Bread and Roses: Women Workers and the Struggle for Dignity and Respect. *Working USA: The Journal of Labor and Society*, *16* : "Even before Zwick had definitively shown that the poem predated the strike, in 1996 Gerald Sider found that no photo of strikers, their marches or pickets showed the "bread and roses" phrase on a picket sign. No pamphlet in the Lawrence public library files has the phrase. No real time news article reports the phrase being used".

[81] Ross, R. J. S. (2013): "One may speculate as to why the poem, beautiful as it is, has been affixed to the Lawrence memory rather than Chicago. From September, 1910 through February 1911, there was in Chicago a very large strike of apparel workers, mostly women—larger than the Lawrence strike. But there, the men of the garment workers AFL affiliate settled the strike at one large suit maker (Hart Schaffner and Marx) and deserted the some 30,000 sweatshop workers not employed there. Not such a great moment of solidarity".

imprisoned with Joseph Ettor for the murder of Anna LoPizzo—a crime for which they were innocent (Furey, 1994). This hypothesis, however, has been refuted by analysis of the song's lyrics, which in reality consist in *"a very simple union song celebrating a New York City–based ILGWU Local decades later"* (Juravich, 2021). The mention of bread and roses not even occurs, and as Tom Juravich notes: *"Although individuals may have used the phrase 'bread and roses' or 'pane e rose' during the Lawrence strike, we have no evidence that it became a slogan for the striking textile workers en masse."* (Juravich, 2021). Moreover, *"Giovannitti's book of poems written in English, published after the strike and after his jailing during the strike (Giovannitti 1914), has no phrase even close to 'bread and roses.' Another claim is that an Italian local (89) of the ILGWU uses an Italian song with Giovannitti's poem. Local 89 was formed in 1919 (after the strike). Although the phrase does not appear in Giovannitti's collected work in English (Giovannitti 1962, 1975), someone did obtain copyright for a song 'Pane e Rose'—written with Giovannitti—in 1934."* (Furey, 1994). In those songbooks distributed to the strikers of Lawrence, however, there is no mention of Oppenheim's poem.

It is equally notable, in this context, that Arturo Giovannitti himself was a poet, an artist of the people. Although he did not participate in the creation of the poem or in its later diffusion (Furey, 1994), his writings—particularly those produced during his imprisonment following his accusation for the murder of Anna LoPizzo—remain important historical and literary testimonies for the study of the movement and of the IWW.

However, as in many strikes of the era, songs were an integral part of the Lawrence strike. The "labor songs" and the characteristic *Little Red Songbook* of the Wobblies—whose popularity extended beyond the IWW—were very much present during the strike. As Bruce Watson notes: *"While their children were being fed, strikers continued to parade. They had also begun singing—on the picket line, on the march, during meetings. 'It is the first strike I ever saw which sang!' one seasoned reporter wrote. 'I shall not soon forget the curious lift, the strange sudden fire of the mingled nationalities at the strike meetings when they broke into the universal language of song.'* Strikers soon had songbooks provided by the IWW, including the *'Eight Hour Song,' the 'Banner of Labor,' and 'Workers, Shall the Masters Rule Us?'* They also wrote their own songs, including a parody of *'In the Good Old Summertime.* [82] *'"*

In the decades that followed, one witnessed a transformation not only of the content of the songbooks—now increasingly marked by communist influences—but also of the role played by songs of strike and resistance. In the postwar era, *"The war had been won, the Left purged, and labor was now an accepted institution with the legal right to organize. In this new context the nature of rank-and-file activism and the ways in which solidarity is built shifted dramatically from the turbulent 1930s, when struggles against the boss on the picket line and the shop floor brought workers together in class cohesion, the basic building block of solidarity at the time. But a new procedural unionism of filing grievances and arbitration began to overshadow the need for that old class cohesion. Union-sponsored social and recreational events (including singing) became mechanisms for building solidarity through social cohesion. In this way singing was no longer one step in a process of social transformation, as it had been in the 1930s, but an end in itself."* (Juravich, 2021).

[82] Watson, B. (2006): "In the good old picket line, in the good old picket line / The workers are from every place, from nearly every clime / The Greeks and Poles are out so strong, and the Germans all the time, but we want to see more Irish in the good old picket line".

In this context, folk music and other American subgenres experienced a boom and played a decisive role in the revival of certain labor songs. Yet until the mid-1960s, both *Bread and Roses*—the poem and the strike itself—seem to have been forgotten by the general public.

Summer: Rewoven Petals – Bread and Roses in Bloom

As explained, there is no historical evidence for the use of the slogan *Bread and Roses*; it emerged instead from a construction of the collective imagination, due to the power of its symbols and the claims it embodied. Even if its origins remain obscure and it is not possible to trace with certainty the inspirations from which it was born, what remains is that this poem symbolizes (Juravich, 2021) demands for a life and for working conditions marked by dignity. These claims found renewed resonance with the emergence, in the 1960s, of the second wave of feminism (D'Atri, 2020).

This new wave notably witnessed the appearance of the social-feminist collective in Boston called *"Bread & Roses"*, which we will develop further below. In those same decades of questioning the established order—both in feminist movements and in the civil rights movement—the poem acquired public notoriety, this time moving beyond the confines of labor songs to become a popular folk anthem, since then covered and reinterpreted many times.

PART II. Bread and Roses as Symbols Woven Through Time: Enforcing Labor Law, Inspiring Movements

Loaves and Petals: The Metaphors that Endure

Up to now, the Law and Literature movement has regarded poetry as a marginal sediment within the analysis of law (Christ & Mueller, 2017). Few in-depth studies have been undertaken on this knot, at once so entangled and so complex, between law and poetry. While poetry within judicial decisions has been studied, as well as poetry cited or poetry that takes law as its subject, little attention has been given to poetry as the companion of legal struggles, as a tangible and direct trace of legal claims (Christ & Mueller, 2017). I propose here to use the poem *Bread and Roses* as a key for reading this historical event in labor law, long subject to attempts at erasing collective memory. What it contains in powerful metaphors and in traces of demands that remain current allows us to highlight not only its capacity to humanize law, but also how poetry is influenced by law and, by ricochet, enables change.

If Law and Literature scholarship has often used works of fiction in particular in order to humanize law and to bring out the individuals behind its application, the poetry analyzed here appears to transcend that humanizing function (Talavera, 2025). Indeed, although it makes visible the recipients of a law unenforced by the factory owners of Lawrence in a manner both striking and moving, its poetic and symbolic impact goes further. It is a song of resistance with a singular trajectory: one that not only succeeded in rendering visible a feminist struggle through strong and enduring symbols, but also penetrated society by transmitting a series of symbols that have been employed for activist, dialectical, and artistic purposes, as will be analyzed below. Some anthologies of poetry and law exist, but they do not propose such a reading of law through poetry, limiting themselves instead to poetry *about* law or to highlighting lawyer-poets (Talavera, 2025; Lawrence, 1993).

In an ultracapitalist world where everything without monetary value is discarded, poetry is a kaleidoscope that exposes us to the diversity of the human condition, making us feel in the deepest parts of our hearts and flesh the experience of others—offering a way out of our hyper-individualist focus (De Medeiros, 2013). To see to what extent poetry was able to sow and prolong a profound cultural revolt, is a trace of its continuing necessity, including in the study of law. Not only to shed light on injustices, but as symbols of unity so that law may be applied justly, or so that its application may be challenged. Poetry is a language that *"reflects a self, a subject, which partly exists in the human and social realities it expresses. Language includes an aesthetic plane part of, yet simultaneously apart from, human and social experience."* (Lawrence, 1993). In the case of *Bread and Roses*, this language also carries the force of being nonviolent yet militant, which distinguishes it from many other canons of labor movement songs.

Following the example of Eberle and Grossfeld, it is possible to trace parallels between the poem *Bread and Roses* and the legal context, the very law for whose enforcement these striking women fought (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005).

First, both the poem and the law are kinds of languages, sharing the raw material of language that transforms reality into common reality. If law seeks to order reality, and at times to regulate the exploitation of a segment of society such as immigrant workers, poetry is likewise a kind of freer language yet equally normative, in that it lays bare the rules of the heart, of individual aspirations, or of what people seek to denounce (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). Poetry also renders tangible the exploitation and its consequences on individuals that law seeks to establish, impose, or alter.

Furthermore, both law and poetry are "universals" in their own right, which can come into conflict as in the present case: law is universal in its aim to apply universally to a limited number of persons, while poetry is universal in its capacity to resonate with individual and collective consciences. It is this capacity that seems to be at work in the poem *Bread and Roses*, with an inclination that transcends the Lawrence strike and even the particular historical context that saw it born, developing thereafter into an iconic song of resistance. If law imposes by means of coercive norms, poetry proposes another normative field—one that appeals to the construction of a collective imaginary, in this case of dignified life and justice (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005).

Both law and poetry are human and cultural product(ions), infused with time, place, and human sensibility (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). In this case, the poem *Bread and Roses* was born in a context of cultural change, turning slowly but propelled by a continuous impulse toward legal and political (r)evolutions. If it is a trace of that context, it is also, and above all, a trace of aims that exceed it, and that resonate still today with struggles being waged across the world. Poetry is also, in the specific context of protest songs, a site of subversive expression. Like law, poetry fixes a collective imaginary within the limits of the words it offers. Unlike law, however, it perhaps leaves more worlds open (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). Poetry transforms the static time of history, setting it in motion, budding with what was then beginning to metamorphose in society and its struggles. The culture sown and made visible through the poem's petals thus forms a renewed global and juridical narrative (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005).

Finally, both law and poetry function through metaphors aimed at ordering and making sense of reality: if the fiction of the "reasonable man," present in numerous rules of law, is a metaphor, so too are the bread and roses of the poem analyzed here (Eberle & Grossfeld, 2005). Thus, in their way of touching and seeking to influence reality, both law and poetry rely upon this "metaphorization" of reality. In the case at hand, it is these metaphors in particular that I wish to analyze insofar as they reveal the heart of the demands but also what has remained so enduring in this struggle, in these ideals. Poetry, in sum, humanizes, resists, and transmits—linking singular horizons with a struggle for social justice, continuous and continuing.

It is these metaphors, these particular symbols embodying the demands of the working women of Lawrence, that we shall now evoke in their dimension of continuity and transmission into contemporary society.

What makes *Bread and Roses* a case apart, almost unique, is that this poem and its imagery succeeded in permeating society with the legal and political claims of the Lawrence strikers. By a kind of chance of circumstance—or rather, by a conjunction of feminist evolutions and struggles that intersected and inspired one another until they converged at a given point, attributing this poem to Lawrence, disregarding the historical reality which is nonetheless thereby honored—this poem became an emblem that penetrated not only the political and activist domain, but also academic discourse and the cultural world. Claims so essential that reality itself seems insufficient to embody a struggle for them, and that it is necessary to weave legends so that the leaven may rise and the buds may bloom.

Bread and Roses as Symbols of Enforcement and Victory

This poem illustrates how law can penetrate every stratum of society and inspire change from below, if it takes the form that touches, the form that appeals and recalls to emotion. In the poem, the "marching, marching" is of course initiated by the immigrant women of Lawrence in a kind of historical fiction that serves reality, but it is the innumerable inspirations that have succeeded them that continue to march: academics, artists, and all those who still fight today for dignified working conditions. One of the strengths of this work is that it excludes no one, not even men, thanks to its inclusive character: the struggle is understood as a class struggle, of the excluded, fighting for bread and roses, which are two highly concrete representations of claims for the application of law. If the piece is an homage to women, it is not confined to them and instead impels a larger number of people to join the movement.

Bread and Roses is also the trace of a victory of these claims in social law: the Lawrence strike overcame the resistance of the mill owners on a still-cold day of March 1912. The poem conveys this hope of victory through its symbols, which immediately evoke issues still crucial to contemporary struggles. A collective history that was woven and embroidered with motifs of bread and roses, and whose immense tapestry—contributed to by each woman and each activist—continues today to advance our aspirations by reminding us that two hours a week may well represent the most important of a life—because they are life itself [83]. The poem is a trace of the enforcement of the law itself, in that sense and linked to this particular context.

If this poem remains so emblematic, it also seems to be because abuses of women and children through labor are considered even more abominable than those inflicted upon men. This view is certainly open to critique, but it nonetheless helps explain why public opinion throughout America and the wider world aligned itself with the Lawrence strikers at a time when social movements (and especially those led by immigrant workers) were viewed with enormous suspicion (Ross, 2013). In the press and in the archives, numerous caricatures denounced the violence of the police repression against the strikers, and in particular against the children

[83] Ross, R. J. S. (2013): "One definition of a myth "is a traditional tale with partial reference to something of collective importance" (Burkert 1982, 23). A view of legend includes "a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs".

attempting to board trains to leave for other cities. Following a similar logic, public opinion seems more easily moved by the deplorable working conditions of women and children.

A recent example, likewise in the textile industry, is the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Dhaka (Bangladesh) on April 24, 2013, which embodied the tragedy of the consequences of fast fashion. More than half of the 1,135 victims were women and children. As Ross points out, *"The system consumes women; its brutality mobilizes our sympathy."* (Ross, 2013).

Bread and Roses as Feminist, Militant, and Academic Symbols

Because of the metaphorical duality—so complementary—of bread and roses, of survival and of fulfilled existence, the expression *"Bread and Roses"* rapidly established itself in academic discourse, becoming analytical markers that transcend the discipline of law to touch all of the humanities.

Among the earliest uses of this slogan in such a context was by the labor organizer and functionary of the Women's Trade Union League, Rose Schneiderman, who in 1912 titled her lectures on women's suffrage in this way[84]. In the 1960s, as Tom Juravich further notes: *"a number of academic feminist books adopted versions of the lyrics for their titles, such as Sarah Eisenstein's Give Us Bread but Give Us Roses. In 1971 The Liberated Woman's Songbook included the song, as did the 1974 compilation All Our Lives: A Women's Songbook. 'Bread and Roses' also became part of ceremonies at the women's colleges Mount Holyoke and Bryn Mawr."* (Juravich, 2021). At Bryn Mawr College, summer school educational programs for unschooled girls from factories were held in the 1920s and 1930s, serving as models for other initiatives of the same type (Dullea, 1984).

More recently, it should also be noted that this poetic slogan has been adopted in numerous publications across the humanities, including in studies of psychology, international relations, copyright law, and labor studies. Throughout the humanities, this slogan has become a living, tenacious, and evocative expression—reinforcing its potential as a key for interpreting both past and present phenomena[85].

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[84] Ross, R. J. S. (2013): "But Schneiderman's lectures with that title (1912) came after Oppenheim had written it. Zwick notes though, that Schneiderman worked for many years as a functionary for the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) an organization of reform-minded affluent women who encouraged women workers to form unions. The WTUL was extremely active in support of the women and families of the Chicago strike in 1910–1911. In 1907, he notes, a British founder of the earlier WTUL had visited Chicago and given talks there. She argued, "wrote Zwick," that women must work for more than just increased wages. Her message was summed up in a quote she attributed to the Qur'an: "If thou hast two loaves of bread, sell one and buy flowers, for bread is food for the body, but flowers are food for the mind." The Women's Trade Union League probably turned that thought into the slogan that inspired James Oppenheim's poem".

[85] See, inter alia, in various fields of sciences and humanities : Riordan, C. A., & Kowalski, A. M. (2020). From Bread and Roses to #MeToo: Multiplicity, distance, and the changing dynamics of conflict in IR theory. *ILR Review*, *74*(3), 580–606. https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793920970868; Gasparri, S., & Fanti, S. (2025). Trade unions and equality, diversity, and inclusion in Italy: bread and butter, bread and roses, or just breadcrumbs? In *Diversity and inclusion research* (pp. 255–277). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-81938-4_12; McKay, R. K. (2019). Bread and Roses: Empathy and recognition. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, *29*(1), 75–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/10481885.2018.1560870; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2024). A manifesto for Bread and roses. *Migration and Society*, *7*(1), xv–xx. https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2024.070102; Lacey, L. J. (1989). Of Bread and Roses and Copyrights. *Duke Law Journal*, *1989*(6), 1532–1596. https://doi.org/10.2307/1372660; Moyo, F. L. (2012). We Demand Bread and Roses when We Are Hired. *The Ecumenical Review*, *64*(3), 254–266. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2012.00172.x.

In the activist world, the aforementioned Boston collective *"Bread and Roses"* took its name from the eponymous poem (Juravich, 2021). Founded in the summer of 1969 by Meredith Tax and Linda Gordon (Breines, 2002), it shaped the following decades through its contributions to socialist and feminist struggle. Although this movement had a notable impact on the development and diffusion of feminism in the United States, it was also criticized—particularly by former member Winifred Breines (2002) —for its lack of intersectionality. Nonetheless, the very fact that a movement of such importance adopted this slogan as its name demonstrates its evocative power in signaling struggles and demands. Being sufficiently universal to connect to the transcendental aspirations of second-wave feminism—across social classes, nationalities, and races—this slogan appeared as a link between the feminist movement and social struggles (Juravich, 2021).

On this point, it is emphasized that the reasons why this poem was somewhat excluded from traditional labor songbooks are the same as those that explain its durability within the feminist movement—and also as a song-artwork: *"As an anthem-like song transcendent in its imagery and focus on women, it managed to be both reflective and militant ('marching, marching'), but it operated at a distinct remove from the strident masculinity of socialist realism (and implicit sectarianism) that infused prewar songbooks. Susan Lewis, of the Seattle-based duo Rebel Voices, described how 'Bread and Roses' stands out from other labor songs: 'It's poetic, it's not didactic at all. The imagery—'A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray'—I can see it and I can see these women. It is very visual.' Janet Stecher, the other half of Rebel Voices and the director of the Seattle Labor Chorus, continued: 'I love the marching part. It keeps coming back to the marching. It started then, and we are just one more chapter in an ongoing march—this is not done. We get to join in and there is some sense of continuity about it.' As Pat Humphries of Emma's Revolution explained, 'So few songs go to us as women and workers. It is great to have the song. We need to be reminded that women are workers, too.' She continued, 'An awful lot of labor history doesn't reflect women's history—I don't see myself.'"* (Juravich, 2021).

The fact that this poem was, in a sense, excluded from the songbooks—*"caught between the socialist realism of the Left and the depoliticized labor and popular songs of the post-McCarthy labor movement"* (Juravich, 2021) —made it an ideal harvest in the 1980s and 1990s for feminist movements, but also for the new labor movements that increasingly rejected "business unionism" (Juravich, 2021).

A more recent movement emerged under the impetus of the Marxist and Trotskyist feminist Andrea D'Atri in Argentina (D'Atri, 2020), named *"Pan y Rosas.*[86] *"* This far-left group has since developed in the United States, in France, and in several other countries in Latin America and Europe—ensuring the continued vitality of this slogan within the feminist movement.

As Ross notes, in the 1960s social history underwent major advances in its discipline by adopting a "bottom-up" perspective, and the history of labor law became an increasingly developed field of study. In this context, the Lawrence strike *"became part of a narrative of inclusion of women and of minority racial and ethnic groups. It came to symbolize more than labor's struggles but the whole story of female and ethnic inclusion. Bread and Roses met feminism, and they got married, and they were very equal."* (Ross, 2013). It then appeared that while strikes have always been important sources of demands, allowing the priorities of the working classes to be brought to light, it is remarkable that the strikes associated with calls for

[86] *Pan y Rosas*. (n.d.). https://panyrosas.org.ar/.

the improvement of *"material decency"* and *"the dignity of labor"* were carried by women workers. As Ross emphasizes in the context of the Lawrence strike: *"The legend of Bread and Roses, however, adds something beyond release from degradation; it pushes us to connect the mundane ability to buy bread with the exalted opportunity to appreciate art and beauty. Dignity, the slogan instructs us, is a complex bundle. That the aspiration the slogan expresses is culturally attached to women and/or immigrant workers is the mirror of the special degradation such workers encounter. But on the positive side of that proposition is a more universal one: we all want the Roses—even the tough and silent men—but it is the women who are allowed to say so. The legend reaches deeply into the cravings of those the Internationale claims who 'have been naught' but wish to be all: 'Nous ne sommes rien, soyons tout.'"* (Ross, 2013).

Bread and Roses as Symbols of Artistic Inspiration and Resistance

Unlike other militant songs such as *The Internationale*—which the Lawrence strikers knew and sang in their mother tongues—the piece *Bread and Roses* embodies an additional dimension to the struggle. If *The Internationale* is the leftist anthem *par excellence* and continues to represent strong militancy and commitment to rights, *Bread and Roses* bears the (violet) imprint of feminist inspiration and seems to transcend political boundaries to be inscribed within a broader sensibility in favor not only of women, but also of decent working conditions and a satisfactory work–life balance.

Even more, it is its musical setting that truly cemented the organic association that now appears between the Lawrence strike and James Oppenheim's poem. Although one may say that this poem never truly belonged to the labor movement as such—because of its exclusion from songbooks and its convoluted genealogy of inspiration—it remains that its musical adaptations effectively "brought" it back to its rightful place at the heart of protest songs inspired by struggles in the world of labor.

Its first musical adaptation dates back to 1917 with a version by Caroline Kohlsaat, which, however, was more a lament than a rallying song. It was the folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s that truly transformed the poem into a song of rallying and feminist, universal solidarity. In 1974, the poem acquired broader notoriety when it was set to music by Mimi Baez Farina [87]. In 1976, Judy Collins' version topped the charts, marking the beginning of a series of adaptations by singers such as John Denver, Bruce "Utah" Phillips, and Ani DiFranco in the following decades (Juravich, 2021). The song is regularly reinterpreted by contemporary artists[88]—for instance, by Hélène Pedneault and Marie-Claire Séguin, who opened the *World March of Women of Quebec* in 1995 with their version *"Du pain et des roses."* (Juravich, 2021).

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[87] Juravich, T. (2021) : "Judy Collins further elevated "Bread and Roses" with her recording of the song, which topped the charts in 1976. This success came about in part because Mimi Baez Farina — the younger sister of the folk icon Joan Baez and a singer in her own right as part of the folk duo Richard and Mimi Farina — wrote a new melody for the lyrics. Although the original melody attributed to Caroline Kohlsaat was not difficult to follow in a sing- along, it was more a lament than it was a march. Farina's melody not only took the form of a march but also soared with a sense of purpose and defiance — capturing the spirit of the growing women's movement".

[88] Juravich, T. (2021): "By making "Bread and Roses" the title cut of her 1976 record album, Judy Collins brought the song to a popular audience; musicians as diverse as John Denver, Bruce "Utah" Phillips, and Ani DiFranco released their own arrangements in the 1980s and 1990s; and the song's inclusion on the Smithsonian Folkways 2006 Classic Labor Songs CD further secured its place in the canon. Not surprisingly, "Bread and Roses" continues to be sung and rearranged by a new generation of labor and progressive performers in the twenty- first century, including Emma's Revolution, Rebel Voices, and Bev Grant".

Bread and roses are elements that inspire life—and, it would seem, artistic production as well. Ken Loach released a film of the same name in 2000, addressing the working conditions of Los Angeles cleaning women (Castaño, Bretones, Abuladze, 2012). In 2023, Afghan filmmaker Sahra Mani, co-produced by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai, also adopted this title for her documentary on the situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime. Publications as well as examples of visual art creations are equally widespread and regularly mobilized, notably in posters.

Conclusion

Reading Law Through Metaphors: Poetry, Symbols, and the Life of Labor Law Claims

> *"Law and poetry have a curious yet compelling relationship with one another. They have much in common—perhaps more than is generally acknowledged. Both are human creations of imagination and ingenuity, both communicate their essence through language, both provide order, form, and structure to the dizzying array of phenomena present in daily life, and both reflect and reshape the culture from which they arise. In these ways, law and poetry offer insights into, and deeper understanding of, the human condition". – Eberle, E. J., & Grossfeld, B. (2005). Law and Poetry.* (Eberle, & Grossfeld, 2005).

In a society where labor is often elevated as the supreme value, while creative work is frequently devalued, perhaps the ultimate *"girlboss move"*—to borrow a fashionable expression from social media—would be to demand a truly poetic life. A poetic life would not be composed of dead time, but of living time; a life in which artists would not create only in the interstices of time, but would choose to create at the times they desire. The women of Lawrence may not have sung *"Bread and Roses"* during their strike, but their aspirations remain strikingly relevant today. Roses come with the thorns of struggle, but they promise, thereafter, an existence where the leaven does not fail to render life substantive and nourishing.

The labor of women and children remains a pressing issue, as do social rights. Yet through this analysis of the strike by way of poetry, what emerges is the extent to which struggle transmits itself metaphorically, symbolically, penetrating different disciplines of society and knowledge. Poetry is one of the petals of possible analysis, and is certainly not always the most relevant, but in this case—as I hope in many others—it acts as roots that draw the analysis from its origin up to the stems rising toward the sky. Rooted in labor law and its related claims, the metaphors it carries have enabled us to see its enforcement in a broader sense—beyond its mere application in Lawrence—through the transmission of its symbols. Labor law served as the fertile ground for these symbols, which have endured and evolved: from protest song, to academic discourse, to artistic inspiration, all the while preserving the essence of what they sought to achieve.

Over the years, from its erasure to its rediscovery, *Bread and Roses* has become an emblem born of struggles for social rights that has transcended both time and geography to serve as a direct transmitter of emotions. These emotions, tied to the claims of the women of Lawrence, still resonate with us today, but above all demonstrate how these symbols—emerging from a specific legal struggle—were able to form a shared and transnational legal imaginary, rooted in labor law claims. Through the power of symbols and metaphors, struggles that transcend temporal and geographic boundaries have been woven together, producing a poetic enforcement of the claims they embody.

At a time when, in several countries around the world, the retirement age continues to rise and workers' and trade union rights are increasingly under threat, the poem *Bread & Roses* and everything it embodies feel more urgent than ever. While the discourse surrounding work-life balance has become integrated into our common narratives, we must also move beyond labels in order to assess its tangible reality and concrete implementation, rather than allowing it to function merely as a form of "good conscience" within our workplaces. The memories of workers — and even more so those who are structurally marginalized — must also resist attempts at silencing and collective amnesia, as the poem and its survival so powerfully demonstrate.

To analyze the poetic life of law is to analyze, at once, the life of those who make law, those to whom law is applied, and the ways in which law grows and transmits its symbols.

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Aurélia Gervasoni is a Belgian poet and multidisciplinary artist. In her work, she addresses questions of gender and intimate relationships. Unaltered yet always poetic, she exposes these subjects that concern us all but that we do not always dare to look at directly. Her art is intrinsically political and feminist. Her work also explores communication between individuals and the theme of autism, which affects her personally. In parallel, she is a researcher in law and literature at the University of Zurich. She currently lives somewhere between Brussels, New York, and Bogotá. Her website : www.aureliagervasoni.com.

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“Collective Human Substance”: Power and Community in George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*

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Abstract

George Lamming’s novel *In the Castle of My Skin* establishes a major theme of both Lamming’s writing and his politics: a conflict between what power people possess, especially in their labor, and the circumstances of subjection in which they live. Up to now, scholars have taken a rather melancholy view of the novel’s characters’ capacities, even describing them as “sterile” and “unreflective.” Through a careful reading of *Castle*, attention to Lamming’s comments in later interviews and lectures, and especially reference to the archive of Lamming’s papers at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill, this essay argues for a new interpretation of collective power in the novel.

Keywords

George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*, labor, collective power, community

Decades before readers meet the character whom everyone calls Pa in George Lamming’s first and most autobiographical novel *In the Castle of My Skin* (1983), he was one of many Black workers from Barbados who built the Panama Canal. It was hard, dangerous work, but to Pa, it meant that “money flow like the flood through these here hands,” and it also gave him pride: “I help to build the canal, the biggest an’ best canal in the wide wide world,” he says (Lamming, 1983, 85). When readers encounter him in the novel, Pa is an old man, but when he was young in Panama, his muscles must have ached from digging, drilling, or dynamiting. Pa’s labor power, multiplied by thousands of workers, reshaped the earth.

The wages he made in Panama helped give Pa and his wife, whom all the locals call Ma, a decent life in Barbados, even an “air of dignity” (Lamming, 1983, 252). Pa and Ma rent their land from a white man, Mr. Creighton, a representative of the old colonial regime who gives the land his name, Creighton’s Village. While the wages Pa earned in Panama “had been spent in one way or another, he had never been dissolute. He never seemed to regret anything, not even his present poverty which seemed tolerable” (Lamming, 1983, 252). Late in the novel, however, after Ma dies, Pa faces eviction.

As this development indicates, Barbados in Lamming’s novel is changing in both spectacular and subtle ways. The labor strikes of the 1930s, woven together with resistance to British colonialism, are prominent but just offstage in Lamming's novel, yet they set much of the novel's conflict in motion. One result of this tumult is that Mr. Creighton sells the land, unbeknownst to most people in the village, to a character called Mr. Slime, a local teacher turned entrepreneur, who hides greed behind a cynical claim to sovereignty. The land that Pa rents is sold again by Slime, without Pa's consent, to some unnamed buyer, and therefore Pa must move (Lamming, 1983, 250). To Slime, these exchanges are a clever avenue to profit; to Pa, the eviction is cruelty.

The character whom Lamming calls the head teacher visits Pa to give him the news, "to prepare him for the shock" (Lamming, 1983, 251). The head teacher has knowledge of both the new capitalists and the people who live in the village and it is from this "double understanding" that he feels he must arrange, with the old landlord, to move Pa to the Alms House, a place that the novel describes as "the final stage of human degradation" (Lamming, 1983, 251, 253). Pa asks the head teacher a series of pointed questions about this arrangement, suspecting, correctly, that he's getting swindled (Lamming, 1983, 248-57).

Pa and Ma's story points to a major theme of both Lamming's novel and his politics: a conflict between the power people possess, especially in their labor, and the circumstances in which they live. For Pa, as for many caught up in the dynamics of the British plantation regime in Barbados at the time, there is an almost impossibly wide gap between his life's capacities and its conditions. This gap, Lamming indicates, poses fundamental questions about the degree to which people in the country control their own lives, about where and how they work, about what relationship people have to the place they call home, and about how the dynamics of class, capitalism, colonialism, and racism influence them.

Furthermore, Pa and Ma's situation is not an isolated case in the text. Sandra Pouchet Paquet writes that "[c]haracters such as Ma and Pa in *In the Castle of My Skin* are collective characters in the sense that they express the cumulative experience of the village community"; "in Pa and Ma," she argues, "Lamming contains and personalizes the cumulative experiences of the village and island poor" (Paquet 1982, 5, 25). Paquet's argument echoes what Lamming writes in the introduction to the 1983 edition of *Castle*:

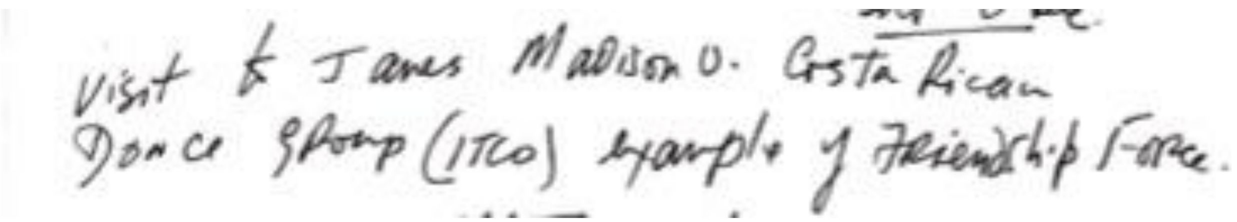
> The book is crowded with names and people, and although each character is accorded a most vivid presence and force of personality, we are rarely concerned with the prolonged exploration of an individual consciousness. It is the collective human substance of the Village itself which commands our attention. The Village, you might say, is the central character. When we see the Village as a collective character, we perceive another dimension to the individual wretchedness of daily living. It is the dimension of energy, force, a quickening capacity for survival. (Lamming, 1983, xxxvi)

The issue here—and one source of the novel's richness—is that Lamming's characters live out the conflict between their power and their circumstances. The novel presents a mix of evidence about this "collective human substance," both wretched and capacious. This is why Lamming invokes Pa in Panama, full of "energy" and "force," and also his prospect of loneliness in the Alms House.[89]

[89] In the essay "Journey to an Expectation," which closes the collection *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming writes about a person he refers to as Papa, "whom a wicked arrangement of money had forced to move… The land had been sold to a new syndicate who were black men; but Papa had to leave because he couldn't afford to pay cash for his tenancy,

While Lamming points to this power, a "capacity for survival" at times in the text, other parts of the novel present a dim view of anything that looks like success for its characters. In a heartfelt scene, Pa and Ma question whether all their striving was worthwhile (Lamming, 1983, 85). Later, Lamming's narrator describes residents of the Alms House as "caged in their impotence" (Lamming, 1983, 252).

The term "impotent" strikes a harsh note, here and elsewhere in the novel. Boy Blue "looks so impotent" after a fisherman saves him from drowning (Lamming, 1983, 151). When the riots begin and the old landlord, Mr. Creighton, is very nearly beaten, he wears "an expression of impotence [that] was inhuman" (Lamming, 1983, 206). At another moment, the head teacher goes so far as to declare outright, "The villagers had no power" (Lamming, 1983, 67). Yet there are still other moments in the novel when the characters recognize their "power to say" and their "power to know" (Lamming, 1983, 76, 79). One of the villagers sees their collective labor power clearly: "without we," he declares, "work come to a stan'still" (Lamming, 1983, 96). Lamming tellingly refers to such moments of communal capacity in a 1981 diary entry as "friendship force" :


Visit to James Madison U. Costa Rican
Dance Group (ITCO) example of Friendship Force.

Some of the novel's most perceptive critics read this mix of evidence and arrive at a rather melancholy view of the text. Paquet writes that the "impotence of the 'mob' is in evidence on every level in the village and appears a necessary prelude to its eventual dislocation. [... A] fear of incapacity hangs ominously over the village community" (Paquet, 1982, 26). Paquet builds from this observation to a general analysis of how the novel depicts its political situation, writing that the "villagers do not understand the nature of their political power and have no thought of organized resistance to the sale of the land. This inability to organize in their own interests parallels the death-in-life image of the Alms House." Paquet ultimately describes this situation as one of "powerlessness" (Paquet, 1982, 27). In a similar vein, Neil ten Kortenaar writes that "[t]here is no possibility of acting on the world or of making one's own world" in mid-century Barbados; he concludes that the novel is a study in "sterility and paralysis" in an "unreflective" community (ten Kortenaar, 1991, 50, 53, 49).

Admittedly, *Castle* is not a novel of spectacular clashes. Its characters more often grapple with and comment upon the situations they face, rather than making grand interventions. The action in the novel is intimate, an intimacy that seems to read as claustrophobia to critics like Paquet and ten Kortenaar. While the above readings of the text are understandable given the text's events, this essay argues that they turn the characters' dilemma into a situation from which no exit is possible. While we see the characters' despair, we do not agree that they are powerless; the characters may not have adequate power to change their situation, but that does not mean they have none. Contrary

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or risk installments on behalf of a future which could not be very long. He was already over seventy. [...] [T]he meaning of Papa's departure is the story of *In the Castle of My Skin*" (Lamming, 1992, 227, 228).

to melancholy readings of the text, this essay focuses on the subtle, but nevertheless substantial, moments of collective power that Lamming features in the novel. We highlight here the palpable vitality of the villagers' everyday kinship; Lamming constellates their collective consciousness and the text rests on the strength of that consciousness.

The people of Creighton's Village, we argue, show a prime example of "friendship force" at work: a space in which relationality generates anti-colonial energy, even if that energy is not yet put to clear use. The community in *Castle*, we recognize, is not liberatory or utopian, nor does it idealize "tradition," especially when that tradition is vulnerable to self-promoters like Slime. However, we hope to counter interpretations of the novel as a kind of cul-de-sac for its characters, interpretations that tend to disregard the collective energies of those characters, in favor of recognizing veins of incipient power in the "chorus" that is Creighton's Village (Lamming, "About" n.d.).

From January through February of 2018, we worked in the archives at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill in Bridgetown, Barbados, where Lamming's papers are held. The Lamming Collection includes ephemera like lecture posters, correspondence with other authors and editors, and notes for lectures that Lamming delivered about *Castle* and other works. The archives also hold Lamming's annotations on important documents, like his photocopies of the Moyne Commission Report, the document produced by the colonial administration about the labor unrest in the Caribbean in the late 1930s, which Lamming drew upon and reacted against in order to frame *Castle's* story (Lamming, "Moyne Annotations").[90] This essay is an effort to think with Lamming about the nature of what he calls "collective human substance" as represented in *Castle*, using these archival materials and Lamming's essays and lectures. It is difficult to present the fullness of Lamming's thinking on the subject of collective power over the course of his career, but we nonetheless wish to produce an interpretation of *Castle* that reflects more fully the vibrant lives of the characters whom Lamming so carefully and lovingly sketches there.

Since our time in the archives, the world in which we live has also changed—not in the same ways that Lamming's characters experience in *Castle*, but also not completely differently, either. On 4 June 2022, George Lamming died. Four years later, we are thinking about autocratic exercises of power, about the fracturing of community, and about what forms effective resistance might take. Although we could not have anticipated these changes when we visited Lamming's archive, our writing became a search for how Lamming's work might guide our actions today. Friendship force, a critique of racial capitalism, and the relationship between literary criticism and labor movements are, we suggest, as important to the 21st century as they were to the 20th.

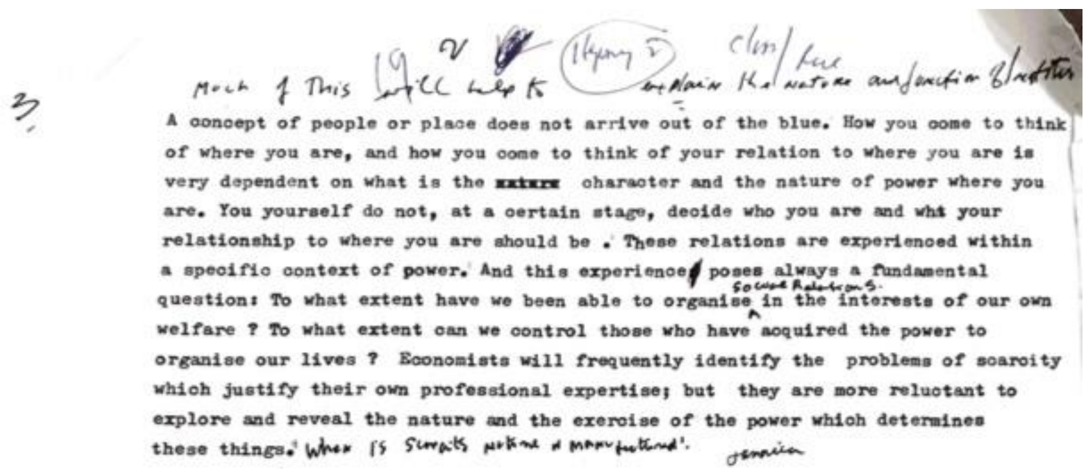
The Character and Nature of Power Where You Are

A good first step to understanding how power and community work in *Castle* is to see that Lamming's thoughts about them are informed by the historical contexts about which he wrote, by his allegiances to Caribbean working-class people, and especially by the importance he placed on

[90] At the time of our visit, Lamming's papers had only recently been donated to the library and were therefore largely unprocessed, which means that documents did not have uniform titles or reference identification numbers. Therefore, we have assigned titles to documents here, following when possible Lamming's own headings. For details about the Lamming Collection at UWI-Cave Hill, see https://caribbeanliteraryheritage.com/collections/s/site/item/1480.

language. In a lecture at the Centre for Caribbean Thought, University of the West Indies, Jamaica in 2003, which was subsequently published in *Conversations III*, Lamming said:

> a concept of people and places does not arise out of the blue. How you come to think of where you are, and how you come to think of your relation to where you are, is very dependent on what is the character and the nature of power, where you are. You yourself do not at a certain stage decide who you are, and what your relationship [is] to where you are should be. These relations are experienced within a specific context of power, and this experience within a specific context poses always a fundamental question: to what extent have we been able to organize in the interest of our own welfare? To what extent can we/have we been able to organize in the interest of our lives? (Lamming 2009, 20, and Lamming, "Contexts of Power"):


3.

A concept of people or place does not arrive out of the blue. How you come to think of where you are, and how you come to think of your relation to where you are is very dependent on what is the ~~xxtxxx~~ character and the nature of power where you are. You yourself do not, at a certain stage, decide who you are and wht your relationship to where you are should be . These relations are experienced within a specific context of power. And this experience poses always a fundamental question: To what extent have we been able to organise in the interests of our own welfare ? To what extent can we control those who have acquired the power to organise our lives ? Economists will frequently identify the problems of scarcity which justify their own professional expertise; but they are more reluctant to explore and reveal the nature and the exercise of the power which determines these things.

These were enduring questions for Lamming, from the time he wrote *Castle* through his last lectures and interviews. Such questions also shaped the debates of his generation of Caribbean writers and thinkers, and they continue to be pressing concerns for theorists of emancipatory politics.[91]

In his published and archival materials, Lamming developed, refined, and complicated his understanding of the ways in which we can "organize in the interest of our lives," using various terms to describe related concepts: "the sovereignty of the imagination"; "collective human substance," and "friendship force" (as we have suggested) among them. Lamming also frequently used concepts developed by other thinkers on this subject, such as Martin Carter's "free community of valid persons" (Scott 2002, 124). While each of these concepts has its own complicated nuances, the parsing of which would require another essay, the point is that all of them rest upon a recognition of human power, especially labor power. How to understand that power is complicated, but for Lamming, a writer who thought so deeply about language, an answer must build on that ground.

[91] See, for example, David Scott's discussion of the problem of vindication in *Conscripts of Modernity*, in particular pp. 61, 84, 83.

Lamming wrote in English, which only has one term for power, whereas other languages have two or more. This fact may be the stumbling block for the entire debate about *Castle*'s characters: even though English has only a single word for power, the word has two distinct meanings. One meaning is the power over others—the ability to rule, to dominate. The other meaning is the power to act—to exercise one's capacity or potency. These different powers do not necessarily cancel each other out; some people having the power to rule does not deprive others of their capacities. Collapsing the two definitions reduces the complexity of novels like *Castle*, and leaves no way to see the difference between what Lamming calls "people of power and authority" on the one hand, and, on the other, people who have "the power to say" and the "power to know" (Lamming, 1983, 43, 76, 79).

Languages other than English treat the two meanings of power with different terms. French, for example, uses both *pouvoir* (authority; holding a position of power) and *puissance* (the ability to act). The French translation of *Castle*, *Les Îles Fortunées*, for example, renders the moment when the head teacher chastises his students, saying that they should not misbehave, by invoking *pouvoir*: "en présence de personnes respectables, de personnes qui détiennent le pouvoir et l'autorité" ("they should not misbehave in the presence of respectable people, people who hold power and authority") (Lamming, 1954, 48). Latin has the terms *potestas* and *potentia* to describe this distinction. From the second term, English gets the words *potent*, *impotent*, and *potential*. When Lamming uses the word "impotent" to describe his characters, therefore, he is not (or not only) making a comment about their sexual aptitudes, but also about their intrinsic power—about what capacities they have to act in the world, and to what degree those capacities are being curtailed by the structures and circumstances under which they live.

Recognizing these two meanings shows that different types of power also derive from different sources. Power over others is often granted by institutions—governments, schools, or property; that is, by being invested with capital or social capital. Capacity, however, comes from human qualities: from intrinsic abilities, from the relationships people have, and from the webs of words in which those relationships are enmeshed. Curdella Forbes (2022) argues that there is a single "existential question around which Lamming's thought, across all his writings, is distilled: the question of what it means to be human and, within that, the idea of language as a human relation […] There is, across all of Lamming's [work] … a prismatic and singular pursuit of this simple and complex equation: to be human is to speak; to speak is to be human" (9). Language and speech are the foundations of an understanding of power in Lamming's work—they are the primary aspects of human experience that provide a counterargument against a conclusion about powerlessness in *Castle*.

To this point, Lamming's archive at UWI-Cave Hill includes his handwritten annotations on the Moyne Commission Report, the document that frames, from the colonial perspective, the labor unrest throughout the Caribbean in the years 1936-38.[92] In Lamming's view, per his marginalia and also his comments in conversation with David Scott published in 2002, the purpose of this Commission and its report was to "diffuse" those labor and anticolonial movements; to dissipate

[92] The report was subsequently published in its entirety; see *The Moyne Report: Report of the West India Royal Commission*. For discussions of the era's labor uprisings and their relation to decolonial movements, see Fraser, "The Twilight of Colonial Rule in the British West Indies: Nationalist Assertion vs Imperial Hubris in the 1930s" and Lewis, *Labor in the West Indies: The Birth of a Workers' Movement*.

their power (Lamming, "Moyne Annotations" and Scott, 2002, 89). As Richard Drayton writes, Lamming's "life was decisively shaped by events which surrounded his eleventh year. In July 1937, riots and civil disorder directed against merchants, planters, and the colonial administration broke out throughout Barbados. Both the labour movement and mass politics in that island had their beginnings in these July days, and their mark is clear in all of Lamming's mature work" (Drayton, 1992, 18).

The novel shows these disturbances at some distance, as the young Lamming experienced them from his own home in Carrington's Village (the area just outside Bridgetown on which Creighton's Village is loosely based). In interviews, Lamming recollects the public experience of the Moyne Commission's work, explaining how the proceedings were broadcast to crowds of people outside in Bridgetown's Queen's Park square. These crowds at times responded to what they were hearing by shaking their heads and shouting "That's not true! That's not true!" Lamming calls this period "a fascinating moment in a kind of popular democracy" (Scott, 2002, 78). Bill Schwarz calls it "the production and dissemination of historical knowledge as a democratic practice, in the sense of understanding all men and women as 'already' historians. It is a wonderful way of thinking of historical knowledge as *popular*" (Schwarz, 2002, 65). This question of "popular" energies, those stemming from the *populus*, are central to Lamming's work.

The assembled evidence here—Lamming's comments about the character and nature of power, the language of power and the two meanings of the term, and a recognition of the history of labor and anticolonial movements in 1930s Barbados—is the ground bass to which Lamming tunes his characters. What Lamming notes in *The Pleasures of Exile* about Sam Selvon's characters also accurately represents his own characters in *Castle*: "he never sneers at [them]. He is always with them in what they are doing, the foolish things as well as the beautiful things" (Lamming, 1992, 229). Lamming's characters are neither complete arbiters of their fates nor powerless to act. They are neither sterile nor unreflective; their all-too-human combination of "foolishness" and "beauty" makes Lamming's characters more compelling and complex, not less.

Castle's "Friendship Force"

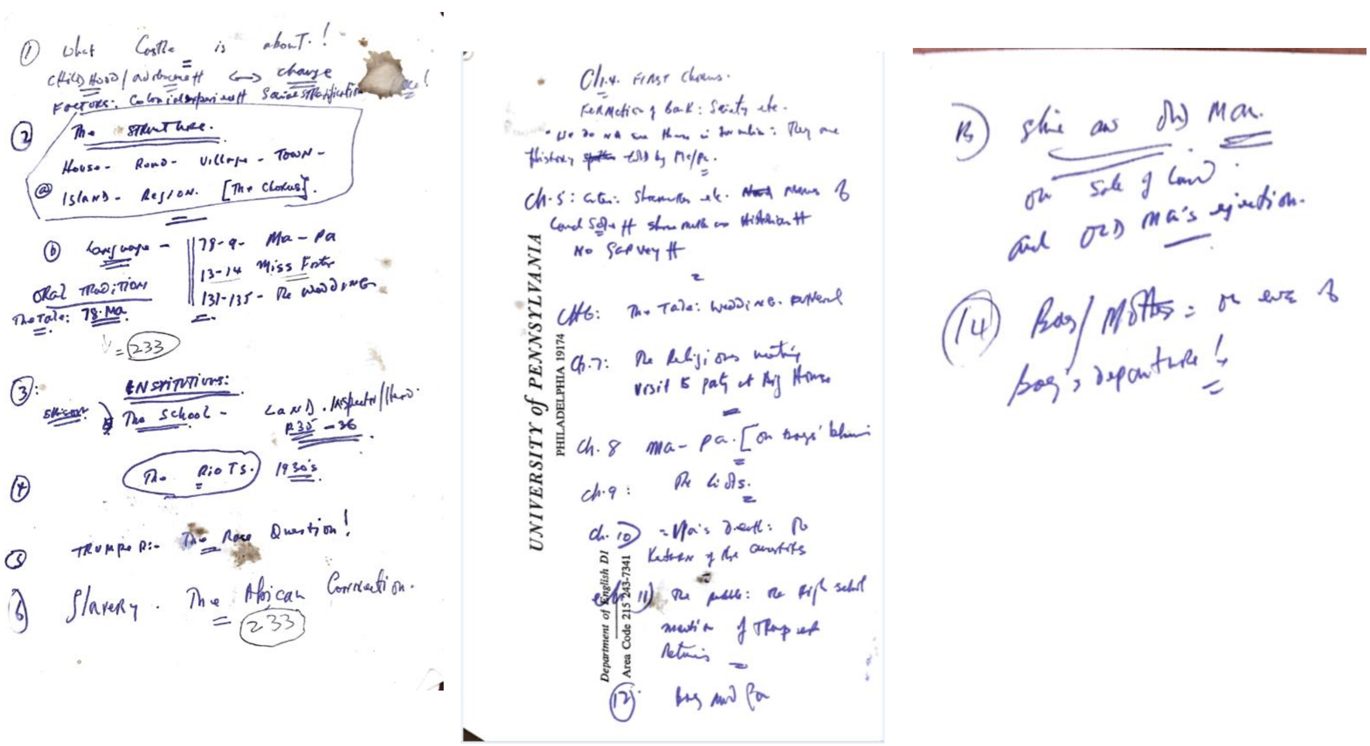
Contrary to interpretations of *Castle*'s characters as powerless, we argue for a broader understanding of how power works in the novel. To get to that argument, though, we must first look closely at the major piece of evidence for the melancholy view of the text. This view comes in large part from a comment made by the head teacher early on in the novel, well before he visits Pa to break the news of the eviction.

The head teacher is exactly as his name, the only name Lamming gives him, suggests: "a strict and sensible school master" (Lamming, 1983, 64). He grew up in the village, and he sees himself as a "poor boy who had done well" and who had become a "public man"; as one of his students says with respect to the village school, "He got power and authority here" (Lamming, 1983, 67, 48). But when the head teacher discovers evidence of his wife's infidelity—an intimate photo connecting her to Slime, who, at the time, is a teacher under the headmaster's jurisdiction—he feels a "strange impotence of action" (Lamming, 1983, 64). His thoughts go immediately to what public knowledge of the situation would mean for him. He reflects on his relationship with his wife only briefly; he worries more about what people may think or how they may sneer at him. He wonders whether scandal would undermine his authority to a degree that might jeopardize his position.

It is at this moment that the head teacher delivers his assessment of the community: “The villagers had no power” (Lamming, 1983, 66). Seen in its context, the comment is a salve that the head teacher applies to himself to ease his worry. It represents a common human failing more than an accurate assessment of the villagers’ capacities: the head teacher feels powerless, so he projects powerlessness onto others. It is an overly sweeping judgment, made in a moment of weakness, when the head teacher hopes that others will be weak and will be unable to challenge him. It is a comment to read critically; it is also a questionable piece of evidence upon which to base a general assessment of the novel’s characters.

So, although the head teacher’s statement seems to have some purchase in the scholarship about *Castle*, in this section we respond to that scholarship by analyzing the network of community in the novel—or, to borrow Lamming’s phrase, some of the “substance” of the novel’s “collective human substance.” The novel’s multivocality, its shifting access to characters’ interior worlds, and its seemingly meandering wanders through the villagers’ day-to-day lives reflect Lamming’s investment in communality and cooperativism—in the potential possibilities of Creighton’s kinship structures. At one point in the novel, Trumper says, “Everybody in the village sort of belong. Is like a tree. It can’t kind of take up the roots by itself; we all live sort of together…. An’ ’tis the same in the other villages” (Lamming, 1983, 144). Both formally and thematically speaking, *Castle* bears out this collectivism.

In an undated set of lecture notes, Lamming constellates the elements of the novel, sketching its scenes and connecting characters in their relationships: (Lamming, “What *Castle* is About.”):


(1) What Castle is about!
Childhood / adolescence ⟷ change
(2) The structure.
House - Road - Village - Town -
Island - Region. [The chorus].
Oral tradition
The Tale: 78 Ma.
(3): Institutions:
The School - Land. 135-36
The Riots. 1930's
Slavery. The African Connection. 233
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA
PHILADELPHIA 19174
Department of English D1
Area Code 215 243-7341
Ch. 4. First chorus.
Ch 6: The Tale: wedding. Funeral
Ch. 7: The Religious meeting
Ch. 8 Ma - Pa.
Ch. 10 Ma's death
(12) Boy and Pa
on eve of boy's departure!

These notes show what a global look at the novel also demonstrates: rather than championing a single protagonist, Lamming favors a web of relationality. As Claudia Marquis (2012) observes, "*In the Castle of My Skin* places emphasis on a local world that official society barely notices—the village—and transfers narratorial authority to a crowd of speakers" (36). The book opens by gesturing towards the lived experiences of this "local world": the physical proximity and the material insecurity of the houses in Creighton's Village prevent against families withdrawing fully into their own private lives. The first line of the novel finds G's mother "put[ting] her head through the [neighbour's] window" to notify those nearby of G's ninth birthday (Lamming, 1983, 1), and shortly thereafter, she,

> br[eaks] into a soft repetitive tone which r[ises] with every fresh surge of feeling until it bec[comes] a scattering peal of solicitude that soar[s] across the night and into the neighbour's house. And the answer c[omes] back louder, better organized and more communicative, so that another neighbor respond[s] and yet another until the voices seem … to be gathered up by a single effort and the whole village sh[akes] with song on its foundation of water. (Lamming, 1983, 4)

This call-and-response opening demonstrates that, of geographical and architectural necessity, the villagers' lives are intimately intertwined.

What is more, this early scene sets the novel's tone: *Castle* is throughout a chorus of voices. Although the book initially adopts the perspective of one principal character, a boy simply and semi-autobiographically named G, Lamming soon disperses the novel's narrative authority. While *Castle's* early pages are filtered through G's consciousness, shortly thereafter, the novel briefly becomes a script of sorts, with "First Boy," "Second Boy," "Third Boy," and so forth accorded lines in the dramatic action. A few pages later, readers suddenly find access to the Head Teacher's internal monologue, and then enter into a dialogue between Ma and Pa, the village elders whom Lamming explicitly refers to in lecture notes collected in the archives as the novel's "chorus." While some critics take this structural "inconsistency" as a formal failing of sorts, we argue that it is actually Lamming's way of expressing the importance of the collective.[93]

Lamming's sense of the village as a space of communal intimacy in the novel is also underscored by a number of his other formal choices. He often leaves characters unnamed, using the turns of phrase "someone said" and "another added" rather than clearly identifying a scene's speakers (Lamming, 1983, 106). Individuals are not unimportant to Lamming (after all, we occasionally follow the particular exploits of G and his friends Boy Blue, Trumper, and Bob), but the *relations* of individuals to one another, he implies, are paramount. It is in the spaces between people, in other words, that "friendship force" can be found. It is in this sense that the novel treats its characters as a "chorus" (Lamming, 1983, 75, 299).

For instance, when Lamming describes daily life in the village in the novel's second chapter, his language reflects this almost visceral intimacy. Here families are collective, land is collective,

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[93] J. Dillon Brown, for example, writes that the "difficulty" of Lamming's writing, in the context of the era in which he wrote it, "takes on the guise of a potent political strategy that helps articulate a sense of Caribbean nationalism and anticolonial protest."

roads are collective, and people share their confidences while life flows through them. This is a moment worth quoting at length:

> Miss Foster had six children, three by a butcher, two by a baker and one whose father had never been mentioned. Bob's mother had two, and my mother one. The difference between six and two and one did not belong to the piece itself. In the corner where one fence merged into another, and the sunlight filtering through the leaves made a limitless suffusion over the land, the pattern had arranged itself with absolute unawareness. Outside at the street corner where villagers poked wreckage from the blocked canal, it had absorbed another three, four, fourteen…. Here where the fences penetrated each other and in silent collaboration produced a corner there were three. Outside where the roads crossed there were more: thirteen, thirty. The three were shuffling episodes and exchanging the confidences which informed their life with meaning…. Outside the others were shoveling earth. They too exchanged confidences while life flowed through them. In the broad savannah where the grass lowcropped sang in the singeing heat the pattern had widened. Not three, nor thirteen, but thirty. Perhaps three hundred. Men. Women. Children. The men at cricket. The children at hide and seek. The women laying out their starched clothes to dry. The sun let its light flow down on them as life let itself flow through them. Three. Thirteen. Thirty. Three hundred. (Lamming, 1983, 25)

Lamming's descriptions of the village here are inescapably communal; they reveal a web of affective relationships in which G is enmeshed. A common life force flows through Creighton's "Three. Thirteen. Thirty. Three hundred," producing a "pattern" that far exceeds the neat grid of the nuclear family. In fact, while Lamming points to particular characters throughout this passage—some children are Miss Foster's, some are Bob's mother's, and G himself is an only child—the idiosyncrasies of these characters are less relevant to "the piece itself" than are the "confidences" exchanged between them: the network of kinship that "informs" the villagers' lives "with meaning" (Lamming, 1983, 25).

The passage above also reflects Lamming's broader suspicion of the effects of the colonial-capitalist class of 1930s Barbados—the twinned evils of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation that curtail shared structures of feeling, to borrow a term from Raymond Williams—and a clear-eyed belief in both the potential and the perils of cooperativism. On the latter point, Lamming does not promote the intimacies of the village at the expense of individual creative freedom—this kind of freedom is something that Lamming protected throughout his career. However, while Lamming values what he describes as "the capacity you have for *choosing* and making and remaking that self which you discover is *you*, is distinctly you," particularly in the realm of artistic production, he also acknowledges that "[t]he creative act cannot be an exclusively private and subjective matter" (Scott, 2002, 145-6) and highlights the ways in which everything that appears proper to the individual is also collective. As Boy Blue explains in the novel, if one imagines oneself to be an island, "You start to believe you see things nobody else see, an' you think things nobody else think … nobody will want to see you, an' you yourself won't want to see anybody…. Boy, you'll get so lonely 'twould be a shame. You'd be a sort of man on a rock with nobody else standin' near you" (Lamming, 1983, 156). In other words, denying the ways in which one is shaped by friendship and kinship amounts to alienation.

The novel also suggests that the alienation of the individual under the gaze of Barbados' plantation owners is more likely to limit one's freedom than are the village's collective commitments. British colonizers in Barbados disrupted collectivities that they perceived as threats to their dominance, as they did throughout their Empire. As carla bergman and Nick Montgomery (2017) write, "the free individual of modern, Western capitalism … is a sad and lonely vision: a strange fiction invented by a violent and fearful society, walled in by morality and self-interest. This is an uprooted being who sees his rootlessness—his very incapacity to make and sustain transformative connections—as a feat of excellence" (82). Indeed, Mr. Creighton, the white landlord of the village, is precisely such a "sad and lonely vision" in the novel, self-sequestered on his property. As the privations of capitalism fan outward in Barbados, this loneliness multiples. When the opportunistic Slime purchases land from Mr. Creighton, he necessarily distances himself from the rest of the villagers, and as the land is further subdivided, the village finds itself at risk of fracturing irreparably. The result, for G and his friends, is a tension between belonging and becoming that is evident throughout the novel.

G's alienation plays out most clearly at school. G is initially pleased to be singled out for his academic promise and to be sent away from the village to study at the High School in town. However, he quickly learns that the village and the school are "two worlds," worlds strategically divided by the colonial education system. G explains his newfound isolation by saying, "It was as though my roots had been snapped from the centre of what I knew best, while I remained impotent to wrest what my fortunes had forced me into" (Lamming, 1983, 224). G begins to learn that Barbados' political issues have practical value for people in the villages, whereas "[a]t the High School the battles took place … within the limits of the text-book" (Lamming, 1983, 225). The colonial apparatus seeks to sever the brightest native subjects from the stuff of collective resistance, and G finds himself taking an abstract view of politics while "the shoemaker [and his] friends [in Creighton's Village] [a]re more interested and concerned because they seem … to understand the issues much better" (Lamming, 1983, 225).

When G graduates, he wonders, "[w]ould it have made any difference if I hadn't gone [to the High School]? My interest in the games and the people I had known [at the school] was exhausted and my feelings were gradually moving back to the village" (Lamming, 1983, 230). Ultimately, he recognizes that the High School, with its slavish devotion to the British curriculum, is in fact a tool of oppression, a means of better dividing and conquering native subjects. Once he returns home, "there [i]s a sense in which the village … restore[s] what the High School had destroyed" (Lamming, 1983, 299): the structures of feeling in which G feels he shares are those of his immediate community, despite the school's best efforts to dismantle those structures.

In an interview with David Scott, Lamming talks about a passage he loves from Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* wherein Marx says, "If we assume man to be man, and his relation to the world to be a human one, that love can be exchanged only for love, trust for trust, and so on." Glossing this passage, Lamming continues,

> really what he is getting at there is the communal nature of man as a social animal and that the two most vital needs for the solidarity of that community, the two most vital needs, that need of love and that need of trust, these are the two that are not negotiable in the marketplace. Each can only be exchanged for itself. You may do bribery here but you

> cannot be assured of love except by the exchange of love, and you cannot be sure of trust except by the exchange of trust. (Scott, 2002, 179)

In *Castle* we frequently see love exchanged for love and trust for trust in the village. If the characters were as powerless as some critics contend, those human exchanges would not be possible. To the contrary, such exchanges are evidence of a kind of grassroots community among the "folk from down below" with the capacity to resist—even if only partially and provisionally—colonial hierarchies and forms of domination (Lamming, "*Castle* Production"). This is why G feels "restored" by his return to the village after having been "snapped from [his] centre" by his High School curriculum (Lamming, 1983, 299, 224).

Although the villagers are ultimately betrayed by Slime—a move that Lamming explains in notes collected in the archive as "Men of colour trying for 'ownership power' as protection against [the] White oligarchy … [and preying upon the] Black Masses … [as the] only means whereby they could undertake this"—the residual strength of their affective economy is nonetheless significant (Lamming, "*Castle* Production"). When Slime's first buyer, a mixed-race "chief sanitary inspector who live[s] in one of the big-shot residential areas of the island," appears in the village to claim his new land from the shoemaker, Bob's father tells the shoemaker, "Don't worry yuh head, … [w]e by yuh side always" (Lamming, 1983, 240, 241). This heartfelt promise of solidarity and hospitality, though not yet operationalized for organized resistance, is nonetheless a resistant gesture. The fact that nearly all the villagers' homes are treated as shared spaces is also a rebuke of sorts to colonial alienation; when Po King is killed by the police, his distraught mother is taken into the Fosters' house, where "the women" bring her tea, wipe her tears, and change her vomit-fouled clothes, and "the men … gr[ow] suddenly fierce" in the face of her tale (Lamming, 1983, 201).

As Richard Drayton explained in a 2000 letter to David Scott in advance of Scott's interview with Lamming for *Small Axe*, "if you read G[eorge]'s novels from the 50s carefully, you will find that even as early as *Castle*, that there is great skepticism about what popular politics amounted to, doubt about the phenomenon of the political leader and worry about the fragility of leadership" ("Drayton to Scott"). In *Castle*, Slime recapitulates Empire's desire for hierarchy by promoting and assuming the "head's" leadership of the "body," but the buoyant life of the body is still palpable throughout the text. While the High School tries to strategically sever G from the village's affective claims, and while it does, for a time, manage to sow in him the ugly feelings of superiority and resentment that might produce a docile colonial subject who could become complicit in oppressing his own people, the "sprawling dereliction" of shared life in the village ultimately counters the estranging effects of the colonial curriculum. As G puts it, "I knew now that somewhere in my heart, already riddled with fear, ambition and envy, there was a storage of love for … that life [in the village]" (Lamming, 1983, 228). This is a subtle but substantial way for Lamming to represent the power and potential that his characters have, especially in their relationships, while also not falsely granting them any straightforward path to revolutionizing their lives and their community.

Lamming is also careful to note how this power can be disrupted by external pressures or internalized fears. He does so by offering, by way of example, the tale of Bots, Bambina, and Bambi. Bambi initially lives in two different homes with two different women, Bots and Bambina, and he fathers a number of children with each woman. Bots and Bambina are "the best of friends," and the children "who wus half brother an' half sister live like real brother and sister without any talk 'bout half or quarter" (Lamming, 1983, 134). The strength of this system of affinities and affiliations is profound: "Everybody says there never know in all the village from top to bottom a set of people who live in love an' harmony like Bots, Bambina an' Bambi, with the children there, not in the same house, but in the same sort of feelin' of you belong to me an' I to you" (Lamming, 1983, 134). However, a German anthropologist ("a white woman … comin' to take some notes 'bout the people") arrives in the village and convinces Bambi that he must marry either Bots or Bambina in order to free himself from "mortal sin" (Lamming, 1983, 135). Since Bambi loves both women and cares for all of his children, he simply flips a coin and marries Bots—and before long, the entire community is in disarray. Bots, Bambina, and Bambi begin drinking and fighting, and soon Bambi drops dead of a heart attack. After his death, the two women row so angrily over his funeral rites that the body is relinquished to the state for a pauper's burial, and Bambi ends his life in unmarked ground.

This story reveals the limitations of the kinship structures of Barbados' colonial-capitalist ruling class—competing privacies are poor substitutes for a vibrant collective—and it also exposes the efforts of that class (and its affiliates, like the academic interloper described above) to dissolve "unconventional" relationships perceived as threatening to Western hegemony. Bots, Bambina, and Bambi's extended network represents a "dangerous closeness," a closeness that colonial powers and their representatives "work to eradicate" through "relentless violence, division, competition, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units" (bergman and Montgomery, 2017). Although G and his friends are still young boys, they feel the weight of this "eradication." Trumper says, "it seem [that marriage] don't belong to certain people, meanin' a lot of people put together, like the village for instance…. [T]here's always that said same breakin' up when marriage makes his appearance. I don't know. I only know I ain't ever goin' get marry" (Lamming, 1983, 142). This sentiment, though still somewhat inchoate, reframes the anthropologist's privileging of nuclear family ties as a fracturing of community and thus a form of subjection. Trumper sees the path forward in terms of collective action: the power of "a lot of people put together" (Lamming, 1983, 142).

In the Castle of My Skin ends with three conversations that G has with his mother, with Trumper, and with Pa. G's mother faces a change that many parents face, seeing her child shift from belonging to her and the local community to becoming an adult and moving away. She sees the power of movement, of emigration, and she is scared for G, fretting for him. As G finishes school and contemplates emigrating to Trinidad, Trumper travels to America to work. When he returns to Barbados, he talks to G about his newfound sense of race-consciousness: "If there be one thing I thank America for, she teach me who my race wus. Now I'm never goin' to lose it" (Lamming, 1983, 304). Trumper plays for G a recording of Paul Robeson's *Let My People Go*, explaining that the concept of "My People" ought to extend beyond the village, encompassing the more expansive affective and political claims of Blackness. G then asks Trumper, "You remember you were saying about a feeling, … a big bad feeling in the pit of the stomach. A feeling you were alone in a world all by yourself, and although there were hundreds of people moving round you, it made no difference[?]" Trumper responds, "A man who know his people won't ever feel like that…. Never" (Lamming, 1983, 309-10). In other words, while Creighton's Village offers a local, grassroots example of "friendship force" in action, this broader notion of "My People" indicates how affinities and affiliations might operate even at a distance. Trumper delivers a message of Black militant collectivity, energized by Paul Robeson's voice and politics, that G will have to learn. G and Trumper correctly feel that the scheme to dispossess Pa is a "tremendous injustice," and that this injustice is part of a broader current of anti-Blackness; they wonder together, but cannot yet answer, quite how far that current extends (Lamming, 1983, 287).

In the novel's last scene, Pa shares with G a tender recognition that they are both moving away from the village. G meets Pa as Pa takes one last look at his home before he will leave it the next day. Exactly where Pa is going is ambiguous—undoubtedly, he has been mulling the ultimatum that the head teacher gave him—but he is clear-eyed about the indignities of the Alms House. In any case, Pa says to G, "We both settin' forth tomorrow […] I to my last restin'-place before the grave, an' you into the wide wide world" (Lamming, 1983, 302). This statement sums up neatly the energies of the novel as a whole: some of the community's power is spent and some is poised to grow.

In Lamming's terms from his 1983 introduction, these characters, each in their own way, experience life's wretchedness, but also show their energy, force, and capacity for survival. There is power in the village community and in the characters' relationships, but that does not mean that the characters are fully able to determine their own fates—the world is more complicated, more cruel than that. When the novel concludes in the mid-1940s, it will still be more than twenty years until Barbados gains its independence from Britain. The evictions depicted in the novel will continue across the island for a long time to come: in 1980, when the Freehold Purchase Act was finally passed in Barbados, roughly 70% of Bajans were still living in chattel houses, movable structures designed to be disassembled and rebuilt in some new temporary perch when families were instructed to leave their land (Potter, 1986, 255).

Perhaps it is unsurprising that G feels the need to move away from the island at the end of the novel; as Lamming explained years later, upon reflection, the colonial experience in Barbados was "a daily exercise in self-mutilation" (2002). In fact, he wrote in the 1983 introduction and repeated in a 2002 article that he thought perhaps he ought to have killed Mr. Creighton in the 1937 riots depicted in *Castle*—although no white men were *actually* killed during that period, "the most authentic response to the long history of shame and humiliation that produced the riots" would have been the landlord's death: "the symbolic end to a social order that deserved to be destroyed" (Lamming, 1983, xii-xiv and Lamming 2002). But even though Lamming did not make that choice, the evidence from the novel still shows a dynamic community that is a substantial counter to that destructive "social order." After all, while the strikes and riots take place off stage, they still take place. The situation to lament is not a strike that tries and fails; the situation to lament is when injustice exists but provokes no resistance.

We are sympathetic to characters who are disappointed with the state of the world in which they live, whose power meets with the seeming brick wall of structural prohibitions, who exist amidst a social order that "deserves to be destroyed." Ours is no argument for finding solace in disappointment. We prefer to see labor strikes win and colonial (and neo-colonial) regimes end, *fiat justitia ruat caelum*. The more common situation, however, closer to the story in *Castle*, is that rights are won by collective action, and that such collectivity is rooted in relationships like the ones Lamming depicts in his novel. Rights that should have become universal must be defended again and again, and each new generation must learn its role in that struggle, as G and Trumper discuss at the novel's end. That realization is not heartening, but neither is it a form of powerlessness. Rather, it is a call to find power in relationality, to maximize "friendship force," and to bring "collective human substance" to the cause of countering injustice.

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"The Sky Above and the Earth Below": The Tramping Narratives of Jack Hilton

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Abstract

This essay examines the representations of tramping in the work of the Rochdale writer, Jack Hilton (1900-1983), and argues that the act is considered as a key expression of working-class cultural and political autonomy in the context of 1930s Britain. Whilst Hilton and his writing was applauded by his contemporaries in George Orwell and W.H. Auden, his work fell into obscurity until the chance discovery of *Caliban Shrieks* (1935) in Salford's Working-Class Movement Library in 2021. Through readings of this novel, alongside *Champion* (1938) and *English Ways* (1940), my article explores how Hilton develops the figure of the tramp from an individualistic symbol of anti-productivist rebellion into a representation of a broader working-class cultural practice. In contrast to Orwell's depiction of tramping as social failure (filtered through middle-class perspective), Hilton's semi-autobiographical writing reframes the figure as one that asserts working-class agency. My paper therefore challenges dominant literary narratives of vagrancy, and contributes to a reimagining of working-class culture, community, and the English national identity in the interwar period.

Keywords

Jack Hilton, working-class literature, British literature, tramping, vagrancy, working-class culture, interwar period

Jack Hilton (1900-1983) was a writer almost unique in his approach to the re-telling of working-class narratives during the 1930s. A plasterer by trade, by the end of the decade Hilton had become a popular household name and was noted by George Orwell and W.H. Auden to be an important, newer kind of literary voice: one who wrote not only from personal experience, but also from a viewpoint of the wider class. Unfortunately for Hilton, he existed between two booms in popularity that proletarian literature faced in the first half of the twentieth century; an internal memorandum for his publisher Jonathan Cape, written shortly before a meeting with Hilton, reads that "the proletarian novel…is finished completely" (Howard, 1971, p. 176). As such, he and his works have since faded into near-total obscurity. In 2021, his first text *Caliban Shrieks* (1935) was rediscovered in Salford's Working-Class Movement Library, and his name is now beginning to receive the long overdue accolade it deserves (Self, 2024).

Max Krafchik has demonstrated that official responses to vagrancy in the 1930s increasingly framed the issue as an individual problem rather than as a consequence of structural economic issues; he notes that administrators were reluctant to admit that unemployment was a "major source of vagrancy", since doing so would have implied that wider economic policies were systemically affecting society (Krafchik, 1983, p. 196). Instead, it was insisted that vagrancy's roots "lay in the individual" (Krafchik, 1983, p. 196). This identification in inter-war attitudes to transiency is significant as it demonstrates how the figure of the vagrant was constructed through a framework of social sickness, a discourse that Hilton directly challenges. This essay therefore argues that in his novel *Champion* (1938), Hilton reconfigures tramping from a symbol of deviance or social failure into a lived practice rooted in working-class culture and experience.

An active supporter of trade unionism and the left-wing political environment, Hilton was secretary of the Rochdale Plasterers' Union between 1929 and 1935, and was also heavily active in the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (Windle, 2013, p. 46). In 1932 he was banned from public speaking for three years following an altercation at Rochdale's Public Assistance Committee and so took up attendance at the Workers' Education Association (WEA) with the realisation that, "if chucking the soap-box Socialist game had stopped me from speaking aloud I could talk to myself quietly and put this on paper" (Hilton, n.d-a , p. 92a). Hilton aimed to show that the "mass culture" of the working-classes was just as valuable as the favoured high-brow and generally elitist tastes of his literary contemporaries, as they were inextricably linked to the social, economic, and material conditions under which his class lived. He believed in the legitimacy of the working class as a diverse unit with its own valuable cultural histories (Croft, 1985, p. 17). Social exploration texts by middle-class writers that aimed to show the idiosyncrasies of the working-class were immensely popular throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but they had the tendency of a myopic lens on destitution, poverty, and unemployment (Koven, 2004). Hilton classified these writers as "book socialists": intellectuals whose "ferocity" was "confined to the iron rigidity of terminology", and who participated in none of the pleasures of the class (he lists betting on horses, "being a sport", and "indulging in carnival sangfroidness" amongst these) (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 130).

One of these so-termed "book socialists" was Orwell. The two writers had taken up correspondence with each other following a review Orwell had written for the *Adelphi* of *Caliban Shrieks*, and, having received instruction from Victor Gollancz to "write a book about the condition of the unemployed in the industrial north of England'", Orwell wrote to Hilton and asked if he could stay with him and his wife Mary, and use their home as a base from which to conduct his research, initially planning to focus on the mill workers of Rochdale (Crick, 1992, 278). Hilton not only declined the question of accommodation (mainly owing to the fact that the couple lived in a one up and one down), but also advised Orwell to focus on the colliers of Wigan instead, as he believed these to be a truer representation of an independent working-class culture (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 178). Hilton wrote of the resulting text, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), that Orwell "might well have stayed away" from Wigan, as he had "wasted money, energy and wrote piffle", on account of his position as a '"all, ex-officer type, Eton, modest, non-hard-boozing, non-hard-cursing, non-crude-gamestering, no locale in the dialect sense" who had failed to gain the trust of the working colliers (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 178).

Orwell spent much time masquerading in the life of a tramp and wrote about these experiences in his diaries and essays; sections from which were later extracted and inserted into *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935). The term masquerading is used, not because Orwell did not appropriately embody the life of the tramp – in fact, as Bernard Crick notes, "he lived rough, exactly as the tramps did and never carried more than a few shillings on him", but because he could choose to leave the lifestyle at any time he so wished; for example, Aunt Nellie, his "favourite relation" also resided in Paris at the time of his "down and out" status (Crick, 1992, p. 126). Crick derives this representation as a misunderstanding on the part of Orwell's readers and critics, writing that Orwell had never claimed to have *become* a tramp, "only to have been among tramps and in doing so to have freed himself from certain prejudices", yet this privileged freedom in being able to choose to eschew these (class-based) prejudices denotes a paradoxical situation in itself (Crick, 1992, p. 127). Even if Orwell had never actually claimed to have literally become a tramp, his writing reveals a shifting perception of self when wearing the clothes of a tramp. He writes,

> It gives one a very strange feeling to be wearing such clothes. I had worn bad enough things before, but nothing at all like these; they were not merely dirty and shapeless, they had – how is one to express it? – a gracelessness, a patina of antique filth, quite different from mere shabbiness… An hour later, in Lambeth, I saw a hang-dog man, obviously a tramp, coming towards me, and when I looked again it was myself, reflected in a shop window. The dirt was plastering my face already… Dressed in a tramp's clothes it is very difficult, at any rate for the first day, not to feel that you are genuinely degraded (Orwell, 1933, pp. 174-176).

Orwell's inability to see himself in the mirror in this extract is a key component of his (mis)recognition of class; his judgements are founded upon a surface-level assessment and indicate a cursory understanding of the subtleties of class. Despite his long history of social commentary, Orwell depicts the clothes of a tramp with damning vernacular – degradation is the overarching theme here.

Indeed, Orwell's middle-class readership would no doubt have been highly entertained by the idea of the author donning these class-indicating garbs. As Seth Koven has shown, slumming was a lucrative tourist trade in the nineteenth century. A form of "social urban exploration", slumming was carried out for many different reasons by the rich and elite, and covert visits to workhouses, with subsequent publications, were especially welcomed by the public. Koven notes that figures like Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew had remained as outsiders when carrying out their own visits into deprived areas of London, whereas James Greenwood's series of articles under the name "A Night in the Work-house" ushered in a new era of sociological research: one of "incognito social investigation using cross-class dress" (Koven, 2004, p. 32). Greenwood's tactic fetishises the clothes of the working-classes and makes them a costume; a cultural appropriation of sorts. Clearly, this is problematic. It strongly others the working-classes by portraying them as a culture innately different to that of the middle- and upper-classes. Orwell continues this tradition in his own usage of "cross-class dress" and thus we witness the commodification of working-class culture for the enjoyment of those looking down upon it.

Class-based perceptions of walking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped judgements of tramping, with the act often seen as diminishing the "value" of pedestrianism when practised by the working-classes. Middle- and upper-class literary traditions, particularly those associated with the Romantic peripatetic mode and Transcendentalism framed walking as a means of "re-creation of the self, reconnection with nature and so the divine, continuity of sense, mind and spirit, community and connection with a communal past" – available to those who could afford leisure (Wallace, 1995, p. 17). Tramping, by contrast, was rarely afforded the same legitimacy. Luke Lewin Davies identifies this divide through examples from Henry David Thoreau's 1861 transcendentalist essay "Walking", that makes a "clear distinction between those who practise the true 'art of Walking', and other 'mere idlers and vagabonds"; and Hilaire Belloc's 1902 travelogue *The Path to Rome*, in which he proposes that "the kind of man who boasts that he does not mind… roughing it, is…a man who cares nothing for all that civilisation has built up" (Davies, 2021, p. 178). In this context, walking is figured as a means of self-improvement, with itinerant life becoming a form of unproductive mobility. The "drift, drift, drift" of Hilton's tramps is thus rendered socially meaningless by these middle-class commentators, and Orwell, renowned for his insight into the tramping subculture, actively continues this tradition in his own writing, believing this form of walking to be a waste of energy that would be better spent elsewhere (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 37). He writes,

> One could not, in fact, invent a more futile routine than walking from prison to prison, spending perhaps eighteen hours a day in the cell and on the road. There must be at the least several tens of thousands of tramps in England. Each day they expend innumerable foot-pounds of energy – enough to plough thousands of acres, build miles of road, put up dozens of houses – in mere, useless walking (Orwell, 1933, p. 221).

The language used here clearly shows a preoccupation with the contribution to society that the vagrant is either willingly or unwillingly not making. With his disparagement of "futile routine'" and "mere, useless walking", it becomes apparent that Orwell's time on the road did not awake in him an affinity to the lifestyle separate from his distrust in anti-productivism. As an individual who has chosen to go on the road, with the knowledge that financial security lies around the corner should he so wish to take it, Orwell seems unable to conceive of a life in which a person may actually choose to become anti-disciplinary and anti-productivist, or to refocus from desiring the right to work to, in the vein of the French political activist and literary critic Paul Lafargue, *The Right to be Lazy* (Lafargue, [1883] 2017). In this pamphlet, Lafargue suggests a radical reframing of the proletarian cause, in which the working-classes cease to be classified by the products of their labour, and instead aspire to the right to leisure. Thus, in Orwell's idealisation, which is based around the assumption that every unemployed person has the innate desire to work – he posits that to solve the problem of a useless vagrant, "every able-bodied tramp who presented himself could be made to do a sound day's work", as "under the present system tramps are as dead a loss to the country as they could possibly be" – there is no freedom for the proletariat: they must always be useful or be used within the means of production (Orwell, 1933, p. 222). Hilton's idea that walking and tramping could be a "mental recreation for the fatigued body" under the constraints of labour are here unwillingly thrown back into a system in which the tramp's body and physicality are once again controlled (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 62).

In his 1929 essay, "A Day in the Life of a Tramp", Orwell uses animalistic, dehumanising language to describe a crowd of tramps who are waiting outside of a spike for it to open its gates. Twice he calls them a "herd", they are "haggard, unshaven, filthy and tattered", and "here and there, an imbecile jabbers meaningless words" (Orwell, 1929). The impression that the reader garners is one of a group of people (Orwell notes that for every fifty men, there are two women, and their overall ages range from sixteen to seventy) who are on the very brink of human existence. Illiterate, sordid, crazy, a mere mass of bodies that are a damning indictment of a failed system and who seem to possess no humanity to speak of. Some of "the bravest prowl around the butcher's or the baker's", while others lie on the grass or squat in the dust, inciting a picture of wild, undomesticated animals who exchange words "in a strange slang, the tramps' special language, full of bizarre and picturesque words and phrases which cannot be found in any dictionary" (Orwell, 1929). The tramps are systemically othered by Orwell in a dual-subordination that invokes not only conceptions of the (out-of-)working-classes as illiterate, unproductive, and lazy, but a focus on their linguistic behaviours (one "jabbers meaningless words", whilst others talk in a "special language", unrecognisable to an outside ear, presumably including Orwell himself) subjugates them as foreign objects in the English landscape who "live at the expense of the community" – furthering negative connotations about the unemployed not contributing fairly to society. (Orwell, 1929). Additionally, Orwell writes that "their faces make you think of the face of some wild animal, not perhaps a dangerous one, but one which has become at once savage and timorous through lack of rest and care" (Orwell, 1929). The framing and racialisation of the working-classes or tramping subculture as a throwback to an earlier form of civilisation is a trope that has its roots in the nineteenth century. In his study *London Labour and the London Poor* Henry Mayhew categorises "two distinct races of men": "the wandering and the civilized tribes" (Mayhew, 1861, p. 2). In an attempt at ethnography, Mayhew states that the "nomadic races of England" (he bands the "habitual vagrant – half-beggar, half thief" and itinerant worker together in this categorisation) have a "greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature of man"; they can be marked out by their "high cheek-bones and protruding jaws" and, like Orwell, "use of a slang language" (Mayhew, 1861, pp. 2-3). Ideas of evolutionary degeneration and colonial overtones are applied to the tramping subculture to designate them as part of the undeserving poor – in problematic Victorian terms they are "savages" in need of civilisation.

By contrast, Hilton relates the "spoken word" of "the people of the abyss" (a direct reference to Jack London's 1903 text) as being "emphatic", writing that "even in its humour it was highly coloured and the popular colour was red, and running as though the beat of time, were regular expletives, suggesting of contiguous fecundity" (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 41). Hilton's tramping class speak in the insistent language of socialism, and if Orwell admits to struggling to understand the speech of tramps, does that then indicate that Orwell cannot relate to the working-classes, in his position as one of Hilton's "book-socialists" whose "ferocity is confined to the iron rigidity of terminology"? In his disinterest in learning the associated cant or slang of the tramping lifestyle, Orwell reveals that he does not appreciate it as a fully formed and distinct subculture. He thus reproduces and sustains a ruling ideology that seeks to marginalise the (out-of-)working-classes. This operates by othering the class, severing it not only from the middle- and upper-classes, but also by fuelling ideological differences between it and the broader working class. The thoughts and actions of the (out-of-)working-classes are subjected to forms of control and exclusion, rendering them as an inert and unimportant section of society.

To situate Hilton alongside Orwell is to consider a key difference in class-based perspectives on cultures of the 1930s, demonstrating a fundamental disparity in ideological and cultural codes surrounding walking. Orwell's position as a 'book-socialist' with the privilege of elected poverty ultimately places a limitation on the authenticity of his literary representations. This is a danger in itself. Orwell's position as a leading intellectual of the day, with his work read by a varied group of people, means that his writing is not just a representation of class, but instead, a vehicle by which class can be defined. Hilton's tramping is a form of resistance that emphasises working-class autonomy as opposed to productivity; a value of being that is not directly tied to working. Hilton's writing on walking and tramping therefore unsettles dominant middle-class narratives of working-class existence, and foregrounds the class' identity in self-determination.

Part-sociological essay, part-polemic, part-memoir, *Caliban Shrieks* has divided opinion since its inception. An unnamed reviewer for the *Rochdale Observer* decided that it was "not an easy book to read, nor is it easy to write about", calling it 'monotonous", "crude", and finally postulating that "one cannot avoid feeling a real sympathy for one who finds so little in life except greed, selfishness and sham" (*Rochdale Observer*, 1935, p. 14). The next week, there was a response to this review written by a Mr H. Briercliffe, in which he called the original article "hardly fair", as "what there is undoubtedly rings true without extravagance or vague wanderings into the spirit world", and that "there is sincerity throughout the book and at no time greater than in his final reaffirmation of faith in the mass of humanity" (Briercliffe, 1935, p. 14). It started life as a series of personal essays that Hilton accidentally handed in to his

WEA tutor, Mr Mason, instead of the prescribed assessment for that week. Hilton, by his own admission in *Caliban Boswelling*, was so embarrassed by the mix-up that it took him several weeks before he could bring himself to raise it with Mr Mason, but the tutor pleaded ignorance at receiving the notebook. The matter was seemingly finished. However, some months later Hilton received a copy of the *Adelphi* through the post with a letter enclosed from the then-editor, Richard Rees, congratulating him on his contribution and asking him to consider submitting another (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 92a). It transpired that Mr Mason had been so impressed with the quality of Hilton's writing that he had sent it to the *Adelphi* in secret. Correspondence was struck up between Rees and Hilton, with the editor eventually suggesting that the "dozen penny exercise books on the mass-working lad's experience" should be published in book form, and thus, the Rochdale plasterer became a published author with the release of *Caliban Shrieks* in 1935 (Hilton, n.d.-a, p. 92b).

Hilton's political and philosophical project – to celebrate the tramp figure as one of radical selfhood in an inherently exploitative time for the working-classes – is articulated through the following extract:

> Rebellion came upon me, and I, intended for industry, for being a clean-nosed respectable god-fearing climber, surrounded by grime, strict discipline, crowding and the dignity of labour, took to the road, the open road, with visions of liberty, freedom, air, sun, and health. Damn the methodical work game, damn the churchwarden and his tray for the eternal threepenny bit, hang the football coupons. The road, nomadness, no shaving, no soft-soaping to respectable city fathers, no accepting of patronage from bilious old Victorians of the duffer brand, no more ambition, no set purpose, just drift, drift, drift, complete scope for nanny-goat whimsicalness, and eternally the 'captain of my soul' (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 37).

There are a few things of note to pick out from this extract – ideas that are first introduced here but which form important frameworks for further analysis of Hilton's work. First, there is a clear dichotomy between the "grime" of the working person's life and the refreshing vitality of a life spent on the open road. Hilton paints a picture of a country and a people sullied by mechanisation; its land scarred from the aftermath of an Industrial Revolution that introduced the "strict discipline" of a "dignity of labour" and seems to yearn for a nostalgically bucolic ideal. Elsewhere in the text he draws attention again to the connection between rurality and tramping, writing that "you had 'ten thousand vagabonds infesting the roads, begging and stealing, many of whom had been divorced from the land by enclosure acts", thereby reinforcing the tramp's historical connection to land and highlighting the social and political forces that forced working-class displacement. This therefore challenges their representation as dangers who are "infesting" the countryside – in fact, Hilton reminds us that it was political ideology that necessitated their presence (Hilton, [1935] 2024, p. 53). In the above extract Hilton also attacks the established structures of labour, organised religion and leisure, reinforcing Croft's assertion that his writing presents an innate resistance to a "fully industrialised work pattern" – tramping becomes a methodology in which a person can remove themselves from all strictures of capitalist society (and in this view, even leisure-time becomes heavily structured and something to escape) (Croft, 1985, p. 14) . The condemnation of "bilious old Victorians of the duffer brand" demonstrates a frustration with ruling ethical and moral codes that were perceived to dictate the livelihoods of the working-classes. This aligns Hilton with the flourishing Modernist movement, in that he also wants to "make it new" but, unlike the writers of that sect he does not have the strength in institutional backing or privately educated upbringing that they enjoyed and utilised. His personal approach extends itself as a visceral discomfort with any and all forms of establishment. The final few words of this extract are perhaps the most important, and indeed, nearly sum up all that precedes them. Interestingly, the words "captain of my soul" are borrowed from William Ernest Henley's highly Victorian typified poem, "Invictus", which is notable for its themes of stoicism and resolve in the face of adversity. This somewhat complicates Hilton's condemnation of "Victorians of the duffer brand" and their associated moralities – in this reclamation of Victorian thought, Hilton shifts the message of self-determination and individual will to become a tool of working-class resistance, rather than maintaining its original imperial associations. The desire to become the captain of his own soul points to a judgement that the working-classes have no freedom under an economic system that is innately exploitative. He believes that taking to the road is the only possible way to garner true freedom in the context of 1930s Britain – during a worsening political climate across Europe, the rise of extremist groups like Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, and the impoverishment invoked by the National Government's Means Test – a place in which his class, fundamentally, are not a free people. In rejecting work, respectability, and purpose in favour of "drift" and autonomy, Hilton affirms his vision of the tramp as a literary embodiment of working-class individualism in the 1930s, transforming it from a victim of circumstance into deliberate iconography.

Champion was Hilton's first explicit foray into the world of fiction. It follows the story of two men from Northern England: Jimmy, an unemployed plasterer who lifts his family out of abject poverty by becoming a championship boxer; and the political activist Charlie, Jimmy's brother's childhood friend, who takes to the road in a display of protest after being incarcerated for breach of the peace. There is something of the young Hilton reflected in the figure of Charlie. *Champion* was a text written with publication and the possibility of a middle-class audience in mind (unlike its predecessor), and so Hilton's approach considerably differs. Thematically, tramping (for Hilton) still has ties to anti-productivism, as the sections concerning Charlie will show, but the wider purpose of its inclusion demonstrates Hilton's belief in the importance of walking and tramping as a fundamental working-class cultural exercise. Class consciousness and walking are married together ideologically as tramping becomes a way to foster different kinds of community that are not socially, economically, or culturally exploitative. At this stage, Hilton recognises the impracticality, or impossibility, of removing oneself entirely from society; instead, he positions the subculture alongside this assertion from Phillip O'Connor, that what has made the tramp "fail in our society might well make them succeed in a foretaste of the one to come" (O'Connor, 1963, p. 185). In *Champion*, Hilton develops the ideologies first seen in *Caliban Shrieks,* particularly in relation to a communion with nature, begins to celebrate a sense of solidarity and community amongst the tramping subculture itself, and also introduces elements of a utopian society in which behaviours deemed deviant at the time, such as homosexuality, are allowed to flourish.

The text's first engagement with the tramping experience emerges during Jimmy's spell of unemployment. He has heard possibility of a building site that may have need for plasterers, and so he rises in the earliest hours of the morning and sets out on a four-mile walk to a town called Forton in search of a job. Once there, it quickly becomes apparent that there is no need for him after all, and he, along with a crowd of other hopefuls, are subsequently turned away. From there, Jimmy walks from site to site in the hope of finding work but to no avail. Whilst Jimmy is unemployed, his pedestrian movement is dictated by the operational structure of the failing labour market. This is a reflection of Hilton's reconfiguring of tramping, as the act begins to become tied to economic necessity, rather than being purely individualist as in *Caliban Shrieks*. Tired and dejected, Jimmy is making his way home when it begins to rain and so he takes shelter in a nearby wood shack in the park, in which sits an old woman. Hilton describes her as wearing

> an old black satin skirt, the style that his grandmother had worn long ago; brown, tight-fitting costume jacket, the suns of many summers had faded the dye; over her head, gipsy-fashion, was a dirty large red handkerchief, and loosely hanging around her shoulders was a striped shawl, much mended. Her feet were buried in men's boots, much too large, and of different pattern… On the seat beside her was a bundle, and a big handbag, the strap of which was off and substituted by string (Hilton, 1938, pp. 106-107).

The woman's attire immediately earmarks her as one of the tramping class. Rachel Worth has highlighted the difficulties in clothing acquisition for the rural labouring poor in the nineteenth century, documenting that "the combination of low wages and large families meant that clothing for working families would have been basic and in short supply", and although clothing was of course a necessity, the immediate focus must be that of rent, fuel, and food, and so "new clothes – let alone considerations of 'fashion'", were unlikely to feature prominently in their lives, if it all (Worth, 2018, pp. 52-53). If this is to be true for those who earned money – however little it may have been – then for the tramp, who had no income to speak of at all, fashions of the day were of the very least importance. Nonetheless, this lady is noticeably set aside by the manner of her garments, as not only is she dressed in skirts of the late-Victorian style (even in the context of scarcity of new clothes, these are considerably old-fashioned), her sun-discoloured jacket is too tight for a body changed by age, her shawl has been visibly mended, and most notably of all – she is wearing men's boots, that are both too large and not a matching pair anyway. However, what appears most strikingly is the tone that Hilton applies to her. By connecting the woman to Jimmy's grandmother, Hilton invokes a personal connection not often ascribed to the homeless population at this time, with what Elizabeth Coggin Womack terms an "ingrained association" between walking and idleness or criminality, due to centuries of vagrancy and poaching laws (Womack, 2016, p. 119). The phrase "the suns of many summers" is almost romantic and almost certainly idealistic (he does not draw attention to the ice of many winters), and Hilton also falls into the trap of racial exoticism, with the woman's scarf being tied "gipsy-fashion" around her head – another idealistic image of a traditionally nomadic lifestyle. The image of the woman painstakingly mending her shawl with feet "buried" in ill-fitting boots that would have brought great discomfort to a walker travelling some twenty miles a day between casual wards is one of deep pity and feminises her. The clothes that the tramp wears tell her story piece-by-piece, and when viewed as a complete image there arises a poignancy ascribed to her poverty. Hilton's attention to clothing presents tramping as a lived and gendered experience, as opposed to the direct symbol of rebellion ascribed to the act in *Caliban Shrieks*. This poignancy is reflected through Hilton comparing the woman to *Cymbeline*'s Imogen, whom Bonnie Lander characterises as a symbol for observing "how the cultural forces of gender and nation on the individual interact with the knowing individual's assertion of independence and agency", much like Hilton's perspective on socio-political effect on the tramping figure (Lander, 2008, p. 165). As she puffs on her pipe clouds of smoke surround her head, and through this "mind-eye-smoke-X-ray", the "symbol of love, motherliness, and life's renewal" is portrayed (Hilton, 1938, p. 109). Hilton does not portray the lifestyle as admirable, but rather, the individual who endures it. This overall depiction of the female tramp broadens the conception of the figure beyond the young, politically alienated, and male rebel as set out in *Caliban Shrieks* – a more nuanced interplay between the duality of oppressive systems (especially in relation to gender) now comes to the forefront, reinforcing my argument that, in *Champion*, Hilton attempts to move away from the harsh and centred individualism of Caliban in order to showcase that the tramping subculture was composed of a wide range of socially marginalised people. Tramping is not just a case of sole political protest, but a social and cultural reality.

Before leaving the shelter, Jimmy considers a handful of rough change he has left in his pocket and leaves a few pence for the woman who now sits asleep, regaining the energy required to continue her tramp onwards to Manchester (a journey of ten miles). Jimmy's own relative destitution as one of the mass unemployed brings this action into sharp focus and signifies an inherent class solidarity between the two in their shared deprivation. On his way home, Jimmy is stopped by a male tramp who asks for directions to the "grubber" (alongside "spike", both slang terms for the casual ward of a workhouse). Notably, Jimmy immediately understands this tramp's use of cant or slang. His linguistic knowledge earmarks him as part of a wider, class-based community, signalling belonging and shared experience. The male tramp looks as if he "had robbed a scarecrow", is both wetter and older than Jimmy himself, and is "very badly shod", as he "slurred along on his heels, for his toes were too blistered and blood-soaked to put on the ground" (Hilton, 1938, p. 118). The spike is yet another three miles onwards. When Jimmy finally reaches home, he realises that since leaving the house at six-thirty in the morning, he has walked some sixteen miles in search of a job. By placing emphasis on the condition of both tramps' feet (with the man's being blood-soaked and the woman's being encased in ill-fitting boots), and the fact that Jimmy has walked so far, Hilton highlights the material effect that socio-economic policy has on the body through poverty and transiency. It is here that walking truly becomes a material form of working-class cultural expression, with bodies tangibly marked by class and labour conditions.

Whilst Jimmy's tramping experience is short-lived, and stems from a search for work, Charlie Smith decides to take to the road as a result of disillusionment with what he considers to be failings within the labour movement. Both men's experiences are directly shaped by the same socio-economic dynamics, but Charlie's actions are propelled by a desire to be anti-productivist, in contrast with Jimmy who is seeking the opposite. Charlie is introduced by Hilton at the beginning of the narrative, as a sanatorium wardmate of Jimmy's brother, Freddie, who is suffering from consumption. Charlie is shown to be a kind and sensitive young man, and he entertains the ward with fantastical stories to distract them from their illnesses, and ultimately, it is Charlie who is there when Freddie passes away. Freddie had contracted tuberculosis as a direct result of a heavy manual labouring job, and by the time he had taken on a lighter job, it was too late. The human cost of capitalism and industrialism has a profound effect on Charlie, and scenes such as these, of previously fit, healthy, young bodies being damaged or destroyed by the effects of industrial labour, are a clear instigator for the development of a class consciousness in an individual. Additionally, Hilton comments on the devastation that the Industrial towns of the North faced during the 1930s, with levels of unemployed reaching those previously unseen. Charlie reflects that the "chimneys that as a boy he had seen spouting black smoke, were oftentimes smokeless; those happy chattering tongues of the boom days were now silent and gloomy", accentuating how deeply the rapid decline in industrialisation impacted the cultural makeup of the north of England (Hilton, 1938, p. 193). The space comes to represent a hinterland – a place in which there are no known associations. As well as the direct economic effects that marked these communities (severe poverty, hunger, homelessness, fuel hardships), the appearance of the town and thus its atmosphere had vastly changed too. Suddenly, these bustling industrial areas were quiet and smokeless, and the scenes that many had known since childhood, and were for the most part all they knew, were irrevocably distorted. Hilton uses the death of Freddie and the decline of the once-prosperous North as symbols of the devastating impact that industrialism had on the working-class communities who lived there; Freddie's fate is emblematic of workers all over the country, whilst the town's deterioration itself signifies the erosion of economic foundations that sustained working-class cultures. As such, Charlie's decision to strike out on the road and physically remove himself from the changed landscape of his youth signifies a rejection of those who have failed him, the rest of his class, and the place that he calls home. Tramping is thus tied to the working-class experiences of loss, displacement, and resistance, reinforcing the notion that, within *Champion*, tramping is not a purely individualist act, but rather an integral cultural practice that arises from the material conditions of the 1930s.

Over the course of the narrative Charlie becomes the voice of the working-classes in Rochdale and a bastion for the unemployed – a figure that Jimmy comes to regard as Christ-like in his personal mission, explaining to his wife that, "I used to listen to him sometimes when I was out of work; he used to speak on the market-place for the unemployed… I felt in his way of talking something of what I thought Christ would be… There's something of the bleeding, and suffering, and striving, and burning for fellow-man in him" (Hilton, 1938, p. 165). Charlie's personal mission becomes a spiritual burden, and after he is arrested for causing disturbances in the House of Commons, this is only intensified; Hilton writes that, "the cause of the workers was in his blood, it pushed him, enraged him, and worked him up to an impassioned, animal vitality" (Hilton, 1938, p. 172). Charlie is eventually arrested for inciting unemployment riots and is sent to prison for three months. He serves his time and makes a return to his hometown, but the months have been long for those he left behind, and Charlie finds that people are suddenly wary of him, with the fear and threat of more civil unrest hanging heavily over their heads. Charlie's arrest, imprisonment, and subsequent alienation from his community highlights the impact of institutional power upon individual resistance, and he is affected by a deep depression. After he initially resolves to drown himself, Charlie instead decides to strike out onto the road, in a chapter aptly entitled "A New Life". This represents more than just a physical departure; it is a symbolic break from a society and culture that he deems to have failed him. Hilton's own frustrations at the disconnect between the consciousness of the working classes and the power structures that kept them in place are clearly echoed throughout the pages of *Champion*, and in particular through Charlie, as he tries to publicise the struggle of the common people.

Hilton has shifted the motivations of Charlie's life almost totally, and his cynicism toward the labour movement leads to a new life that is stripped back to its bare essentials; nothing else seems to matter apart from "the sky above" and "the earth below" (Hilton, 1938, p. 193). An unnamed tramp in O'Connor's study gives some indication as to the affinity that tramping had with rurality, writing that 'one did own the sky at night. I've never felt nearer to it than on a road in the evening with nowhere to sleep…Union with it [nature] is very good for one, for reassurance about the naturalness and not the bloody "'drama' of human existence" (O'Connor, 1963, p. 88). This seems to be Hilton's, and therefore Charlie's stance, in that most things cease to hold importance whilst amongst nature and on tramp. The presence of nature becomes a deep comfort for Charlie and offers a new, quasi-religious framework to rebuild his life around, at once reflecting Jimmy's earlier suggestion that Charlie is Christ-like in his dedication to the Socialist cause but also offering a new, non-institutional framework which explores how working-class spiritual identities might develop outside of organised religion. Charlie, once the isolated martyr, is now surrounded by a newer, more comforting spirituality. Moments of "solitude and communion with the brook's rippling water" and "the early greeting of the morning swallow" have now become his 'new gods, more worthy gods than any others he had known", and "whilst at first they had refused him their companionship" as he had "been untutored in their mysteries", he is eventually enveloped in profoundly spiritual surroundings

(Hilton, 1938, p. 198). With this moment of retreat into nature, Hilton subverts the notion identified in this essay's introduction of the vagrant as socially sick as Charlie finds a profound connection to landscape. The support that Charlie finds from his rural surroundings are not only a safe space for him mentally but also carry out a physical and legal functionality. As Charlie's sense of self converges with his surroundings, Hilton writes that "the birds had told him when to rise, and when to go to bed, when to shelter, and when to flee, and when to hide from the farmer, who would send his dog along"; this is a symbolic intimation from Hilton that the working-classes have the right to the countryside. The natural and anti-systemic structure is rooted in organic rhythms, rather than the strictness of externally imposed ones. This subverts notions of farmers and landowners as custodians of the country and reinforces rural communion between the working-classes and their surrounding landscapes (Hilton, 1938, p. 198). Ben Clarke notes that, within *Champion,* Hilton "disrupts the notion of a universal working-class hostility to what J.B. Priestley called 'Old England'…and uses residual social formations to criticize the forms of capitalism that displaced them" (Clarke, 2016, p. 777). The countryside becomes a site of reclamation, as the working-classes assert their right to be there.

The rural space also serves as a space in which there is a lack of surveillance, and this enables the tramp to engage in behaviours that would be policed within urban or city areas; as Kenneth Kusmer notes in a US context, "life on the road…allowed a variety of sexual practices to flourish that normally would have been condemned by a larger society" (Kusmer, 2002, p. 143). There is a longstanding history of homosexuality within the tramping subculture, and whilst Owen Clayton identifies a common "dynamic of mastery" between older men and younger boys on the road in the States, and Orwell openly calls sexual advances from another tramp whilst in a spike together "a nasty experience', the homoerotic subtext found within Hilton's novel is almost utopian (Clayton, 2023, p. 84; Orwell, 1933, p. 174). As these kinds of relationships were not possible in mainstream society, the tramping lifestyle acts as an alternative space in which non-traditional relationships are able to flourish. One night, whilst sleeping under a bed of straw amongst some pigs in a barn, Charlie is joined by a fellow tramp. They do not acknowledge each other's presence, and Charlie leaves at four in the morning to resume his walk. Whilst bathing in a river some few miles from his overnight stay, his bedfellow, Harry Sykes, suddenly appears and tells Charlie that he has been following him "as a speck two miles in the distance" (Hilton, 1938, p. 203). This in itself is indicative of desire – the two men had made no contact the night before, and so Harry's decision to follow Charlie is unusual, unless it is recognised as a demonstration of sexual and emotional longing, made possible by the anonymity and lack of surveillance on the open road. Charlie immediately sets to sharing his can of tea and offers up his "grub", 'mooched the day before" (the food Harry declines, he is aware of its scarcity in comparison to tea) (Hilton, 1938, p. 202). A friendship strikes up between the two, and when Charlie admits to not knowing where he is going next, Harry invites him along to Epsom Derby. Charlie accepts, and after noticing that Harry is "out of condition" (his face is red and blotchy and his waistcoat is markedly sullied by beer stains), convinces him to strip off his clothing and join him in the river. Whilst Charlie swims "like a tadpole" Harry floats on his back and cries, "Christ, it's like being kids again", to which Charlie yells in reply, "that's what we always should be" (Hilton, 1938, p. 204). The almost immediate bond between the two men incites an excitement and youthfulness – the often-hard reality of tramping is cast aside as they revel in the initial lure of the culture. Harry proceeds to play some piece of Schubert on his cornet which was "fitting for two men at six a.m. in a wooded valley with water dashing down from a chalk rock above them", and they, with "not a stitch upon them other than that their feet were covered by rags and shoes", dance in and amongst the trees in a display of unadulterated exuberance (Hilton, 1938, p. 205). Hilton reimagines working-class masculinities to include queerness, directly supporting his broader goal of destabilising narratives that act to stigmatise the tramp; instead of presenting the subculture as one of ‘social sickness’, it becomes a space in which social freedoms can be explored.

The homoerotic nature of Charlie and Harry’s relationship continues through their journey to Epsom and beyond, as they visit cottager’s houses to beg for their dinners, wake each other up in the night by dangling wet frogs over faces, and revel in the gaiety of public houses together. They also share equally in all proceeds made from Harry’s busking. However, this relationship is destined to remain in the rural outskirts as following the closing race of Epsom, Harry informs Charlie that he will now be going down to London to work the theatre queues with his cornet. To this, Charlie replies that he will do the same but Harry quickly rebuffs him: “‘You can’t come in on the theatre business; it’s summer, and there’s not enough taken for one’, said Harry, to have an understanding from the beginning” (Hilton, 1938, p. 241). What this “understanding” entails is an end to their easy-natured and often idyllic existence together, whilst also signifying the transient nature of relationships on the road. This was a subculture wholly founded on the basis of movement, and therefore there was an acceptance that people were also transient themselves and an understanding that relationships formed had no true permanence – a fact which does not undermine their emotional depth. Instead, the impermanence of their relationship highlights the poignancy of what the tramping subculture can offer.

A deep sense of comradeship and community in the tramping subculture is depicted in Hilton’s writing about the tramping presence at Epsom Derby, one that he marks as of historical significance. The “Tramp’s Hollow” is an area surrounded by trees that, since the time of Kings James and Charles, had been a piece of land exclusively camped on by “tramps and sturdy beggars” during Derby eve (Hilton, 1938, p. 219). In the space, “half a dozen cauldrons were provided, timber was in abundance”, and ‘the police never interfered”; Charlie and Harry are offered some “rosy-lea”, as “some sport has left a hundred-weight” for the gathering of down-and-outs (Hilton, 1938, p. 219). Curiously, in the original typescript for *Champion* Hilton handles this place with a decidedly more spiritual approach. It is instead named “Tobey’s Hollow” (tobey/toby being slang for tramp/vagrant), is described as the tramping class’s “place as a right”, and the presence of tea is due to, rather than a charitable donation, an entitlement, with Hilton explaining that “the mystique of Tobeys’ Hollow ensured this for somehow or other over forty years, at least, the tramps had a traditional right to water and timber and cauldrons” (Hilton, n.d.-b, p. 57). Here, Hilton presents the tramps not as trespassers, but as rightful inhabitants of a historically significant space which rooted in continuity and communal practices; this writes back against the same socio-political mechanisms that divorced the working-classes from the land and which Hilton criticises elsewhere. Either way, Hilton believes in the tramping class as a legitimate subsection of the (out-of-)/working-classes, and he demonstrates this in both versions of the text with the statement that “the Derby was England’s National Festival, the King attended it, the beggar attended it, and all the important nobodies inbetween attended it” (Hilton, 1938, p. 219). By including all echelons of society within this grouping, Hilton suggests that cultural preferences are not dictated by class status. Clarke adds that Hilton’s account of the Derby in *English Ways* (in which he again stresses the egalitarian nature of the meet) “resists the kind of simple conception of the nation that characterised contemporary nationalism, emphasising diversity and an essential democratic identity that emerges even in seemingly hierarchal celebrations” (Clarke, 2016, p. 779). This insight from Clarke underscores a key aspect of Hilton’s broader project in challenging homogenised middle-class narratives of English national identity. Hilton’s writing is an attempt at a deliberate challenge towards cultural discourse of the time, and the inclusiveness of the Derby shows the actual realities of lived experience, thus framing working-class culture as an important part of understanding conceptions of Englishness with various complexities. The tramps gathered at the Derby participate in ritualistic storytelling, a verbal tradition that positions them in a lineage of community-based heritage and invokes a sense of communal identity as they pass around stories from their common history – "Sheffield Sam", who had won a thousand pounds at one meeting of the Derby, and who remembered the "Jubilee Plunger"? (Hilton, 1938, p. 222-223). The sharing of stories, sustenance, and a sense of right to land is not a direct rejection of traditional society, but rather, a redefining of how society can function. The focus shifts from tramping as radical individualism to a source of communal freedom.

As the evening wears on, the imagery of Tobey's Hollow takes on a mythical and ancestral tone. The light of the blazing fires throws the men into profile, with their faces resembling "men of a pre-civilized era; unkempt, they belonged to the soapless age, unshaved and dispossessed of every vestige of respectability, they seemed to be the brothers of the early Saxon men" (Hilton, 1938, p. 223). The tramps are anointed with ancestral continuities that situate them in a lineage of invoked community throughout time. They are not just comrades with those sat around the fire on that particular night, but also with every tramp who has sat around a fire in the Tramp's/Tobey's Hollow throughout the temporal space. Hilton is working within the same tradition as Orwell by framing tramps as part of an evolutionary throwback – what differs is that Hilton ascribes Anglo-Saxonism to the group, as opposed to Orwell's depiction of crude, animalistic savages. Anglo-Saxonism is a historical ideology that was prevalent in the late-nineteenth century, and which believed in the racial superiority of civilisations descended from the Anglo-Saxons, attributing this to their physical, intellectual and democratic traits, and a mythologised notion of freedom. Nineteenth-century intellectuals utilised this ideology to justify the expansion of Empire, as well as a focus on piety and tradition, with Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) becoming a foundational text in his mythologisation of the Anglo-Saxons as the "true" English people. Moving into the Edwardian era, Velma Bourgeois Richmond comments that G.K. Chesterton (a vocal opposer to empire) advocated for an "Englishness" that emphasised rural values that had been "largely lost through industrialisation and the disappearance of the peasantry", and William Morris "added socialist ideology and a tremendous enthusiasm for northern identity" into their conceptions of Anglo-Saxonism (Richmond, 1997, p. 174). Additionally, Joanne Parker considers that the Anglo-Saxon novels of the nineteenth century were written in response to definite social changes, such as the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), which had "generated a widespread British fear of invasion" and heightened interest in defining national characteristics (Parker, 2020, p. 638).

Writing in the late 1930s, at a time where Britain was on the cusp of another major conflict, Hilton employs the same strategies that focus on an emphasis of rural narratives, socialist ideology, and questions of nationalism, but, by applying Anglo-Saxonism to the tramping class, he does not bolster nationalist or imperial agendas and instead reclaims these ideologies, a notion of a "real England" for the dispossessed. In this sense, Clarke's assertion that Hilton's representation of the Derby in *English Ways* "resists the kind of simple conception of the nation that characterised contemporary nationalism, emphasising diversity and an essential democratic identity" that mobilised against fascism suggests that, in *Champion*, Hilton attempts to stabilise English identity before the outbreak of war through democratised cultural belonging (Clarke, 2013, p. 779). He portrays the (out-of-)working-classes as deeply rooted in an English national identity that expresses ideals of a much older form of civilisation, reinforcing their cultural legitimacy and reconfiguring Anglo-Saxonism from a place of nationalist dogma into one that can sustain a radical and egalitarian proletarian image of the future. The cultural richness of the gathering at Tobey's Hollow is therefore a direct rebuttal of the concept that tramping is socially isolating as it not only brings forth a sense of community amongst those physically present but also roots that community in an ancestral continuity across time.

In *Champion*, Hilton develops his portrayal of tramping from being something that is a radical expression of working-class individualism, anti-productivism and autonomy into an example of a lived, bodily practice that is deeply entrenched in working-class experience. The figure becomes a representation of social endurance, reaching its zenith at the scene in Tobey's Hollow, whereupon symbolic intimations become mythologised and reimagine the very idea of Englishness itself.

In 1939, following the publication of *Champion*, Jack Hilton and his wife Mary set off from their home in Rochdale, pushing a perambulator filled with, as Hilton describes, "all the things my wife considered necessary for home comforts away from home" with himself as "the potential donkey", and walked to Plymouth, a journey which took them six months (Hilton, 1940, p. 17). This journey was undertaken by the Hiltons as a study into the cultural make-up of the country, with Croft arguing that the resulting text*, English* Ways (1940), was written as a direct response to Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, for which "Hilton felt partly responsible" (Croft, 1990, p. 250). He notes that "the account of a Lancashire working-man (and his wife) tramping from Rochdale to Epsom and back was the exact opposite – and consciously so – of Orwell's brief journey north" (Croft, 1989, p. 162). *English Ways* thus stands as an attempt by Hilton to reframe the representation of working-class life made by middle-class authors such as Orwell; H.V. Morton, *In Search of England*, 1927; and J.B. Priestley, *English Journey,* 1934. Clarke observes that "the most obviously radical feature of *English Ways* is Hilton himself", with the text resisting "the idea of a generic working-class response to places and institutions" (Clarke, 2016, p. 777). Significantly, Hilton's conception of walking has now fully moved beyond the earlier articulation of anti-productivism in *Caliban Shrieks* to function as a means of social observation. In his new role of social investigator, he reimagines the nineteenth century tradition of "slumming" and shifts the terms of "productivity" from a capitalist understanding to one based in the understanding and formation of cultural heritage.

Hilton published his next novel *Laugh at Polonius* in 1942, and then, ten years after *English Ways*, he and Mary retraced their steps from Rochdale – this time walking to Brighton and then back via Blackpool. The resulting book was called *English Ribbon* (1950). In the introduction to this text, Hilton writes that 'whilst sorting out the material so gathered, I sulked. It was all so sunny in colour, and for me to write a sunshine story was incredible. But Art and Truth are related" (Hilton, 1950, p. 11). This signals the ideological evolution in Hilton's writing, from his beginnings in *Caliban Shrieks* to *English Ribbon*. It also reflects a shift in the broader cultural landscape for the working-classes – the 1930s were a decade marked by deep economic depression and political unrest, indicating the need for *Caliban Shrieks'* call for a radical assertion of autonomy in the form of tramping, an act that stood as a way to establish agency. In *Champion*, Hilton had developed his ideology into one that positioned tramping as a lived, bodily practice, and which could offer a site of utopian cultural reclamation in its connection to the rural and freedom from dominant social norms, but which was still tangibly marked by the material conditions that the class was subjected to. By the time of *English Ribbon* in 1950, the post-war welfare state and social reforms had begun to transform the experience of working-class lives, and Hilton's almost disbelief at writing a "sunny" story signifies an inherent hope for the future of his class. Hilton's focus on walking throughout his literary career captures the shifting cultural, social, and political associations of working-class life in the first half of the twentieth century and symbolises the ongoing journey of identity and resistance.

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How Universal Basic Income (UBI) Can Empower the Working Class Through Improved Wage Negotiation and Poverty Alleviation

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Abstract

Universal Basic Income (UBI) and its relationship to class are undertheorized and have received scant attention in academic literature. In this article, we address this omission of UBI and class in current discourses on UBI. We do this by focusing on how UBI can ameliorate class inequalities and ease social insecurity and precarity through a guaranteed, regular basic income. We focus on key areas where UBI can lighten the burden on the working class, namely, rebalancing power in the labour market, poverty and stigma reduction, navigating crisis (economic and Covid-19), addressing automation, improving health, and supporting employment and education. In all these areas, UBI has mitigating value for the working class, bringing new opportunities for a fulfilling life. Focusing on the UK, we believe that, with welfare reform and certain government constraints, UBI can make a significant contribution to improving the standard of living for the working class. However, we also argue that UBI has limitations since it cannot transform class relations, let alone abolish class. The article also discusses the problematic nature of defining class as binary, the significance of intersectionality, particularly between ethnicity and gender, and the development of class from Marx to current-day definitions that encompass populations who feel precarious and financially under- or unrewarded for their work.

Keywords

UBI, Working Class, Amelioration, Poverty, Stigma

Introduction

This paper argues that Universal Basic Income (UBI) can increase workers' wage bargaining power, thereby liberating them from low pay and undesirable work. Moreover, UBI can be a vehicle to reset the class balance, which in recent times has shifted in favour of capitalists and employers, through de-unionisation, precarity in the gig economy, and low wages (Chang et al, 2023; Walke, 2023). Moreover, we argue that UBI has significant potential to reduce poverty, which affects both low-income and unemployed groups. Thus, we take an innovative perspective on UBI as a radical tool with the potential to play a significant positive role in the class struggle. We argue that UBI, by strengthening the wage-bargaining power of unions and workers, will improve their conditions, and we contest the view that UBI would be used merely as a subsidy for employers to pay low wages.

UBI as a Vehicle for Class Emancipation

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the concept of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) (also known as a citizen's income, standard income, or unconditional basic income) with worldwide pilots and a plethora of books and articles in academic journals. However, its source extends back at least to the English radical Thomas Paine, who argued for a UBI in his pamphlet *Agrarian Justice* (1797). UBI is a social policy that guarantees citizens' subsistence as a right and is independent of paid labour by providing a regular payment, mostly from the state, but also possibly from charities and large corporations to all citizens, regardless of their employment status, age, and gender (Zimmermann et al. 2020, 301). It can include children and older people. Although terms are used interchangeably, there is a difference between UBI, basic income and cash transfers. Cash transfers are payments of financial assistance to the poor, such as to support food security, health, and education (Nyame and Gwilym, 2025). Basic incomes are payments to selected groups of poor people; they are not universal. An example of how these terms have been used interchangeably is the worldwide UBI pilots, which have never been fully universal but have focused on groups, such as care leavers in Wales (Gwilym and Beck, 2024). We address issues regarding how to phase out means testing, how payments would be made and funded, and the level at which UBI is set elsewhere (Gwilym et al, 2025). We also address elsewhere the evaluations of UBI trials worldwide, including the trade-offs, such as the rate at which UBI is set and the largely positive results of UBI pilots (Nyame and Gwilym, 2025, 2023; Beck et al., 2024)

There are many positives in UBI, such as redistributing wealth between social classes (provided it is accompanied by tax reform), tackling poverty and inequality, empowering workers in oppressive work, and enabling a person to live a secure life free from the social insecurity of low pay, insecure hours, and precarity (Lowrey 2018). While not a route to Marxist class emancipation, UBI nonetheless promises millions of working-class people greater freedom over their lives (Standing 2017). We posit that UBI has the potential to free the working class from many shackles of poverty, precarity, and social insecurity (Riedl, 2020; Weight, 2004). We argue that it increases workers' bargaining power with employers, thus improving wages and working conditions. However, eliminating poverty would also require a universal health care system and a free-tuition public higher education system, as well as generous benefits for people receiving categorical benefits, such as those with disabilities (Sculos, 2018, 3).

A policy that spans the political spectrum, for the Liberal Right, a UBI can be understood as associated with the social justice theory of "real libertarianism" (Zimmermann et al. 2020, 312). This theory aims to combine freedom, that is, the ability to do whatever one pleases, with equality, that is, the equal opportunity to pursue opportunities, in a particular way. On the Left, proponents claim that a UBI would free workers from market shackles and work toward the objective of labour decommodification (Cigna 2022, 133). UBI could rebalance bargaining power in the labour market and potentially contribute to a partial de-commodification of labour. Currently, employers and the state keep pay rates below a living wage (therefore contributing to in-work poverty). UBI's main effect would be to reduce the pressure on workers to accept poor-quality work, potentially leading employers to increase wages over time. At present, the conditional nature of welfare forces workers to accept poor-quality jobs (or risk losing their benefits), and exploitative employers are effectively subsidised by the state through in-work benefits. UBI could somewhat level the playing field and enhance individual choice over which jobs are accepted and on what terms (see 'Wage Labourers' below). Thus, because it stresses each person's entitlement to resources, UBI is consistent with positive libertarianism; nevertheless, because it is redistributive, it is at odds with radical libertarianism, which esteems free-market solutions (MacLean, 2018).

The eligibility criteria for UBI typically require both nationality and residency (Gentilini et al. 2020, 25). While UBI aims to provide universal coverage, it may extend to temporary residents, such as foreigners living in the country, at the government's discretion. However, if applied only to citizens of a specific nation, certain disadvantaged groups, such as undocumented immigrants, would be excluded from UBI due to their lack of eligibility for public funds. The income unconditionality that basic income provides lays a foundation for meeting essential needs, such as employment, quality of life, and better access to health care. Moreover, it incentivises people to work, as its universality means recipients do not experience reductions in social security benefits, which currently trap working people in poverty. A basic income enables all young people to participate in unpaid or low-paid internships, which would otherwise be available only to the well-off (Parijs & Vanderborght 2017, 25). It is for this reason that basic income is considered a social protection system, creating minimum conditions and protecting those on the edges of social marginalisation.

The term 'basic' in UBI does not necessarily refer to a minimum payment threshold or a link with so-called *basic needs*. In fact, a basic income might theoretically both exceed and fall short of the income threshold considered sufficient to meet an individual's basic needs (Martinelli 2017, 6). In worldwide pilots, the rate at which it has been set has ranged from 750 to 2,059 euros monthly (Kay, 2017). Basic income is a flat payment, meaning that regardless of differences in living expenses, people receive the same amount regularly. No one loses out since most categorical and contributory benefits would remain after the introduction of UBI, for example, to help those with additional needs such as disability. UBI does not eliminate the necessity for a living wage because it aims to provide a basic income floor rather than cover the full, diverse costs of living for everyone. While UBI offers financial security, a living wage guarantees that work is rewarded at a rate that allows for a dignified standard of living beyond mere survival. Not only does it serve as a potent redistributive device in favour of the poor, but UBI is also additional to citizens' main income (Parijs & Vanderborght 2017, 9). The purpose of UBI is to ensure that an "above-poverty" standard of living can be achieved. Those below the poverty line have been widely viewed as undeserving and as belonging to an underclass that is often depicted as dangerous and a threat to the moral fabric of society (Murray, 1984; Owen Jones, etc.). However, many poor working-class people who would receive UBI would have at least one household member working.

Wage Labourers

A major focus of this article is the empowering nature of UBI regarding pay and working conditions. Work has been a controversial topic in the UBI debate, particularly regarding the working class. The discussion amongst social scientists often focuses on the different roles in the relationship between employees and employers, as well as on their different lifestyles (Sculos, 2019). Class advantage determines the level of risk and resources they encounter, for example, through relatively high incomes (Fitzpatrick, 2022; Mathers, 2020). As for the working class, they often face exploitation at work because their physical labour intensity is greater, and the time they devote to work is also greater, so they can ensure enough income for themselves and their families. In this case, UBI is seen as a welfare programme that ameliorates harmful class relations within capitalism, partially counteracting the power imbalances of those relations (Gentilini et al., 2020). We argue that UBI could significantly enhance workers' wage-negotiation power, thereby contributing to higher incomes and better working conditions. UBI demonstrates the ongoing reality that the capitalist state itself is a focus of class struggle (Brenner, 2025). However, UBI might mitigate an all-out class war if it were ever to occur, making it anathema to revolutionary socialists (McDermott, 2025).

A UBI would increase individual freedom and improve fairness by reducing the risk of exploitation by employers, domestic partners, or government administrators, as it would lower the likelihood of falling into poverty and material deprivation (Reibstein & Stern 2018, 248; Laukkanen, 2018, 2). In the implementation of UBI, workers see their income increase and their power to speak up and make choices about their employer. This means they have a greater ability to choose whether to continue working or quit and seek better opportunities for themselves (Wright, 2004). For people in disadvantaged groups, how to make ends meet becomes a fear that motivates them to do exploitative work. Workers may also have to retrain, which can lead to periods of unpaid leave. Applying UBI gives them not only the option to leave for better opportunities but also the ability to manage their livelihood while looking for a new job (Reed and Lansley 2016, 10). UBI will likely have a more profound impact on class relative power than other welfare policies since it increases the ability to engage in non-market, non-commodity activities, thereby expanding the scope of economic activity outside capitalism (Wispelaere and Yemtsov, 2020). Several academics conclude that UBI is the most effective way to protect society's most vulnerable members in the face of the quickly evolving social and economic landscape of the workplace (Searight and Dowd, 2025; Hamilton and Martin-West, 2019).

A UBI would support workers by contributing to greater symmetry of power between labour and capital, even in the absence of collective organisation on their part, which would be particularly salient for workers in low-skilled, low-income jobs. With a UBI, the low-paid would have real choices, strengthening their negotiating position with employers by providing guaranteed strike funds for workers (Sculos, 2019). Naturally, this might imply that many of these low-skill jobs evaporate. However, as many low-skill professionals still need higher incomes than a basic UBI provides, prospective employees will remain ready to fill those positions (Wright 2004, 83). Workers will have the option to continue maintaining their current jobs without increasing their hours or taking on extra work to meet basic needs. Usually, people who are truly interested in these jobs are willing to do them for a relatively modest income, as is often the case for actors, musicians, political activists, and social care workers (Lawhon and McCreary, 2023).

UBI functions, in effect, as a permanent, universally accessible form of income, formalising the capacity for industrial action in a way no previous welfare arrangement has. The historical decline of union power through de-unionisation and casualisation, as discussed at the start of this article, makes this potential even more significant. Johnson's (2023) work on restoring authority in so-called "lumpen" communities, communities that have been progressively detached from formal economic and political participation, expands this insight: UBI is not merely a safety net but a gateway back into collective economic agency. It fosters workers' freedom, resilience and non-domination by corporate hierarchies.

Contributing to the Elimination of Working-Class Poverty

Enhancing workers' power in wage negotiations alone is not enough to significantly reduce poverty. UBI can support a multipronged approach to the present-day war on poverty. The

'Absolute/Relative' binary approach to understanding poverty in the UK has recently experienced significant change. Recent data from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2026) indicates that poverty in the UK is more nuanced, especially when household costs are considered (using the Department for Work and Pensions' Households Below Average Income data). This offers a much clearer understanding of the severity of poverty in the UK, categorised as 'very deep poverty', followed by 'deep poverty', and then 'poverty', though not as severe. When discussed in this way, poverty becomes more relatable and helps us to see how choice becomes restricted for those experiencing different levels of poverty. Class, on the other hand, is rather opaque but also provides an additional perspective on choice.

Class leads to varied opportunities to accumulate capital, whether social, cultural, or economic (Bourdieu, 2005). Marx identified two classes: the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who labour to create profit (Edgell, 1993). He also mentions a third class, the petty bourgeoisie, which is sometimes in conflict with the bourgeoisie's interests and is likely to merge with the proletariat, since their capital is not great (Joyce, 1995; Marx, Communist Manifesto, etc.). His Das Kapital ends with a focus on class, but Marx did not fully develop his theory of class, leaving this to his followers to complete (Kivinen, 2022). Weber developed Marx's theory of class by adding the concept of stratification, in which society is hierarchically arranged into strata, including status and ethnic stratification (Edgell, 1993). Contemporary discourses about class have revolved around whether a classless society has emerged and whether white-collar workers who also produce surplus value should be included in the working class (Day, 2001). The binary idea of two classes no longer suffices given intersectional dynamics with ethnicity and gender; moreover, many professionals and self-employed people would not identify with the owner class (Wright, 2019).

The working class largely emerged in urban areas during the Nineteenth Century (Dejung and Motadel, 2024). Throughout the Twentieth Century, the UK's Registrar General identified six classes, three of which belonged to the broader category of manual workers. More recently, Savage (2015) identified seven classes in the UK, four of whom we recognise as working class for this article: new affluent workers, traditional working class, emergent service workers, and the precariat (Savage, 2015). Opportunities are closely tied to one's social position, which is largely influenced by economic and social capital. Those with greater economic means can access better education, networks, and cultural assets, further widening the inequality gap between the wealthy and the disadvantaged. In addition to tangible assets like land and natural resources, inherited wealth also includes "intellectual property", such as patents (Standing 2017, 31). In the UK, only 5% of deaths result in an inheritance tax charge, roughly 31,500 estates, thus conserving wealth inequality for future generations. In contrast, in the 1950s, the UK Estate Tax was progressive, reaching 80% (HMRC, 2025). Despite the increase in the GDP index, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen. Although it is evident that the world is wealthier now than ever, income poverty is not anticipated to decline in the near or medium term based on present patterns (Worldbank 2021). Indeed, class conflict and inequality have increased significantly in recent years, partly due to the deregulation of the global financial industry (Dejung and Motadel, 2024). Moreover, understanding the working class is complicated by issues of gender, ethnicity, and globalisation, in which workers in one country often fiercely resist the migration of workers from another country (Dejung and Motadel, 2024).

The economic challenges are also significant in developed countries; for example, the UK experienced its worst recession since World War II, with a decline in GDP of more than 6% between the first quarter of 2008 and the second quarter of 2009 (Brewer et al. 2013, 180).

Following the global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, attention has increasingly focused on UBI's potential to address rising inequalities and economic insecurity. The Welsh Government has piloted a basic income for care leavers (Gwilym and Beck, 2024), and in 2020 a debate among parliamentarians was held in Westminster Hall, demonstrating growing interest (Loft et al., 2020). Moreover, a YouGov poll suggests that nearly half of UK citizens would support a UBI (Difford, 2024). A UBI does not eliminate the need for welfare reform in the UK to address the crisis of access to services and the provision of public services (Gwilym et al., 2025), and the move towards a full UBI would be in addition to current levels of welfare, as proposed by Duffy and Elder-Woodward (2019) as a UBI+ model.

Finding a job is becoming less of a guarantee for lifting people out of poverty in much of the world, including wealthy industrialised nations. Real average salaries in wealthy nations have been stagnating for over three decades despite price inflation and, more recently, a cost-of-living crisis, and this trend is likely to continue. In applying Fraser's (2019) political analysis to the UK, Johnson, Johnson, and Winlow (2025) have shown that situations like this can undermine working-class solidarity - as working-class communities become alienated, paving the way for a rise in right-wing populism. For the precariat, real incomes have been declining and have become more erratic; one slip-up, error, or accident might send them into actual poverty (Standing 2017, 75). In other situations, governments might be able to increase employment by reforming labour laws to loosen labour markets. However, doing so increases the economic insecurity of the working class, which in turn intensifies criticism of the politicians who take that course.

Governments could also introduce a real living wage, as required by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to assist the one billion workers worldwide affected by work poverty (Living Wage Foundation 2024). In the UK, the real living wage at the time of writing (2026) is £13.45 across the UK and £14.80 in London. Approximately 3.5 million jobs in the UK pay below the real living wage, thus contributing to in-work poverty worsened by the cost-of-living crisis from 2021 to the present. At the same time, even when wages rise for the working-class people in the lower income brackets, only those who are employed can benefit, while those who fall into poverty due to unemployment do not have the same opportunity. This is especially true given the UK's benefit cap, in place since 2013 and imposing a ceiling of £22,020 per year for a couple in 2026 (Gov.UK, 2025). A UBI would reset workers' negotiating power with employers, thereby generating higher incomes that would attract workers to menial work.

In the UK, UBI could be seen as an evolution of the current welfare state (Boden 2021, 647). As with the Beveridge policies of 1945, a basic income remains the only viable solution for policymakers (Johnson, Johnson and Winlow, 2025). By providing a regular monetary transfer to all citizens, UBI would help stabilise working-class household incomes, especially for those facing difficult circumstances or earning low wages. It would not simply be a welfare reform in the usual sense, but a political demonstration that the left of politics is, once more, there to fight for the working class, and would serve as a mechanism to reduce the populist pull towards the right.. As a proportion of their income, these groups typically spend most of their income on essential items such as rent, utilities, and food, and struggle to meet their basic needs (Lu 2021, 705). The UK already has a history of income-support programmes through Universal Credit (UC); UBI is a much-needed evolution of this, offering a more comprehensive coverage without the need for complex means testing. Research from other countries suggests that cash transfers are effective at reducing poverty, and similar results could be expected in the UK. For example, research on UBI in the UK shows that even a budget-neutral initial programme could significantly reduce child poverty and outperform other anti-poverty measures (Reed et al. 2023, 1). Experiments with UBI in rural Kenya and Canada indicated enhanced food security, better well-being, and lower rates of illness (Gopal and Issa 2021, 398). UBI pilots in low and middle-income countries have also shown positive outcomes, even when the benefits were relatively modest compared to average local incomes. Ultimately, UBI could offer a more streamlined and equitable approach to welfare, enhancing existing schemes to provide greater financial security for millions of working people (Hoynes and Rothstein 2019, 946). At this point, it is also important to consider the critics-those who argue that a UBI simply maintains the capitalist system and fails to address the underlying and ongoing crises of social reproduction, instead aiming to placate capitalism (Lombardozzi and Pitts, 2019). We understand this position and, to some extent, agree with it. We also consider that UBI, in fact, sustains capitalism, albeit in a new, bottom-up form. However, Lombardozzi and Pitts' (2019) discussion is based on what must now be regarded as a historical perspective, as it presents arguments predating the recent polycrisis we face in a Post-Covid-19 world-including rising poverty linked to Covid, the Cost-of-Living Crisis, Brexit, and growing concerns over unpredictable labour demands, automation, AI use and increasing global tensions across the Middle East.

Clearly, research on UBI has progressed, as have the number and findings of UK and wider pilots (see Gwilym and Beck, 2024; Nyame and Gwilym, 2025 and others). However, a UBI has been argued to help advance social justice for marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, women, and formerly incarcerated individuals, by providing a stable income and reducing dependence on precarious employment (Reibstein & Stern 2018, 248). Standing (2017, 33) referred to this as the "Security Difference Principle," which states that an institutional or social policy change is only socially fair if it increases the security of the most marginalised groups in society.

Decommodification would also be significantly advanced by UBI, which would separate the right to decent living from one's work, inheritance, or investment-based wealth (Sculos 2019, 236). Decommodification and UBI's capacity to separate the right to a decent living from work-based income are important points in our argument that UBI can effectively rebalance power between labour and capital, reduce poverty, and lessen the stigmatising effects of means-tested welfare. By decoupling subsistence from labour-market participation, UBI begins to shift the basis of resource allocation away from what individuals can produce or sell, towards what they need to live with dignity. Johnson and Johnson (2019), in their discussion of stress, domination, and the public health rationale for a citizens' entitlement, provide a relevant conceptual framework: their argument that a guaranteed income is a structural response to the domination inherent in conditional welfare supports. They describe a toxic culture of neoliberal corporatism that supports our claims about UBI and working-class empowerment.

Working-class people trapped in poverty cannot make decisions about choice of work when their primary problem is finding a way to sustain themselves (Damaske 2020, 7). They will not be able to take breaks from the labour they must perform to support themselves (Riedl 2020, 3), prioritising immediate financial stability over alignment with personal values (Judge and Bretz 1992, 261). UBI creates more opportunities for people to gain freedom and pursue their goals and values, improving the quality of their lives. The capitalist class system would survive because of UBI, but instead of people suffering from a lack of access to necessities, UBI would rescue the most vulnerable from the most horrific forms of deprivation and despair.

Stigmatising the Working Class

Poor wages and inadequate working conditions are only one dimension of the challenges facing the working class at work; another is stigma. Normally, social security targets specific groups. But they carry the problem of stigmatising a person when they are eligible for the benefit. Welfare stigma makes people in targeted groups less likely to accept welfare when they need it, or their uptake of welfare is reduced due to feelings of shame. Moreover, conditional welfare founded on means-testing creates further stigma and plays into the public perception of the deserving and undeserving poor, with its roots in Victorian England (Beck and Gwilym, 2020). Stigma is negative and has destructive psychosocial consequences on those who experience it, including stifled aspirations and feelings of hopelessness (Pharsadanishvili and Kitiashvili, 2025). Neoliberal perspectives on welfare, which frame it as a lack of personal accountability rather than a structural failing that disproportionately affects the working class, are at least partially responsible for the stigma (Kovi 2020, 15). Research from Europe, for instance, demonstrates that one of the main reasons eligible recipients don't claim their benefits is shame (Gentilini et al. 2020, 5). Universality could eliminate any stigma affecting beneficiaries. Moreover, UBI, available to everyone on an unconditional basis, has no stigma attached and no work or other behavioural modification requirements (McDonough and Morales 2020, 10). In essence, UBI would completely avoid income discrimination: thanks to its "universal" nature, it provides a basic income to every citizen regardless of income.

The recipients of UBI in pilots have used it to proactively improve their situation (Whitney, 2021; Qejvanaj, 2021). The fear of losing benefits and having to start over discourages workers from taking temporary, low-paying employment (Standing 2017, 78). This is because of the consequences of means-tested benefits, which act as a disincentive to leave welfare *for* work (Laenen and Gugushvili, 2023) and can result in a 'benefits trap'. Moreover, for middle-class people who do not earn high salaries, sometimes referred to as the squeezed middle, the introduction of UBI can be beneficial. The universality and unconditionality of UBI allow the working class of all ethnicities to benefit, thereby blurring ethnic divides and circumventing the issue of who deserves admission. As such, UBI could potentially neutralise racial animus among conservative opponents, thereby providing a basis for persuading conservatives to moderate their opposition to UBI. UBI programmes can advance outcomes aligned with conservative principles, potentially overcoming conservative opposition, and promoting economic growth (Wooldridge et al. 2024, 68). Programmes that benefit people from diverse backgrounds foster social cohesion and positive cross-cultural interactions by acknowledging and engaging in dialogue with members of different groups (Pagani 2024, 300). This is markedly different from class-struggle discourses, which identify class conflict as inevitable and ultimately resolvable only through class war.

Economic and Health Crises and the Working Class

The conditions of workers, including low pay and poor working conditions, have worsened in recent times due to economic decline and low income. The 2008-09 recession in the UK led to increased work-time underemployment, damaging workers' financial positions, increasing class inequalities and financial hardship (Warren 2015, 192). The most recent in a series of crises has been the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in a UK recession in 2020 that was worse than the Credit Crunch Crisis of 2008-09 and the worst recession since the Great Depression in 1929 (Johnson et al. 2020, 191). The Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected social security, health, and well-being and increased economic and societal fragility. The pandemic affected economic activity, leading to stagnation, unemployment, and a sharp decline in UK GDP (Harari and Keep, 2021). The crisis caused many social ills, including unemployment and excess deaths. It also restricted choices and deepened poverty, as many workers lost their jobs or had their salaries reduced under the furlough scheme, which covered only 80% of their usual income during the lockdowns.

There are many painful repercussions from an economic shock. Trauma and poverty both increase the likelihood of divorce and separation, domestic abuse, and homelessness (Johnson et al. 2020, 191). The UK, Canada, Austria, Japan, and many other nations shared several risk factors for deteriorating mental health, such as lower income, lower educational attainment, racism, job loss (or reduction in hours or pay) related to Covid-19, and food insecurity (Beck & Gwilym, 2023, 545; Hall et al., 2022, 384). Even the middle classes felt threatened by financial decline, creating vulnerabilities for them and their families, such as fear of rising costs and retirement insecurity (OECD, 2019). The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic varied significantly depending on one's socioeconomic level, with low-income families suffering significant financial setbacks and limited access to necessities like food.

In times of crisis, the government seeks to guide and protect people from possible risks. During the Covid-19 outbreak, governments took measures to prevent the rapid spread of the virus. Lockdowns were imposed on a large scale to prevent people from moving and limit the spread of the disease. UBI was widely discussed as a policy to protect the incomes of working people during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ståhl and MacEachen 2020, 4). Since the pandemic, UBI has been considered sufficiently resilient by the UN and several states to adapt to the unique circumstances of each crisis and fulfil its objective of mitigating its effects (Chrisp & Wispelaere, 2023, 915). A steady stream of income would allow those in work to be less frugal with their spending while aiding the underemployed (Johnson & Roberto, 2020, 233). Responding directly to Covid-19, the Spanish government declared that it would implement UBI in exchange for the jobs lost to technology (Johnson et al. 2020, 192). The lockdowns led to a sharp rise in global unemployment, and many countries implemented compensatory furlough schemes that pay up to 80% of earnings.

Automation and the Working Class

Automation, which promises economic growth and social development, also poses many challenges for workers, namely the prospect of fewer jobs, lower pay and poorer conditions in industries at risk of automation. These effects are most likely to peak in relation to technology such as driverless vehicles, which could overnight render millions of taxi, truck, and bus drivers unemployed (Sculos 2019, 242). Moreover, manual labour jobs, such as factory production workers, office workers, and cashiers, are more likely to be replaced by automation. The new wave of automation comes as income growth has stalled during the past 40 years, while the economy (and consequently, economic inequality) has expanded dramatically (Hall et al. 2019, 1). Recent data from the UK's Office for National Statistics has shown that the UK's jobs market (number of vacancies) continues to decline. The number of new vacancies dropped by 5.8% across all industries, to just 718,000 as of July 2025 (ONS, 2025).

Many workers become unemployed because technology can replace their jobs and achieve better results, thereby bringing greater benefits to employers. The working class are more likely to fall into unemployment due to automation because of their vulnerability and lack of protection. In many factories, robots have been installed to support the product manufacturing processes. While workers are likely to become unemployed due to machine-driven replacement, automation is also, to a lesser degree, a threat to white-collar middle-class workers (Kelly, 2023; Hall et al., 2019). Automation may exacerbate wage polarisation between rich and poor due to unemployment (Chrisp, 2020), while UBI can serve as a safety net to protect the vulnerable from falling into the unemployment trap (Kelly, 2023; Chrisp, 2020). If UBI is introduced before automation causes large-scale unemployment, it may be possible to reduce the proportion of people made jobless by automation while strengthening opportunities for more satisfying jobs (Allegri and Foschi, 2021).

The Social Determinants of Health

Low-paid workers were more at risk during the Covid-19 pandemic, further adding to the case for UBI as a protector of the working class through their empowerment. The outbreak of Covid-19 led to the establishment of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organisation (Ali et al. 2020, 644). Poor health is closely linked to social determinants, and during the Covid-19 pandemic, the working poor were the most affected, largely because they faced greater risk through their work and living conditions (Holst et al., 2021). There are many different factors in society affecting health, and the working class is more likely to have poor health to begin with, because of their higher vulnerability to disease and harm. UBI can improve health among the working class by covering basic needs and enabling recipients to spend money on health-promoting resources such as healthy food, clothing, and heating (Huss 2023, 1). These are often difficult for vulnerable people to access without UBI support. UBI contributes to poverty reduction for these people by enabling them to meet their basic needs and narrowing the gap between classes (Gerard, 2018).

A recent global meta-analysis of fifty-six separate datasets, totalling 53,405 participants, unequivocally shows a substantial relationship between employment instability and mental health (Allegri & Foschi, 2021, 13). Individuals who have unstable income and low educational attainment may be more susceptible to stress and illness. Improved mental health can result from greater monetary gains, both directly and indirectly (via the educational pathway) (Ruckert 2017, 4). UBI can create opportunities for human behaviour change, which can strongly help reduce adverse behaviours and increase opportunities for the working class to thrive (Wilson and McDaid, 2021). Perceptions of inequality may also inspire aggressive and risky actions; persons in positions of disadvantage who perceive little hope of ‘catching up’ with the rest of society through lawful means may be more prone to choose destructive paths, such as crime (Johnson 2021, 410). The idea that UBI might boost workers' negotiating power, motivate people to enhance self-care, and improve mental health is valuable (Bidadanure 2019, 496). Moreover, UBI enables citizens to pursue more personally fulfilling objectives and interests.

However, UBI can have conflicting impacts on health, having little influence on certain outcomes but significant effects on others, such as birth weight and mental health (Johnson et al. 2023, 3). Families with children in difficult circumstances are provided with a basic income to help ensure their children's nutritional and health care needs, which affect children's cognition, behaviour, and future health. Factors that can determine a child's life course, such as birth weight, are considered very important in efforts to improve the health of future generations. One argument for a UBI is that it would shift the focus from youth investing in themselves to society investing in the future of all its youth. Young people have significant potential to change their lives, but they are also a group influenced by the conditions they face, which is why they may need a UBI to invest further in themselves (Gwilym and Beck, 2024).

Access to Education and Training

Education is critically important for achieving the outcomes desired by both workers and their political representatives, including higher incomes and improved working conditions. At the individual level, a person's education can determine their future quality of life by impacting class mobility, where they live, income, ability to work, and chances of success. Not only that, but education can also impact people's health and the benefits they enjoy in life. Poor educational outcomes contribute to inequality, as children from working-class families do not have the same access to high-quality education as children from wealthy families (Blanden and Gregg 2004, 5). A basic income is linked to higher literacy rates, lower dropout rates, and better academic performance (Ruckert 2017, 3). Increased educational attainment has also been linked to improved health outcomes, strengthened social support networks, and healthier lifestyle choices (Cohen and Syme 2013, 997). UBI pilot projects in Namibia and India yielded encouraging educational outcomes. Most of the funds went for shoes, uniforms, and school supplies, and the school enrolment rate in the participating villages in India was 12% higher. 90% of Namibia's school fees were paid in full, which was "an unprecedented achievement" for schools (Ruckert 2017, 4).

Not only does UBI have the potential to transform educational opportunities for children from working-class families, but it can also reconfigure education, with an emphasis on adult education (Bouttell, 2024). Put another way, regardless of its inherent worth, education is seen as a means of preparing people for the workforce at all levels and in all forms. Additionally, education is viewed as a form of vocational training that equips workers with the fundamental skills needed in the workforce (Rodríguez-Fernández & Themelis, 2021, 69). When education is considered a consumer product, with value in the labour market in the form of job opportunities, workers by accessing education will also increase their likelihood of having a job (OECD, 2012). Increasing the proportion of working-class adults with access to education and training supports a country's future socio-economic sustainability.

Discussion

UBI is often seen as a safety net that protects against various risks, such as unemployment, low pay, economic crises, and pandemics. While it may not end class struggle, it can bring many ameliorating benefits, including better pay and working conditions if implemented; however, to maximise these benefits, UBI needs to be combined with other social policies. Social Security benefits offer a consistent payout, usually tracking inflation, but can be affected by broader economic deficits and surpluses. To prevent a financial crisis, governments often make regressive changes to the social security system that negatively affect the working class and the unemployed (Buchanan 2007, 262). Furthermore, as increases in UBI would count as income against safety-net criteria, certain social welfare programme cutbacks would also occur organically due to decreased need and a decline in the number of those qualifying. If UBI is mandated by law to rise in line with inflation, and is adequate to end poverty, then several other social programmes might be completely phased out (Riedl 2020, 5). Inflation from UBI is frequently mentioned in research articles, so combining it with other economic and tax policies can strengthen stability and help prevent inflation (Gentilini 2020).

As UBI is implemented, the proportion of working people with higher incomes increases, thereby raising their ability to meet their needs, with implications for housing, particularly rent (Connolly et al. 2020, 7). If UBI is financed through increased taxes, landlords may increase rents because the taxes they must pay are higher than before (Fitzpatrick, 2022; Motivala et al., 2024). Controlling rental levels may be necessary to keep cash flow stable while also helping working-class people use the UBI for other needs. It will also allow tenants the financial space to save for a deposit and buy their own home, alleviating the current housing crisis (Beck et al, 2024). In addition, to ensure that employers do not reduce workers' salaries to levels too low for their needs, policies to enforce wage controls should also be considered during UBI implementation, including a generous minimum wage paid for through higher taxes (Pereira, 2015; Satpathy et al., 2020). The basic amount they receive from UBI will not be enough on its own to cover overheads and debts many working people have (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Financing UBI could be partly sourced from income tax since income tax is progressive and redistributive (Ter-Minassian, 2020). Although UBI is an income for everyone, its primary purpose is to focus on low-income working-class groups (Bertotti 2021, 1). Still, opposition could be fierce from the Capitalist bourgeoisie who stand to lose from UBI because of the taxes they would need to pay to implement it. UBI could appeal to the material desires of the poor to secure better support, but at the expense of the bourgeoisie's material desires by threatening higher taxation (Lustig and Pabon 2022, 1). In addition, there is a view that UBI should not be controlled by the executive branch of government since it is reasonable to assume that politicians will be influenced by large corporations. UBI needs to be under the control of an independent entity, such as the Bank of England in the UK (Rasoolinejad 2019, 1). We believe that while UBI would not end class relations, it would greatly improve the working class's income and political participation.

Conclusion

UBI offers a pragmatic way to address the structural disadvantages faced by the working class, including low pay and poor working conditions, by empowering them to bargain with employers over pay. While it does not dismantle capitalist class relations or eradicate inequality, UBI provides a stabilising mechanism that mitigates poverty, reduces stigma, and enhances social security. By guaranteeing a regular income, UBI empowers individuals to make choices beyond mere survival, fostering opportunities for strong wage bargaining, education, health improvement, and personal development. Its potential to cushion economic shocks, address automation-induced unemployment, and promote social cohesion underscores its relevance in contemporary welfare debates. However, UBI cannot operate in isolation; complementary policies such as progressive taxation, rent regulation, and robust public services are essential to prevent inflationary pressures and ensure equitable outcomes. Critics rightly caution that UBI may entrench existing hierarchies if implemented without structural reforms, yet its capacity to redistribute resources and enhance real freedom remains significant. Ultimately, UBI should be viewed not as a revolutionary instrument but as a transformative social policy capable of ameliorating the harshest effects of precarity and insecurity. In doing so, it offers a pathway towards a fairer society where economic resilience and human dignity are prioritised over market dependency.

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Living in the Ruins: Melancholic Nostalgia and the Decomposition of England's Traditional Working Class

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Abstract

Drawing on longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines the function and significance of nostalgia in white working-class communities in northern England. While contemporary political discourse often frames working-class nostalgia as a regressive force fuelling populist nationalism, this study reveals a more complex and melancholic dynamic. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and the work of Žižek and Han, the article theorises nostalgia not as a reactionary retreat but as a response to four fundamental ruptures: the collapse of communal structures, the perpetual insecurity of economic existence, the fragmentation of shared cultural meaning, and the disappearance of positive visions of the future. Participants' nostalgic memories function as attempts to access an elusive lost object that promises to restore a sense of wholeness. However, the lost community participants hoped to rediscover simply cannot be identified and reclaimed. The article demonstrates how melancholic attachment to vanished communal structures reflects broader temporal disorientation in an era of material decline, where the certainties of the past have dissolved and the future has become unimaginable. This melancholic nostalgia bears little relation to imperial longing or ethnic nationalism; rather, it grows from the enclassed experience of watching one's culture and way of life fade from view, leaving only the certainty of loss and the haunting presence of what once was.

Keywords

Nostalgia; melancholia; working class; deindustrialisation; community; temporality; Lacan; Žižek; neoliberalism

Introduction

Nostalgia pervades contemporary life, from the promises of populist movements (Nilan et al., 2025) to the aesthetics of consumer culture (Becker, 2023; Cross, 2015). Politicians and marketers have become skilled in the manipulation of nostalgia—the former to frame dissatisfaction with the present, the latter to commodify the past (Hatherley, 2016; Jameson, 1992; Fisher, 2022). Yet these features of popular debate tend to misconstrue the reality of nostalgia and overlook its function in communities experiencing material decline. Beneath the surface of these contested nostalgias lies a more profound question: why does nostalgia appear to be an increasingly significant cultural trend now, as the certainties of the past disappear, as sources of security fade from view, and as popular conceptions of the future take a darker turn? In intellectual life too there has been growing interest in nostalgia (Becker, 2023; Tanner, 2023; Arnold-Forster, 2025). Traditionally, nostalgia and those who succumb to it have been associated with failure, withdrawal and regression (Adorno, 1974; Gilroy, 2004; Bauman, 2017). The nostalgic individual is commonly depicted as turning away from an unsatisfying present and seeking solace in sanitized, commodified images of an idealized past. A broad range of contemporary analyses tend to simply historicise, contextualise and reaffirm the standard multipolar interpretation of nostalgia as inherently regressive, a problem for the other but never the self, before asserting that it is once again on the march to threaten freedoms, curtail progress and prevent us from honestly appraising the world as it truly is (see for example Campanella and Dassu, 2019).

While the academic literature on nostalgia offers valuable insights (see for example Strangleman, 1999; Boym, 2002; Davis, 2014), as yet it has failed to extend its reach towards the contextualized utility of nostalgia in an era marked by the disappearance of positive visions of the future (Berardi, 2011). What does nostalgia signify in our present moment—a time characterized by genuine material regression, fracture, atomisation and fear, a time in which many have abandoned the standard post-Enlightenment faith in incremental progress and instead accept the inevitability of decline (Wark, 2021; Varoufakis, 2024)? What might patterns and themes in the contemporary experience of nostalgia reveal about the various ways we interpret our own disjointed age, an age in which so many feel excluded from the normative flow of historical time, cleaved away from history and disinvested in all but the vaguest conceptions of the future?

Before we can begin to consider such matters, it is first necessary to identify precisely what is meant by nostalgia and situate it a little more firmly within our cultures and mental life. Following this original account of the function and role of nostalgia in the present, the paper moves on to outline the methods used in the empirical aspect of this study. Data and analysis then follows, addressing first the melancholic attachment respondents had to their dead communities and, second, the common assumption that the future would be worse than the present and the past.

The meaning of nostalgia

Nostalgic memories are intertwined with other forms of memory (Conway, 1985, 1994; Tulving, 2002). Memory has of course been integral to human development. What we are now, both subjectively and collectively, is inextricably bound up with our ability to remember. Our memories are complex and extend well beyond conscious mental processes (Ledoux, 2020; Johnston and Malabou, 2013; Hall and Winlow, 2025). Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Henri Bergson (2018, 2019) suggested that memory exists in two forms: habit-memory, which he applied to apparently automatic, body-centred actions, like riding a bike, and pure memory, a category he suggested captured the personal recollections used in more complex tasks, such as assisting in processes of identity formation. The brain, Bergson maintained, does not simply store memories. Rather, it filters information, drawing upon past experiences and weaving them together with elements of what he called the durée of lived experience. Bergson's dualistic model has been quietly influential in the development of philosophical approaches to the study of memory.

But how might our memories inform our identities and the various ways we approach self and social life? Nostalgic memories in particular seem to equip us with a diverse range of 'dialectical images' (Benjamin, 1999) that can be brought together and used to create narratives that aid the individual as she moves from immediacy through opposition and alienation towards resolution in her battle of self-becoming (Hegel, 1976). Images of the past clash with conscious perceptions of the present to aid the process of building a dynamic perception of ourselves. This process involves not only the interplay of development, contradiction and reconciliation (ibid.), but also the complexities of forgetting, remembering and misremembering (Winlow, 2025). Paul Ricoeur's (2006) concept of narrative identity is especially pertinent here. Ricoeur argues that individuals construct their identities through the stories they tell themselves about their lives, integrating past, present, and future into a coherent narrative of self and how we became whatever we imagine ourselves to be. Nostalgic memories, in this sense, and following Bergson, are not passive recollections but active elements of this narrative process, helping individuals navigate dislocation and change.

The process of constructing one's personal identity, then, appears partially dependent upon retrospective biographical narratives. These biographical narratives are structured in relation to our evolving memories of specific events, people, and places. As the actual events that inform the creation and recreation of biographical narratives recede further into the past, our memories of them become increasingly fluid and vague (Schacter, 2002). We do not routinely retain exact images of actual events. Our memories of even the most important events in our lives are reconstructions that inevitably change over time (Schacter, 1997). However, while our memories of actual events change or disappear entirely, the emotions that become attached to such events appear more stable and enduring. It is this emotional residue that seems to form a significant part of the bittersweet substance of nostalgic memories. We 'remember' not just what happened, but the emotions we believe accompanied what happened. These memories are interwoven with the emotions evoked in the act of remembering (Ledouw, 1999; Tulving, 2002), reinterpreted, reconstructed, codified and often revisited in those moments when we seek meaning or comfort in what we have come to imagine once was.

When we revisit nostalgic memories, we do so as voyeurs, consuming representations of our own experiences. The raw authenticity of the original moment is lost, leaving only an unstable, mediated representation. As Baudrillard (1994) observed, our hyperreal present ensures we consume the past as a simulacrum. Authentic images become indistinguishable from an infinite assortment of replicas. As truth collapses into mere representation, authenticity ceases to matter.

We often turn to nostalgic memories in times of personal turmoil (Phillips, 1995). Nostalgic memories can offer a sense of solace, and they are often revisited when we find ourselves in need of clarity or guidance (Vess et al., 2012; Wildschut et al., 2006). In this way, nostalgic memories play a crucial role in processes of self-narration and understanding (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018; Routledge, 2015). Halbwachs (1992) argued that even seemingly personal nostalgic memories are socially framed, relying on shared symbols, rhythms, and narratives to render them intelligible. Collective nostalgia sustains community cohesion by selectively reactivating pasts that serve present needs (Davis, 2014). These dynamics often crystallize around material anchors—childhood homes, anniversaries—that tether nostalgia's abstractions to lived practice. Thus, while regional and cultural identities remain unstable, they are partially bolstered by shared retrospections.

Our understanding of nostalgia can also be aided by drawing upon elements of psychoanalysis. Freud's early work suggested nostalgia functions as a form of screen memory—a selectively idealized past that conceals unresolved conflicts or traumas beneath its comforting surface imagery (Freud, 2001). This idealization parallels his later distinction between mourning, which for Freud suggested an adaptive engagement with loss, and melancholia, which he believed indicated a pathological fixation on an irretrievable object (Freud, 2005). This line of analysis was extended by Lacan, who placed nostalgia firmly in the realm of the Imaginary. The Imaginary for Lacan is the realm in which the subject relates to illusory images of wholeness and coherence that mask the fragmented nature of the subject. Nostalgic memories seem to promise the return to a unified, prelinguistic self, which of course is the principal reason why such memories can be so appealing. However, as Lacan stressed, this unified self has never truly existed, and our fundamental fragmentation cannot be overcome (Lacan, 1998).

Lacan's *objet petit a*—the unattainable object-cause of desire—clarifies why participants clung to idealized memories of community. Their nostalgia fixated on a lost social world they believed could resolve present alienation, yet this 'true community' was always already a fantasy, never the fully realized harmony they imagined (Lacan, 1998). This gap between memory and material history, as we'll see, rendered their nostalgia melancholic: they mourned something that never existed in the form they recalled. The lost object of true community seemed to be hiding within many of the diverse nostalgic memories offered by men and women across the entire sample. There were many noteworthy absences in their lives. Their nostalgic memories often seemed to centre upon times in which they believed themselves to have experienced a greater degree of autonomy, contentment, joy, acceptance and relative affluence, but all of these narratives traced multiple paths back to the same destination. They yearned for the stable world of meaning they believed was once provided by the Big Other's symbolic order (Lacan, 1998), but what they wanted could never exist. It had not existed in the past in the ways they imagine, and it could not be recreated in the present. Participants' growing conscious awareness that what they desired most was destined to remain out of reach cloaked the entire project in a cloud of melancholy (Winlow, 2025).

Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the structural role of fantasy in ideological systems also informs the analysis developed below. Building on Lacan's concept of *objet petit a*, Žižek (2009) theorizes ideology as operating through what he terms *the sublime object*: a Lacanian lost object rooted in ideological mystification. This lost object is 'sublime' in the sense that it attracts fantasmatic and fetishistic investment despite constantly eluding fixity and understanding. Žižek's conceptualisation allows us to get to grips with the various ways political movements generate affective power by elevating specific visions—Marxism's classless utopia, conservatism's organic traditionalism, liberalism's progressive horizon—into imagined or mystified resolutions for historical antagonisms. Crucially, these ideological formations tend to exist independently of their potential practical applications. Rather, it is their very impossibility that imbues them with energy; the sublime object's potency lies in its perpetual deferral, sustaining desire through the promise of a future harmony capable of negating present discontents.

Žižek's (2009) critical contribution lies in his extension of Lacan's original analysis to include an essentially Hegelian account of the dialectics of absence as they pertain to political ideology. The sublime object is neither simple false consciousness nor naïve utopianism, but a constitutive fiction that coordinates social reality. As an empty signifier, it anchors political discourse, organizing perception and practice around an absence. This generates a degree of ideological coherence while ironically reproducing the contradictions it purports to transcend. Participants' idealized recollections of their past cultural lives function as something akin to a sublime object: imagined plenitude contrasted with present want, past security could be compared to present insecurity, cultural vibrancy with insipid commercialism, and so on. However, the idealised culture state remained somehow vaguely composed and completely inaccessible. Its power lay in its non-existence and the forms of fantasmatic investment it inspired. The very act of nostalgic invocation thus reveals both the necessity and impossibility of this lost harmony, mirroring the logic Žižek identifies at the heart of political belief.

Nostalgic memories can, it seems, stabilize identity through narrative continuity. Leader (2000) suggests that individuals often use idealised memories or self-narratives to impose a sense of order on what would otherwise be the chaotic material of everyday life. Similarly, Bollas (2017) has often claimed individuals unconsciously draw on early relational experiences to shape ongoing patterns of being and relating. We are, Bollas suggests, historical beings inextricably bonded to our known and unknown pasts. We use our history, drawn from both the conscious and unconscious realms, as we attempt to organise our present experience. Again, the fundamental message is that the past remains active in our mental life. Nostalgia is not simple reminiscence but a dynamic negotiation between memory's consoling fictions and the unconscious truths those consoling fictions obscure.

For the participants discussed below, nostalgia seemed to provide both of these functions simultaneously: their emotional connection to the lost community appears to sustain them as they battle the real-world problems of the present. Many suggested that private nostalgic memories delivered a measured degree of repose and emotional satisfaction, as if such memories functioned to ground their lives and experiences, clarifying where they had come from and what mattered to them. Similarly, shared nostalgic memories provided the vital function of bonding groups together in material circumstances that seemed set to inevitably drive them apart. However, in a process similar to Adrian Johnston's (2008) model of deaptation, their absorption into the lost community's ideologies guarantees they cannot rejoin the cultural and economic mainstream. Put simply, as the cultural mainstream has motored inexorably forward, at least in the temporal sense, participants' backwards gaze and attachment to that which was always already lost ensures the gap between themselves and the mainstream grows gradually wider. They remain bonded to a lost aspect of culture that serves no function in an economy energised by insecurity and competition, and a post-social order rooted in unflinching privatism and individualism (Winlow and Hall, 2012). Yearning for the ethics of a past judged more secure and more sociable and pining for myriad lost rituals, they feel out of place in time: a discarded ex-community condemned to haunt a transformed version of their own neighbourhoods, living on in times that seem increasingly alien, wishing to rejoin a world retained in memory so that they might truly live again.

Methods

The data presented here comes from a broad empirical and theoretical investigation of the interplay between nostalgia and working-class political consciousness. In the years following Brexit, Trump's election, and the surge of European right-wing populism, a recurring narrative took hold: that white working-class voters were being seduced by regressive nostalgia (e.g., Judah, 2016; Bhambra, 2017; see also McKenzie, 2017). Such claims seemed to capture the discontent of the liberal mainstream as it sought to come to terms with a climate of increased turbulence and enmity while navigating a range of quite old but newly energised antagonisms. However, while interesting and occasionally insightful, such claims often rested on intuition and abstract critique and were absent of a trustworthy empirical foundation. To bridge this gap, I turned my attention to six adjacent neighbourhoods in a northern English city struggling to break free from the inertia of its industrial inheritance. The city where the research took place has been greatly affected by austerity, welfare retrenchment and a lack of public and private investment (Lloyd, 2016; Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Johnson et al, 2024). If an attempt was ever made, political, cultural and financial elites have resoundingly failed to construct a range of new, optimistic and forward-looking images and narratives to sustain the city and its people as a new epoch begins to unfold (Telford, 2022, 2024). Stripped of its former industry, absent of anything new beyond some half-hearted political bluster about redevelopment, the city – which must remain anonymous here – seems to have been discarded to history (Winlow et al, 2015; Telford, 2022). It has, predictably, high rates of crime and other social problems. Its people have shorter lifespans (Walsh and McCartney, 2024). Its infrastructure is dilapidated, its central shopping areas dishevelled and sparsely populated. Most of its civic buildings have either been sold off or left to fall into disrepair. The neighbourhoods where the research was carried out are poor and have been for some time (Winlow, 2001; Hall et al, 2008; McKenzie, 2015). Being born here, or even moving here in later life, is an indicator of future negative outcomes. While these neighbourhoods remain dominated by the white working class, they have changed markedly in character (Hall et al., 2008; Winlow et al., 2017). There has been a great decline in long-term residents, and the population is much more transient than in years gone by. Individuals and families often move in only to move quickly out again. Inevitably, these trends effect community life and shape interaction rituals.

The study sought to unravel a web of interrelated questions: Were white working-class voters truly defecting to the nationalist right? Were they drawn to the populist right by its powerful rhetoric and reductive analytical tropes, or were they so repelled by the blandness of the technocratic mainstream they began to look to the political margins for inspiration? How did the nostalgia of these ordinary men and women differ from mere reminiscence? Amid their diverse yearnings, was it possible to identify a desire to resurrect an imperial past (Mitchell, 2021) or return to a white monoculture in which people like them fared better (Bhambra, 2017)? In an effort to untangle these various lines of inquiry and construct a robust empirical base that might enable me to say something new about how nostalgia is experienced and how it connects to the field of politics, I employed a suite of qualitative methods. I was able to draw upon longstanding ties and established research relationships in the neighbourhoods where the research took place. These contacts introduced me to men and women who might be willing to be interviewed, vouched for me and helped me greatly as the project developed and evolved over time. I focused on residents aged 45–60, a cohort old enough to recall forms of community life predating neoliberal restructuring but young enough to remain at least partially involved in common culture and community life. The overwhelming majority of those who agreed to participant in the study identified themselves as being white, English and working class. Most were atheists, but a small number identified as Christian. My contacts were more likely to introduce me to men, and overall men were keener to get involved in the project and submit to interview. These facts reflect my identity as a researcher and the realities of the neighbourhoods in which the research was carried out.

The most poignant and insightful data tended to come from walking interviews. Walking interviews (n=39) with participants traversing sites of personal and collective history—shuttered pubs, childhood homes, derelict factories—elicited emotionally charged reflections on decline. These walks frequently led on to unstructured sit-down conversations—mostly in homes and local cafés—that allowed me to explore some of their observations more deeply. There was of course a good deal of talk of happy times, and most nostalgic memories seem tied in various ways to a sense of security that most suggested once elevated their lives. However, every warm recollection was inevitably followed by the realisation that those times were gone and could not return. Participants realised there was a degree of comfort in nostalgic memories. But alongside that comfort lay a palpable and multidimensional sense of loss that for the most part was left unaddressed in their everyday lives. Loss could be found encroaching upon virtually every topic we discussed. A total of 63 participants (50 men, 13 women) engaged in these standard interviews, with 28 returning for follow-up discussions.

I also conducted a long-running immersive ethnographic investigation of the neighbourhoods under discussion. I spent months observing street interactions and public behaviour while also engaging in casual talk with residents in shops, pubs, cafes and out on the street. Being present in these neighbourhoods for extended periods allowed me to check the veracity of claims made by participants as I began to form my own views, and as various hypotheses and lines of analyses began to emerge.

Melancholic attachments to dead communities

Participants did not simply remember their extinct communities; they lived alongside their absence, haunted by the disappearance of the rituals that once appeared to hold the symbolic order in place (Kotze and Lloyd, 2022; Linkon and Russo, 2002). For Han (2020), rituals are not mere social conventions but the embodied infrastructure of communal meaning. Rituals lent coherence to individual lives by utilising and reproducing what can appear relatively fixed range of symbols. Rituals mark time collectively, unsullied by the atomized and reductive schedules of neoliberal productivity (see for example Crary, 2014; Lloyd, 2018; Bushell, 2023). The erosion and disappearance of rituals creates what Han terms a crisis of continuity. When a society that oscillates around personal achievement replaces shared symbols and rites with vague and alienating invocations towards self-optimization, individuals become increasingly untethered from history and disconnected from one another.

How can we begin to conceptualise the material and symbolic death of these communities? Han (2020) suggests digital capitalism dissolves communal temporality into a scattered series of disconnected now-points where even memory becomes atomized into isolated data fragments. Participants' sensory fragments of loss are not merely memories. When contextualised and addressed in their true complexity, they are suggestive of multiple and ongoing failed attempts to reassemble durée from contemporary capitalism's temporal granularization (Han, 2020). Without the stabilizing force of collective rituals—those repetitive, embodied practices that once transformed abstract 'community' into a tangible sense of belonging—the past ceases to function as a stabilizing shared resource. Instead, it fractures into privatized nostalgia, apparently foreclosing a collective response to the prevailing sense of decline and diminishment.

This double death offers a means of illuminating why participants' nostalgia occasionally fixed on sensory fragments from the past: the smell of a long-demolished chip shop, the sight of the steal grey churning sea on what was supposed to be a summer holiday, the sound of one's mother humming in the kitchen while preparing tea. These are what Bergson (2002) would call pure memories—affect-laden shards that seem to resist narrative coherence. Intuitively, in attempting to communicate an unknown reality, participants told stories rooted in happiness, security, contentment or comfort lost. When asked directly about their lost community, they were able to move beyond indicative narratives to offer often cogent and revelatory insight into precisely what had been lost, what this loss meant and how it had transformed the lives of those who remained invested in its image. Here, nostalgic memories appeared to operate as the dialectical images (Benjamin, 1999) touched upon earlier: snapshots from the past that, when juxtaposed with the present, led inevitably to an informed account of the contradictions of 'progress'.

Melancholia, Freud noted, is inherently future-averse. Participants tended to assume that decline was inevitable. However, their negativistic view of the future should not be dismissed as mere pessimism. It grows from their inability to invest in a temporal order from which they felt expunged. Žižek (2009) frames this as the foreclosure of the symbolic horizon: put simply, when the dominant ideology can no longer promise a better tomorrow, the marginalized respond by fetishizing yesterday. Han's (2020) analysis of temporal exhaustion extends this point. In a society that replaces collective futures with endless presentism, nostalgia appears to become an ambiguous and double-edged escape, yet one that offers at least minor overtones of temporal agency.

Dennis is a 53-year-old joiner and kitchen fitter. He has two adult children and recently became a grandfather. He was not disposed to romanticising the past, but he still had this to say about the perceived decline of community sentiments:

> "It was just real, do you know what I mean? I can't explain it. It was a nicer time. That's how it seems now. People around here used to know each other. I had family around, everyone had family around… To me it seemed everyone was happier (…). Work was great when I started. I had friends, we'd be out every weekend (…). There were less worries (…). All of that's just gone. Is it getting older (…)? I look at my kids, their kids, people at work, just ordinary people around the place, and it's something else."

This 'something else' kept cropping up through all aspects of the research. For many participants, what was missing resisted simple identification. No matter how hard they thought about it, they could not fix upon precisely what it was that was once present and had now been withdrawn. In order to move closer to this causative absence, participants told stories that they hoped would cast some light upon it.

Dennis again:

> "There was an action to everything. We had some proper characters living around here. The pubs were great (…). Then you're old. You get wrapped up with everything, family, job, stuff like that. Your life just changes. Everyone I grew up with around here moved away or just died, I don't know. I didn't even miss it. I'd be with the family, mind on work, money, personal stuff, you know? And then you start to miss it. I started to miss it about ten, five years ago maybe. I lost touch with some people. Lots of the lads are scattered around, gone (…). And everything's just changed. Look at it. I can't make sense of it. I don't know none of these people here. I lived here forty-odd years."

Like all melancholics, participants remained invested in a lost object. While consciously they could accept its non-existence, unconsciously they simply couldn't let it go. The rehabilitative work of mourning could not begin.

Brendan is 55 years old and works in the hospitality industry. He has two adult children and three grandchildren:

> "This place now, I don't recognise it. The pubs have gone, the shops have gone, everyone I knew pretty much. The people here now just keep themselves to themselves. It's a very private area now, and it never used to be that way. The world just races past you, doesn't it? And it does seem to me that it all changed, like, super quick. Like, it was the way it was, it was home, it was my place. And then just, totally different. Like it changed before you can even tell what's going on."
>
> Q: What's missing?

> "Well, the people have gone, the people who used to live here. If you know how it was you can really see the difference… I don't know [what else has changed]. It's not the buildings or the roads or the shops or anything. Not really (…). It just doesn't feel like home anymore. I feel a bit out of place (…). My local [pub] shut. I used to go to the bakery at the bottom of the road there, but that's gone. But no one cares. Maybe that's it. All that stuff has gone, and no one cares. Maybe I'm pissed off they don't care. They've got their own stuff going on. They don't want to know the history. That's what it feels like: I'm saying, 'this stuff matters', but no-one's got time, it doesn't affect them, so they don't care."

Here Brendan hits upon a succession of important insights. First, he notes the gradual shift to privatism. This is a material reality rather than an idealised fiction. The extended multi-generational families that were once common in these neighbourhoods have reduced markedly in number and, in a process described as 'churn' (see Burrell, 2016; Dahlberg, 2020), new arrivals often tend not to stay. Brendan's retrospective idealisation of the lost community is brought into dialectical tension with the material realities that shape his present experience. Brendan also talks directly about feeling alienated from the very places he has called home for much of his life. Many other participants felt the same. Brendan's 'home' had changed to such an extent that, for him, it could no longer be accurately identified as such. Again, it was missing something vital but something that could not easily be named. As we have already seen, this feeling of discomfort in the present spurred a retreat into bittersweet reminiscence where at least some degree of repose and recognition could be found. Mark, 51, makes a similar point:

> "I feel old before my time. Everyone does these days don't they? You don't realise, then woosh, its gone."
> Q: Why do you feel old?
> "I think I just feel out of it, like the young one's have gone off in a completely different direction. The gaps are massive. I don't get the humour. Like on TV. I don't get it. I don't get all the new technology stuff. I've tried (…)."
> Q: Do you reckon that's just the way it goes, getting older?
> "I suppose. You're stuck in the past a bit (…). But (…) it wasn't like that with my parents (...). I don't think it's been like that in the past, you know, overall (...). We kept things going, I think, with the sports and the interests, that kind of thing. We're not that much different [my generation from the one before] (…). [W]e got married, couple of pints, kids, work, all of that. The gap now seems much bigger. At least it does to me."
> Q: You don't think your Mam and Dad felt the same?
> "No, I don't think so (…). [L]ots of times we ended up working in the same jobs, especially before all the factories shut down (…). I think with women it was even more. Like, there wasn't a big jump with all that between the mother and the daughter. A lot of it was the same. Houses, family, work, friends (…). There's ties, isn't there? (…). I don't get that as much with kids today (…). They haven't got those ties, have they?"

Very few participants could summon up positive images of the future. The future was, somehow, unimaginable. For the most part, participants tended to assume the negativities of the present would continue and worsen, and this prompted a range of anxieties about what would become of their children and grandchildren. Again, implied here is not a sudden rupture but an incremental thinning and gradual disappearance.

Graham is 49. He is divorced and has a 15-year-old daughter. He works as a delivery driver for a large supermarket.

> "I think there was a community once (…). I'm not saying it was perfect, but there wasn't as many selfish cunts about, only bothered about money, only bothered about themselves. When I look back, I grew up with some properly kind people, you know? (…). But now what have you got? And I think it's all affected me. Just seeing what people are. That you're basically on your own. I don't know how to say it. Just the coldness of it. It affected me (…). We are just dying out, aren't we?"

Derek is 56 and has a managerial job for a large retailer. He has three children and one grandchild. He had this to say:

> "I tell them, I tell them all to move away. There's nothing left here. They're never going to bring jobs back. Look, everything's crumbling. It's just the way it is. I tell them to get out and find somewhere. Go, while you can. I love this place, but I hate it sometimes. It's a strange feeling, because the good has all gone (…). That's what I feel, walking around here now. It's home, but there's something missing (…). It's just getting that little bit worse, year to year, everything, isn't it? I want the kids to find somewhere, somewhere safe. But who the fuck knows where that is?"

Sandra is 56 and works in the retail industry. She offered the following observation, which is remarkably similar to that offered by Derek, above:

> "It's going to get worse as far as I can see. No one wants to fix it, do they? The politicians couldn't care less. It's just gone, that whole thing. I've said before, I tell the kids to move. Why would you stay? Get out while you can, that's what I tell them."

Many participants agreed with Sandra and Derek on this point. Tony is 53 and a salesman. He is married with two children and one grandchild. He said:

> "You want your kids to get on in life: jobs, houses, stuff like that. You want them to be successful, safe, and just happy I suppose. But here, I don't think there is much positive to come. You've got to get out there, get into a good job somehow, and then you've got to fight to keep it. It's too late for me, I know that. I don't care. I just want the family to be safe. I don't want them dragged down by what's coming."

Louise, 53, had this to say:

> "It's a bit worrying when you stop and think about it. I mean, when does it stop? You find yourself hoping, you know, things will turn around. There'll be proper jobs, more money, the place will come to life again. You're kind of waiting. But then you get to my age, and you've been waiting for, what, years, isn't it? Years and years. Maybe it will come back in the future, but not in my lifetime."
> Q: Why?
> "I don't know. It's all just feelings, isn't it? It feels like it's just done (…). Maybe it's just me and I need to snap out of it. There needs to be something big. To change things, there needs to be, I don't know, a revolution or something. Something big, something major (…). So that's why I'm all negative about it. There's nothing big is there? Just more of the same."

For participants, the cultural practices of the past had become less accessible and those that remained seemed somehow less nourishing. The neighbourhoods they had long inhabited no longer provided the same sense of belonging or security. Many had internalized the expectation that they would preserve their cultural traditions for future generations. Some recounted futile efforts to sustain symbolic practices but most acknowledged that such practices had now faded beyond recovery. To experience the cultural rituals they valued, they could only reminisce.

In the quotes above we can also see a striking contradiction in participants' narratives: even as they grieved for their lost culture and community, many actively encouraged their children to detach themselves from its tattered remnants to seek opportunities elsewhere. This suggested a pragmatic, if painful, acceptance of cultural dissolution. While they sought to preserve affective ties through memory, they also tended to believe the neighbourhood, the city and the region would continue their downwards descent while the last remnants of the lost community finally faded into nothingness. The intergenerational transmission of culture, once a core expectation, now seemed a pointless undertaking. Their cultural inheritance was no longer considered a great gift. Rather, passing the culture on to their children was often interpreted as saddling their children with ideals, tastes, attitudes and demeanours unsuited to the new world. Instead, participants encouraged their children to leave in search of something better. This was the clearest indication that participants accepted that what they loved could not return. The dead culture, they were sure, was worth preserving. But it had not been preserved, and it had eventually died. It was, as so many participants said, 'too late for them'. Their children were encouraged to find a space where they could shelter from the coming storms.

Conclusion

This ethnography reveals how nostalgia functions as a melancholic attachment to vanished communal structures, reflecting broader ruptures occurring in the wake of global capitalism's ongoing metamorphosis (Wark, 2021; Hall, 2022; Varoufakis, 2024). For participants, nostalgia bore little relation to prevailing cultural debates about nationalism, ethnocentrism or imperialism. Far from fuelling reactionary populism (see Winlow and Hall, 2022, for discussion), this specific strand of melancholic nostalgia grows from a working class that has, for the moment at least, stopped believing in any political salvation—whether from left or right. Rather, their longing focused intensely on the disappearance of a particular way of life – a once-thriving community that persisted vividly in memory but had ceased to exist in reality. They remained emotionally invested in the symbols, rituals and traditions of their lost community, and they remained invested because the lost culture had provided them with a comprehensive means of interpreting themselves and the world around them.

We observe here a distinct form of melancholic nostalgia that emerges from the enclassed experience of the present. It arises as a response to four fundamental ruptures: the collapse of communal structures, the perpetual insecurity of economic existence, the fragmentation of shared cultural meaning, and the disappearance of the future from shared cultural and political discourse. These ruptures appear to have given rise to the sense of estrangement many feel from deep historical processes that once enabled individuals to situate themselves firmly in relation to past, present and future. This common sense of dislocation, evidenced in all aspects of the study, is also tied to participants' experiences of a reality where once-stable foundations appear to have dissolved into the atomized logic of an evolving post-social market oligarchy.

At its core, this nostalgia represents the human pursuit of the *objet petit a* – something elusive that might finally piece together our fractured experience of contemporary social and cultural life. Participants believed that rediscovering this missing object – for them, the dearly remembered lost community – would give them a sense of wholeness and elevate their experience. However, the lost community never truly existed in the ways they imagined. It cannot be recovered, and nor can a hastily manufactured replica conclusively restore the longed-for sense of wholeness.

Participants' nostalgia does not seek to resurrect the past. While it distorts reality, it speaks to perception and bears witness to personal consequences of watching one's culture and way of life fade from view. Their longing is not for a mythic golden age, but for a world that once offered coherence—a coherence now irretrievably shattered by economic abandonment and cultural erasure. What remains is not the promise of reclamation, but the certainty of loss: the neighbourhoods they knew are gone, the rituals that sustained them hollowed out, and their children urged to flee rather than stay and inherit a dying legacy. This is not to say that the decline of community sentiments is new or that the erasure of location and time-specific cultures is not a traditional feature of historical change. Rather, it is to position the decline and death of specific modern cultures in relation to material processes and the corresponding collapse of functional symbolic orders. The decline and death of the specific culture analysed here is tied to a specific form of political economy – neoliberalism – which is now approaching its end (Winlow, 2022; Hall, 2022). However, it is difficult to celebrate the end of neoliberalism, given that what appears to be emerging in its wake seems likely to be significantly worse (Varoufakis, 2024). Cultures inevitably evolve over time. Participants' children and grandchildren will not necessarily be denied access to a reasonably coherent cultural life, even if the cultures that emerge in the future are shorn of the emphasis modern working-class cultures placed upon collectivism, common interests and their various associated rituals. But one thing is clear: no emergent culture will not absorb this study's participants, and nor will they be able to find any comfort in it.

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The Historical Persistence of Working-Class Culture: How Laborers Created the Ethical Foundation of Western Civilization[1]

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Abstract

This article highlights four historical events that shape our present: the world's first industrial strike in ancient Egypt to protest workers' health and safety; working-class efforts to improve labor conditions during the Roman Republic and Middle Ages through strikes and the creation of guilds; the social justice activism of the prophets of Western religions (all working-class folks!); and the creation of the selfie and the transition from a culture of character to our present obsession with celebrities and individualism that began during the Renaissance. Each case highlights unique features of working-class culture, working class reactions to societal changes, and the success of working-class resistance efforts. What all these different events have in common is that they demonstrate the historical persistence of working-class culture which, I believe, remains Western civilization's greatest asset.

Keywords

Strikes, social justice, unions, guilds, working-class culture, working-class ethics, individualism, celebrity culture, character, the selfie

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[1] This is a revised version of a paper presented to the Working-Class Studies Association 2025 Conference, "Class and Social Justice," held at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia, December 2-5, 2025. I thank the Working-Class Studies 2025 Organizing Committee for making this wonderful event possible, and to the conference participants for their valuable feedback on my original presentation. Although scholars debate the meaning of the word "civilization," and what constitutes "Western civilization," in this paper I adopt the widely accepted understanding that defines it as the shared cultural, religious, political, and scientific traditions that originated in the Middle East, Europe, and the Mediterranean region and which over time have expanded globally. For discussion, see further Spielvogel, 2012, esp. pp. xxxi-xxxii. Although Western civilization owes its legacy to Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, such as the Egyptians, Sumerians, and Romans described in this article, its religious focus is fundamentally and resolutely biblical, based on the Jewish Scriptures and their later use by Christians and Muslims, whose scriptures acknowledge their debt to earlier Jewish monotheistic scriptures (a.k.a., Old Testament). For the relationship between religion and Western civilization, see further Green, 2006, pp. 1-22. Class is a notoriously difficult concept to define. I understand class as a group of individuals with similar economic positions. In this study, I build on Marx's concept of class antagonism, namely that classes stand in a particular relationship with one another in regard to privilege, authority, and power and that the relationship between classes is often antagonistic. Or, as Engles and Marx (2002, pp. 6, 10, 202-03, 219) emphasized, all history is the history of class struggles. For this study, moreover, the historical focus is on those in traditional working-class professions as well as those who spent part of their lives in one social class, and the rest in another. For extensive discussions of the latter, see the seminal study of Ryan and Sackrey (1984). For the problematic aspect of definitions of class of relevance to this study, see Pifer, Riffe, Hartz, and Ibarra (2022). Because Western civilization spans many thousands of years, in this study I focus on selective events, all of which are dated, as historical snapshots to highlight significant events in the history of the working-class.

Hot and Angry Workers Strike (1159 BC)

The temperature at noon could reach 106 degrees Fahrenheit (over 41 degrees Celsius) in the remote southern Egyptian town of Deir el-Mednia. Each day its workers—stonecutters, plasterers, artists, and water-carriers—walked thirty minutes from their village to their worksite where they lived and toiled in inhumane conditions apart from their families, for eight days, followed by two days of rest. While these men labored in the oppressive heat, their wives and children back home prepared food, did laundry, and manufactured items for sale to supplement their husbands' incomes. The employer of these men was Pharaoh Ramesses III (reign, 1186-1155 BC): considered the last great ruler of Egypt.[2] However, things were not going well in Ramesses's kingdom.

Twenty-nine years of foreign military exploits to expand Ramesses's realm had taken their toll on Egypt's vulnerable working class. His overspending and endless overseas wars had led to great loss of life among his conscripted soldiers and had crashed his economy; everyone was suffering.[3] Although grain was running low in the royal storerooms, which was intended to feed his subjects in times of economic distress, Ramesses insisted that no cost be spared for his great jubilee ceremony to commemorate his thirtieth-year on the throne.[4] After Deir el-Medina's workers were not paid and their food rations were reduced, they decided to take an unprecedented step that would have ramifications to the present. Deir el-Medina's laborers threw down their tools and walked off the job, refusing to work for their god-king until their conditions improved. It was the first strike in Western history.[5]

Deir el-Medina's residents were the most important members of the working class in Egypt because they were necessary for Ramesses's survival in the afterlife. They constructed the tombs for the Pharaohs in the famed Valley of Kings. According to Egyptian religion, the Pharaoh's body had to be preserved through mumification so he could join his ancestors and the gods in the afterlife. His citizens would then be resurrected with him after their deaths to perform labor for their god-king for eternity: their lowly working-class status would last forever![6] Despite his abuse of those who built his tomb, Ramesses was convinced he had nothing to worry about since Deir el-Medina's working class could not enter the afterlife without him: they had no choice but to obey him since he was divine. But Deir el-Medina's tomb builders believed that social justice was more important than their eternal existence.[7]

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[2] Egyptologist Faulkner (1975, 247) writes that "…with the death of Ramesses III the glory departed, and Egypt was never again an imperial power."

[3] During his reign, Ramesses III fought successive battles with a foreign enemy the Egyptians referred to as the "Sea-People": likely north Levantine and western Anatolian populations who attacked Egypt by land and sea, leading to massive conscription to fight them. See Ben-Dor Evian, 2017-08, pp. 267-85.

[4] For the events of his reign and his legacy, see further Snape, 2012, 404-42; Gardiner, 1948, pp. XIV–XVII, 45–58.

[5] The Deir el-Medina strike is considered the earliest recorded collective labor action in Western history. See further Edgerton (1951, pp. 137-45) and Faulkner (1975, pp. 244-47).

[6] Concerning the importance of these workers, Egyptologist Edgerton (1951, p. 137) remarks: "To Pharaoh's point of view, one of the most important purposes for which Egypt existed was the perpetuation of his individual life after death as a 'great god' among the greater gods. This good purpose could not be achieved without the loyal efforts of the necropolis artisans. Wise Pharaohs, therefore, could not neglect these men."

[7] Bourdieu's (1984, p. 457) comment on the reason for strikes in modern times among the working class describes the situation in ancient Egypt: "The ordinary means of the workers' struggle, strikes or demonstrations, are for them a last resort, which they will consider only when driven to extremities by excessive injustice ('If need be, we'll take to the streets')."

For eighteen days, Deir el-Medina's laborers ignored their god-ruler's order to return to work. "We are hungry," they declared. Ramesses and his officials were paralyzed with fear for nothing like this had occurred in Egyptian history. However, Egypt's divine kings were expected to embody the most sacred quality known as *ma'at:* a word which loosely translates as truth, harmony, and justice. Pharaohs were expected to practice social justice, take care of their citizens, and serve as a model of righteousness since they were the divine representatives on earth of Egypt's vast pantheon of deities. Now *ma'at*—the bond of trust between the gods and humans—had broken down and undermined the longstanding relationship between the Pharoh and his subjects. Efforts by local officials on behalf of Ramesses to appease the workers by sending them pastry instead of their salary failed as they struck again. Finally, only after they received their back payments did Deir el-Medina's laborers return to work. Egypt's working-class had gone on strike against their god and won. However, they quickly realized that their victory was temporary, and that repeated sacrifice would be necessary.

Deir el-Medina's workers went on strike again when their next payment was late. As strikes continued to occur, they no longer pleaded for their missing wages but demanded social justice from their Pharaoh, chanting: "We have gone on strike not from hunger but because we have a serious accusation to make; bad things have been done in this place of Pharaoh."(Wilkinson, 2010, 360). What had begun as a dispute over wages now transformed into repeated strikes throughout the country to protest corruption, injustice, and the continued abuse of the working class by Egypt's divine rulers. The country was never the same. The working class no longer respected their god-kings: the royal tombs were robbed, their mummies destroyed, and officials became reluctant to intervene and protect their rulers' physical remains from desecration. Strikes now became common; the Pharaohs were helpless and unable to respond.[8] The age of the god-kings was over. The country went into a period of decline from which it never recovered.[9]

Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx wrote that all history is the history of class struggle (Engels & Marx, 2002, 6, 10, 202-3, 219). Although the story of the first strike in Egypt may appear unique since we customary regard the withholding of labor to protest unfair working conditions as a modern phenomenon, this is not true. Rather, the ancient Egyptian workers recognized the concept of structural leverage, namely the power associated with a group's position in the social structure. They understood that any system contains within itself the possibility of a power strong enough to alter it.[10] Consequently, they knew that if they conducted widespread strikes to undermine what was most important to their rulers, namely their eternal survival and prestige, the working class would win. However, they also knew that great sacrifice was involved, namely their eternal existence. Yet, they were not only willing to fight for their rights, but for those of subsequent generations of the working class as well.

Laborers throughout antiquity, like Deir el-Mednia's workers, have likewise realized that if they banded together they could bring about great social change, although often with great cost and suffering. Those in Egypt were willing to forfeit their afterlife to improve their lives: a sacrifice their rulers were unwilling to make, and which forced Egypt's Pharaohs to the

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[8] Numerous Egyptian documents record work stoppages due to delayed or absent distribution of grain rations during the reigns of the following Pharaohs: Ramesses III (reign 1186-1155 BC), Ramesses IV (reign 1155-1149 BC), Ramesses IX (reign 1129-111 BC), Ramesses X (reign 111-1107 BC), and Ramesses XI (reign 1107-1078/1068 BC). For a list of these documents, see Antoine, 2017, pp. 223-34.

[9] Breasted, 1924, pp. 177-95; Wilkinson, 2010, pp. 334-35; Mark, 2017.

[10] For this understanding of structural leverage, see further Imig and Bond, 1997, pp. 476-79; Yosso 2005, pp. 69-91.

bargaining table. Let us turn to the ancient Roman Republic for a momentous event that Marx and Engels regarded as a fundamental example that demonstrates all history is the history of class struggle: a series of labor strikes known as the Struggle of the Orders during which a new working-class strategy emerged to oppose unjust labor conditions and worker exploitation.[11]

The Struggle of the Orders (500 BC to 287 BC)

The ancient Roman Republic was divided into two classes of free citizens: the working-class poor, known as the plebeians, and the aristocrats, known as the patricians.[12] The Struggle of the Orders was a conflict between the two. Although the long simmering tensions between these groups have often been interpreted as a conflict between two political orders, it was a class struggle as Marx and Engels recognized. The patricians dominated labor, owned most property, and held nearly all political and economic power. They also occupied the state's religious offices: the rich determined the will of the gods for all! (Beard, North, Price, 1998, 64). In contrast, ancient Rome's working class produced the Republic's food and resources, provided its labor for its great buildings that tourists marvel at today, and were conscripted in its legions to fight whenever and wherever its elites demanded. The Roman biographer Plutarch (ca. 40s-120s AD) wrote of this time: "The wild animals that roam over Italy have a den or hole to lurk in, but the men who fight and die for their country enjoy only the common air and light but nothing else; homeless, they wander about hopeless with their wives and children."[13] Despite their service to the Republic, the working class often ended up in debt bondage, barely one step above slavery (Beard, 2015, 146-53).[14]

The patricians inherited their disdain for the working class from the Greeks, whose elites abhorred those who labored with their hands, including craftspeople and artisans.[15] Manual laborers, the patricians held, were devoid of masculinity, honor, and patriotism since they did not own land or manage others: consequently, the plebians did not deserve the rights and privileges accorded to the rich and influential, or respect from the gods. Finally, the plebians had enough. Like their ancient Egyptian predecessors, Rome's working class went on strike.

In the opinion of the distinguished classicist Mary Beard, the decision of the plebians to strike is one of the most radical and coherent manifestos of popular power and liberty in antiquity, and has inspired working class movements in many countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Beard, 2015, 150). What made it unique was that Rome's working class realized that they were the majority and decided to punish the system that oppressed them.

[11] Marx, 1913, pp. 15-16; Marx, 1976, pp. 481-82.

[12] The esteemed Roman historian Syme (1939, p. 11) in his seminal discussion of this time writes that the patricians held power not through cooperation with the masses, but by their unethical insistence on holding supreme power, wealth, and glory. For a similar and recent assessments, see Beard, 2015, pp. 146-53; Osgood 2018, pp. 29-85.

[13] Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius Gracchus,* 9.828c. All ancient texts are cited according to the numbering followed in the editions listed in the bibliography. Translations are those of the author.

The classification of social divisions in ancient Rome, like our varying uses of the terms working class and middle class, is complex. The difference was based on birth: one had to be born into a patrician family to become one. However, there were plebians who by our standards were affluent but lacked political power and were therefore technically plebians. However, most plebs fit the definition of working class used in this study since they were barred from social advancement, unable to transcend their class solely because they were born plebians and worked with their hands. See further Brunt, 1971, pp. 42-59; de Ste. Croix, 1981, pp. 332-37. The famed historian Rostovtzeff (1957, esp. pp. 469-527) likewise proposed that the later Roman Empire declined and ultimately collapsed due to class conflict like the Struggle of the Orders.

[15] See, for example, Herodotus, 2.167.1; Livy 8.20.4, 21.63.3-4; Polybius, 3.22.3-14.

They literally shut down society. The plebians refused to work, no longer took up arms, and at times left the city *en masse.*[16] Shops closed, commerce ceased, and there was nobody left but the rich to do the work. As Rome's working class temporarily saw their grievances rectified, the patricians would soon oppress them. But the working class were relentless: they repeatedly went on strike until Rome's patricians were forced to give them legal equality through the creation of a Plebian Assembly whose laws were binding upon all. Now the working class had legal representation that allowed them to hold some of the nation's highest offices (Bond, 2025, 1-43).

Marx considered the Struggle of the Orders an example of how the long-term sheer brutality in the exploitation of workers, accompanied by a more or less systematic division of labor, was untenable for the working class.[17] This conflict is also unique because the plebeians displayed what Tara Yosso (2005, pp. 69-91) calls resistance capital: the resources, skills, and strategies that individuals or communities possess to resist, challenge, and navigate oppressive systems or structures. Resistance capital is the desire to challenge power dynamics to advocate for social justice and remedy social inequality. It is also an example of what Jack Metzgar's (2000, pp. 58-83; 2021a, esp. pp.150-71) account of the 1959 steelworkers strike—the largest work stoppage in US history in which over five hundred thousand workers stayed off the job for 116 days—refers to as working-class delayed gratification. Although these modern steel workers had no strike fund, no assistance programs to help with emergencies, and little or no savings, they refused to work not merely for increased wages or benefits, but, like the plebians, to improve work rules and stop exploitation. They wanted to limit management's ability to rule their workplaces: in other words, they went on strike for social justice. Likewise, their ancient Roman working-class predecessors were just as determined. They, like their Egyptian precursors, repeatedly struck against their oppressors for social justice with fewer resources than their modern-day successors: although the plebians faced potential starvation, they willingly left their homes and cities in their quest for social justice.[18]

Rome's working class during the Struggle of the Orders ultimately improved their lives through collective action, organization, and their willingness to endure immense suffering in the pursuit of equality and social justice. However, as Engles and Marx observed, class struggle never ends but begins anew with each generation. The plebians recognized this and attempted to avoid a shortfall of many modern trade union strikes which, although successful, often tend to focus on making improvements for their workers in the present instead of demanding long-term structural changes to benefit future generations.[19] By repeating their strikes, and taking the radical step of temporarily abandoning society, Rome's working class focused on creating a better life for future generations. They forced political concessions that lasted for over a

[16] For an astute discussion that recognizes the role of the ordinary plebians in this strike, see Ungern-Sternberg, 2005, pp. 312-332. For the struggle of Rome's working class and the violence that often accompanied their struggles for equality, see further Osgood 2018, pp. 29-85.

[17] Marx, 1976, pp. 481-89, 467-69, 339-454, 599-610

[18] The earlier 1936-1936 Great Flint Strike and its aftermath provide a modern parallel. It cripped the auto industry in Michigan as auto workers, like their steelworker counterparts and the ancient plebians of Rome, demanded a fair wage and decent working conditions. General Motors exceeded pre-Depression profitability after this strike but failed to rehire laid-off workers and lowered entry-level wages. This led to what has been dubbed a new maxim: "workers make all the sacrifice; management gets all the benefits." The consequence was that the auto industry, having violated the moral economy of shared sacrifice and shared reward, caused labor to mistrust management. This led workers to believe that future benefits would only come through their use of structural leverage through repeated work stoppages as the plebians had done. See Murray and Schwartz, pp. 98-153 (quotation, p. 144). The result was a succession of strikes, in the past sometimes accompanied by violence, that continues today.

[19] See further Velden, 2024, pp. 426-38.

century, which were only undone after the Roman civil wars led to the creation of a dictatorial regime known as the Roman Empire. But the struggle for the working class to obtain justice and a fair society in the Western tradition preceded the Romans and goes back to the earliest books of the Bible that espouse what I believe can be called a working-class ethic rooted in social justice.

Western Religion and Working-Class Justice (1900 BC-632 AD)

The three major Western Religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—are all based on working class ethics.[20] This should not be surprising since the founders of these faiths were itinerant working-class laborers. While most were born into working-class families, others belonged to a unique category I will refer to as reverse crossovers because they consciously chose a working-class lifestyle.[21] Abraham and Moses were the first. Both are not only considered the founders of Judaism, but the theological pillars of Christianity and Islam as well.[22] Scholars believe that Abraham lived sometime between 1900 and 1700 BC. According to the Bible and later Jewish legends, he was an upper-class, affluent, member of what is known as the Sumerian society, the Western world's first civilization, from the city of Ur located in modern Iraq.[23] Moses also came from an elite background.[24] He was raised in the Egyptian king's household. I classify Abraham and Moses as reverse crossovers because they willingly

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[20] Scriptural citations are from the following editions: (Old and New Testament), Nestle, et al. (1994); (Qur'an) 'Alī (1989).

[21] Working-class scholars use several terms to identify those who have changed their social class from working class to the professional class, some of whom claim dual affiliations and identities with their new middle-class professional life and their former working-class family and communities. Among the most popular is the term "straddler" coined by Lubrano, 2004, esp. pp. 193-223. For discussions and additional terms, see further Linkon, 2021, pp. 20-31; Jensen, 2012, esp. pp. 146-77, 202-06; Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 88-95; Ryan and Sackrey, 1984, pp. 1-19. For the related designation "class migrants," see Williams, 2020, pp. 4-5, 26, 50-51. The term "code-switching" is often used in working-class literature to describe the discomfort many feel in changing social class, and their conscious behaviors to hide, or straddle, their social class of origin. See further Ardoin and Martinez, 2019, pp. 21-31, 162-78; Elkins and Hanke, 2018, pp. 35–47. Sennett and Cobb (1972, p. 21) call the difficulties caused by upward mobility "status incongruity." I (Atkinson, 2022, pp. 95-112) prefer the term crossover since I do not believe it is possible to have dual affiliation and identity with one's former working-class community. Rather, to crossover to a new social class is to erase much of one's working-class self, making it impossible to return. I believe that working-class crossovers are essentially ghosts trapped in a liminal limbo, neither a member of the working class nor the new class in which he or she lives and works. For similar perspectives, see further Cruz, 2021, pp. 9, 103; Eribon, 2013, pp. 1-10, 102-09; Hurst, 2010; Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 88-95. See also Case, 2017, pp. 16-35.

[22] God had told Abraham, "Through you all the people of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). This covenant became the basis for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of whom believe they are the inheritors of the original Abrahamic covenant. For the historical background of these faiths, see the accessible discussions in Crossan 1993; Donner, 2010; Ehrman, 2008; Fredriksen, 2018; Frevel, 2023; Hoyland, 2019; Shoemaker, 2012; Shoemaker, 2022.

[23] Abraham's biography can be found in the biblical book of Genesis, chapters 12-25. For legends about his life, see further Ginzberg, 1909, vol 1, pp. 183-308. The Sumerians, who lived in the lush valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers—the site of Biblical Eden—created the first known civilization over six thousand years ago (5500-1475 BCE). They created a writing system and produced hundreds of thousands of documents, among them tax records, business records, law codes, prayers, and stories, including the famed Epic of Gilgamesh (Crawford 2004, pp. 16-213). Although they lived over six thousand years ago, their society was much like our own, including a common disdain of the working class among the elites. Although only few Sumerian men and women could write, meaning that our extant documents reflect the views of the more affluent and not peasants, these texts frequently denigrate the working class. Examples include a fable mocking the various working-class professions and warnings to students to study hard to avoid the fate of the working-class lest they end up laboring in the fields behind a plow and an ox. See Kramer, 1981, pp. 104, 140, 266, 344; Pfeiffer 1969, pp. 437-38.

[24] Moses's life can be found in the biblical Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. For the various biblical and post-biblical legends about Moses, see Ginzberg, 1909, vol 2, pp. 243-75.

gave up their professional urban upper-class lifestyles, abandoned their wealth, and left their homelands to become working-class semi-nomads devoid of citizenship and legal rights.[25] Although scholars do not regard the biblical stories about Abraham, Moses, or other figures in the New Testament, as well as the Qur'an, as entirely factual, this is not relevant to the present discussion. Rather, what is important is that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in their scriptures, and later legends, all claim their founding figures were working class. This makes Western religion unique for its working-class focus, which is based in the foundational law code of all Western religion—the Torah.

The Torah, a Hebrew word meaning Law, comprises the first five books of the Jewish Scriptures, commonly known as the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Torah is an idealistic and utopian code that champions the rights of the working class. It reflects the ethics of a semi-nomadic society in which everyone must cooperate to survive in a harsh desert landscape: it defines principles of justice that are binding upon all, including morality, and views social justice as a national covenant.[26] Abraham and Moses spent much of their lives wandering in the desert, barely surviving. Having no legal rights, they often were prey for civilized folk, for whom working-class nomads were despised because they did not fit into any perceived social class. Both had to take up arms to protect their families and followers. They lived what Cynthia Cruz, writing of those who have left their working-class origins behind, refers to as "nomadism: moving from place to place with no fixed determination in mind."[27]

The foundational ethic of the Bible as found in the Torah was created by working-class semi-nomads who lived in a liminal space, neither settled nor fully wild, with few rights, and who never fully assimilated into their surroundings because of their rejection of their former social class. Even when ancient Israel abandoned its semi-nomadic lifestyle and became an urbanized society in which commerce increasingly exploited the poor, a new brand of teachers unique to the Western tradition known as prophets emerged to champion the traditional working-class values that had long defined a semi-nomadic society.

In contrast to the common perception that the biblical prophets predicted the future, they rarely did so. Rather, prophets were mediators between humans and God. They were primarily social commentators who denounced sinners for not obeying the laws of the Torah and largely reserved their wrath for the rich and the powerful. Nearly all the prophets were from the working class, and likely illiterate: their followers wrote down their teachings in books along with biographical information about them that eventually became part of the Bible. The first prophet whose teachings were recorded in writing was a man named Amos, who was proud of his working-class heritage. Amos boasted that he was uneducated and earned his living as "a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees" (Amos 7.14). These occupations reveal a great deal about his working-class status: he did not own land, meaning that he was at the lowest socio-economic level in an agricultural society since he was a hired laborer. Because he owned no property, he had to move about to earn a living tending sheep and harvesting crops for others.

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[25] For the various biblical and post-biblical legends about Moses, see Ginzberg, 1909, vol 2, pp. 243-75

[26] See further Kaufman, 1960, pp. 291-340. The author has spent considerable time with semi-nomadic tribes while working as an archaeologist in the Middle East. This section is informed by what they have taught me about their lifestyle, and their working-class approach to society and social justice.

[27] Cruz, 2021, pp. 160, 1-10, 102-09 103; see also Case, 2017, pp. 23-25. Fisher (2014, pp. 133-38) describes the state of moving through anonymous environments for the working-class, as Abraham and Moses did, as "nomadalgia." For a similar discussion of working-class academics as being in "limbo," see Crew, 2024, pp. 17-32.

Although watching sheep was a demanding job in a desert environment, dressing sycamore trees was an even more arduous task. It entailed climbing ladders in the hot sun to split the sycamore pods with a special knife to ripen their fruit. Because the sycamore tree could attain a height of over thirty feet (over nine meters), it was a dangerous job. Hired hands such as Amos were allowed to graze flocks in the fields of affluent property owners in exchange for performing this arduous labor.[28] Constantly on the move from job to job, Amos was able to keep abreast of current affairs. His anger at the political and economic establishments of his time led him not to focus on religion, but social justice. Martin Luther King Junior in his famous "I have a Dream" Speech of August 28, 1963, quoted Amos's principal demand: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Neither Amos nor or any of the biblical prophets accepted money. They believed it was necessary to eschew material wealth to live what has been called "the doctrine of the primacy of morality: the idea that the essence of God's demand of man is not cultic, but moral."[29] They chose to remain working class to identify with the masses, and to advocate for social justice against the rich.

Jesus followed the Old Testament prophets by not accepting money. He too was a working-class peasant whose family lived a precarious existence on the margins.[30] Jesus was not the mere carpenter of popular imagination. Rather, in the original Greek of the New Testament he is referred to as a builder: a manual laborer who worked in both wood and stone.[31] The small town of Nazareth in the Galilee region of northern Israel where he grew up is largely devoid of trees. This means that Jesus likely spent much of his time cutting and hauling stone to erect and maintain the countless miles of terrace walls cut into the hillsides to grow crops. Also, he certainly did gig work cutting and hauling stones for roads and walls in the nearby Roman-dominated metropolis of Sepphoris, which was only three-miles (five-kilometers) from his hometown of Nazareth.[32] Jesus would have walked thousands of miles (kilometers) in his lifetime looking for work, building up considerable physical endurance and stamina as he roamed from job to job across dangerous and uneven roads and dirt paths, likely avoiding bandits and wild animals, to provide for his family, as well as to pay the required taxes to Roman authorities.[33] Itinerant working-class laborers like Jesus were considered the lowest of

[28] See further King, 1988, pp. 116-17.

[29] Kaufmann, 1960, p. 345. Unlike the court prophets, who were educated and worked directly for the state, Amos emphasized that he earned his living through manual labor and was therefore not compromised by the rich or the state. The same is true for nearly all the biblical prophets, as well as Jesus and Muhammad who, although they attracted both rich and poor followers, before their religious callings earned their livings through manual labor. For the "I Have a Dream" Speech, see American Rhetoric.

[30] Like the term working class, there are many definitions of a peasant. I adopt the definition of Joyce (2024, p. 21) who defines it as follows: "A peasant is a country person, a person of the land." In his study of peasant societies, Joyce emphasizes the precarious nature of peasants, particularly those without land who, like Jesus working as day laborers, must depend on strangers for their survival. Precariousness was central to their existence.

[31] In the Greek of the Gospels of Mark (6:3) and Matthew (13:55), Jesus is called a *tekton* (τέκτων). Although commonly rendered as "carpenter," it better translated as craftsman or builder, as it is used to describe itinerant laborers working with wood and stone.

[32] The author has spent considerable time living in this area and excavating sites from Jesus' lifetime, and well as walking many of the routes he traveled. Although Jesus's later teachings displayed contempt for worldly goods, in this section I focus on Jesus's upbringing which a leading scholar on the historical Jesus (Crossan 1993) describes as a Mediterranean Jewish peasant lifestyle. As a carpenter, he and his family were at the lowest and most vulnerable socio-economic realm of Palestinian working-class society.

[33] Deines, 2014, pp. 11-50; Reed, 2000, pp. 100-38. Although the Romans taxed recently conquered lands such as Jesus's homeland less to win the support of their peasants, the working class nevertheless had to perform unpaid services for the state in addition to handling over a portion of their wealth to their occupiers. For the plight of the working-class in agricultural societies, see further Lenski, pp. 1966, pp.189-296. Banditry was common in Jesus' homeland, and attracted many from Jesus' social class, namely those without land, who preyed on the rich, but

the working class. His detractors chose to insult him by publicly highlighting his lower working-class status by referring to him as a mere "son of a carpenter."[34]

Christianity's other foundational figure, the Apostle Paul, like Abraham and Moses, was a reverse crossover who left his upper-class life to become an itinerant tentmaker. Paul grew up in Tarsus, located in Cilicia in today's Turkey, one of the Roman Empire's leading cities. He bragged that he had studied under the famed Jewish sage Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He was also trained in Roman literature and rhetoric, meaning that he was among the few educated at the time. Nevertheless, he chose a low-status itinerant working-class profession. He became a tentmaker, which was an occupation that also involved manufacturing and making repairs to garments, saddles, shop awnings, and shelters for soldiers. Because working class professions in major cities, such as Corinth in Greece where he spent eighteen months practicing his craft, were highly regulated non-citizens such as Paul had to work as subcontractors earning paltry sums for their labor (Acts 18:11). Paul proudly proclaims that he was often "in hunger and thirst, frequently without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Corinthians 11:27; see also 2 Corinthians 4:22), as he traveled from city to city practicing his trade and preaching the new Christian faith. In his writings he often boasts of his lowly working-class status (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 1 Corinthians 4:12; 9:6; 2 Corinthians 11:27; cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:8; Acts 20:34-35).[35] The same was true of Islam's founder, the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad came from a respected family in Mecca, located in today's Saudi Arabia. He lost his parents while young, making him an orphan: the lowest status and most vulnerable member of his tribal society. He worked a variety of jobs, mainly tending sheep for others, before a wealthy widow named Khadijah hired him to operate her caravans. Muhammad traveled great distances, suffered from the elements, and had to ward off bandits as he transported merchandise for her throughout Arabia.[36] He became known as an honest working-class member of Meccan society and was nicknamed "al-Amin," which means "the trusted one." At the age of forty, according to Islamic tradition, he received the first revelation from the angel Gabriel, who would deliver God's word to him for twenty-two years (610–632 AD) that eventually became Islam's Scripture, known as the Qur'an. Like Jesus, Muhammad focused on social justice. The Qur'an espouses a working-class ethic based on the Torah as it demands the protection of women, orphans, and workers while denouncing wealth and demanding social justice from those in power.[37] Leading tribal leaders threatened to kill Muhammed because of his teaching that the rich must take care of the poor outside their tribes and share their wealth with the needy. In 620 AD Muhammed fled his hometown with a small band of his followers to save their lives. He crossed over 250 miles of desert and moved to Yathrib, a city later renamed Medina, where he produced what is widely regarded as the first constitution in

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also who at times attacked local populations to survive. They illustrate the perilous state of the working-class poor, for whom a bad harvest or inability to repay loans led some of them to become bandits to provide for their families. For the marginal position of bandits in Roman society, between working-class peasants and the affluent, see further Shaw 2026, 297-315. The great Jewish Revolt against the Romans (66-70 AD) was largely led by bandits and working-class peasant farmers, many of whom greatly suffered under Roman domination. The conflict, which began as a struggle for independence, quickly devolved into a war between Palestinian society's social classes, and proved to be the greatest revolt the Roman Empire faced during the first century AD. See further Atkinson 2026, pp. 3-15.

[34] Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55.

[35] See further Meeks, 1983, esp. pp. 9, 27, 29; Horrell, 1996, p. 76; Meggitt, 1998, pp. 75 77.

[36] The standard biography of Muhammad (ca. 570-632 AD) is the *Sirat Rasul Allah* of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 768 AD), which is available only in the recensions by Ibn Hishām and al-Tabari edited nearly a century later. For the text, see Guillaume, 1995, esp. pp. 68-660.

[37] Donner, 2010, pp. 39-89.

Western tradition. It is a document based on social justice that granted all the city's residents equal rights despite their religion.[38] Forced to fight many wars, Muhammed eventually emerged victorious and transformed Medina's formerly pagan shrine into a place for the worship of the God of Abraham and Moses. He died in 632 AD at the age of sixty-two.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all share a working-class ethic based on social justice,[39] the condemnation of excessive wealth,[40] the respect for the working class,[41] and the demand that the poor be protected.[42] The prophets of Western religions all faced new economic systems of free trade that threatened to undermine the traditional working-class identities of their societies, which were often imposed by religious leaders who sought economic gain.[43] In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engles echo the message of the prophets when they denounce free trade as the shameless, direct, and brutal exploitation that is often veiled by religious and political illusions (Engels & Marx, 2002, 222). The cultural critic Mark Fisher has described what is left behind when such shameless exploitation takes hold of a society as it did in the time of the biblical prophets, Jesus, and Muhammed, namely the collapse of beliefs, a situation in which tradition counts for nothing, and the erosion of long-established time-honored values upon which family life depends: obligation, trustworthiness, and commitment (Fisher, 2009, 1-11, 31-8). Over time, the working-class organized to protect themselves from the brutality of free trade, the loss of a social safety net, and to give themselves some measure of control over their fate.

Guilds: Working-Class Communal Protection (10th-14th Centuries AD)

During the Middle Ages the working class increasingly organized into collective bodies to protect themselves and to provide some measure of control over their fate. These groups they created are commonly known as guilds or associations. They are the ancient form of trade unions that began during the Greek and Roman periods: many Romans abhorred Christianity because they viewed it as an association comprised primarily of the working-class poor.[44] The first guilds were organized by entertainers, and soon spread to a variety of occupations, such as bakers, crafts, merchants, and eventually to all types of working-class professions. Guilds became particularly common during the Medieval period. Members elected officials, made

[38] Arjomand, 2009, pp. 555-575; Wildan, 2013, pp. 17-36.

[39] See, for example: (Old Testament) Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:2; Exodus 22:21-23; Psalm 82:3-4; Isaiah 1:17; Proverbs 31:8-9; Micah 6:8. (New Testament) Matthew 25:34-40; Luke 4:18-19; James 2:15-16; Galatians 3:8. (Qur'an) 2:267, 274, 282; 3:195; 4:135; 5:8; 16:90; 59:7; 70:24-25.

[40] See, for example: (Old Testament) Deuteronomy 8:18, 15:7; Proverbs 3:9-10, 13:11; Ecclesiastes 5:10. (New Testament) Matthew 6: 24, 31-33; Luke 12:33; Corinthians 5:11; 6:9-10; 8:9; Hebrews 13:5; 1 Timothy 6:10; James 5:1-6. (Qur'an) 2:177; 4:29; 9:34; 25:67; 63:9; 64:15; 89:15-17.

[41] See, for example: (Old Testament) Exodus 20:9-10; Proverbs 12:24, 14:23; Ecclesiastes 5:18: Psalm 90:17, 128:2. (New Testament) Matthew 5:16; Colossians 3:23-24; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12. (Qur'an) 3:195; 17:35; 33:72-73; 53:39; 62:10.

[42] (Old Testament) Exodus 22:21-27; Deuteronomy 5:11, 15:7-8; Leviticus 19:9-10; Psalm 82:3-4; Proverbs 19:17, 21:13, 22:9, 31:8-9; Isaiah 58:6-7; Ezekiel 16:49. (New Testament) Luke 3:11, 12:33, 14:12-14; Matthew 25:31-46; James 2:14-17; 1 John 3:17-18; Ephesians 4:28: 2 Corinthians 8:9. (Qur'an) 2:271, 274; 4:36; 17:26; 76:8-9.

[43] For a modern parallel based on popular sports culture that discusses how class identities are insecure, tied as they are to global vagaries in capital movements, see Williams, 2023, pp. 41-57.

[44] For examples and inscriptions documenting the rules of these associations and their membership, see Kloppenborg, 2011. For the influence of working-class associations on Christianity, see Kloppenborg, 2020. Lucassen, De Moor, and van Zanden (2008, p. 6) define European guilds as: "… permanent, generally local organizations of people in the same profession or trade or a combination of the same professions, recognized by the local, provincial, or central government, and which have as their main, but certainly not exclusive, purpose the defence and maintenance of trade monopoly rights with regard to fellow citizens and outside competitors." In this study, I am primarily referring to working-class craft guilds rather than merchant guilds.

their own rules, and collected dues, which were used to cover injuries and to provide their working-class members with a dignified burial and a tombstone as well as money for their surviving families. Over time, guilds became permanent organizations of those in the same profession or trade. They eventually gained recognition by local, provincial, and central governments. Guilds worked to ensure their working-class members received appropriate wages for their labor and, when necessary, banded together against exploitation through strikes.[45]

Contrary to conventional stereotypes, guilds were inclusive rather than exclusive and did not prohibit others from entering their professions (Surdam, 2020, 226-8). However, the focus was on the group. Some medieval guilds prohibited their members from attracting attention to their products: there were even strictures against advertising. Workers operated in studios in which many anonymous artists contributed to the final product under the leadership of a master craftsman who employed them and who sold their collective products to wealthy patrons. Individual credit was frowned upon; self-portraits were rare. The social status of artists was the same as that of other working-class laborers: they seldom achieved any fame. Rather, artists were hired laborers who answered the whims of their workshop owner to please potential clients: they followed orders and produced art they were paid to create and not free to produce what they wanted (Kliner, 2012, 595-691). In exchange, they were taught the special skills required of their craft, which were shared with all. Then, with the advent of the Renaissance, things rapidly changed for the worse for working-class artisans, and eventually for all of us, as a culture of personality emerged to replace the traditional working-class culture of character. It began with the arts.

With the rediscovery of classical artistic techniques and literature during the Renaissance, patrons began to value innovation and creativity.[46] Humanism emerged from this largely scientific quest to imitate the past, reject divine explanations and, most of all, to celebrate the dignity, value, and rational agency of the individual. Humans were now the focus of attention and acclaim, as epitomized by Leonardo de Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, which many believe is a self-portrait that places his physical body, and by association his intellect, at the center of the universe.[47] With the increasing separation of art from craft in the Renaissance, the formerly close relationship between master and apprentice, who were long bound together, became severed as individuation came to dominate. Consequently, skills were no longer passed along to other workers, but became part of an artist's unique identity and not to be shared.[48] A select group of artists now prospered because of the distinctiveness of their work; a number became wealthy, prominent, and famous while the relentless pursuit for renown destroyed others.[49] This new focus on the individual and the quest to no longer be identified as the working class among artists led to a change in creativity that not only defines us to the present, but which increasingly enslaves many of us in a perpetual quest to reshape ourselves.

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[45] See further Dagron, 2002, vol. 2, pp. 385-461; Lucassen, De Moor, and van Zanden, 2008, pp. 5-18.
[46] For the cultural factors behind these changes, largely through the Western rediscovery of Aristotle, see further Rubenstein, 2003, pp. 206-98; Greenblatt, 2011, pp. 110-263. As guilds declined, their former members were increasingly forced to seek employment as artisans along with other day laborers and frequently moved from place to place seeking work. Some toiled under the great masters as temporary workers. See further Komlosy, 2018, esp. pp. 8-18, 28-29, 99-106.
[47] Isaacson, 2017, pp. 140-57. Leonardo's contemporary, the Florentine philosopher Pico della Mirandola in his *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* placed humans at the center of creation, emphasizing the belief in "Homo faber" (Man the Maker), asserting that our greatest creation is to shape our own life histories. For a photo, see "Vitruvian Man": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitruvian_Man
[48] See further Sennett, 2008, pp. 119-46.
[49] Hale, 1994; Wittkower and Wittkower, 1963, pp. 189-81; 67-97, 133-49.

In 1568 the famed painter Giorgio Vasari published *The Lives of the Painters* which consisted of biographies of artists with the intent of making them famous. This new appreciation for creativity and artistic "genius" was fully manifested in the High Renaissance, when superstars like Michelangelo and Leonardo were treated as near equals to the Popes and Kings that employed them. Patrons no longer sought art from workshops where anonymous working-class artisans toiled, but from great creative masters to enhance their own social standing through ostentatious displays of their wealth. Artists began to acknowledge their own importance through self-portraits, sometimes even including their own depictions in their commissions, and sought to become the equals of their upper-class patrons.[50] Then, the greatest change came with the sixteenth century AD German painter Albrecht Dürer—the creator of the selfie.

The Self-Makers and the Selfie (15th Century AD)

Albrecht Dürer was the first artist to seek superstar status. He did not merely want people to praise his art, but his persona as well. In other words, he wanted to be famous for being famous. His contemporaries joked that he was too busy to take commissions because of the inordinate amount of time he spent on his hair, which he treated with egg whites to facilitate and control its curling (Koerner, 1993, 169-72). He often included his self-portrait in his commissioned art, dressed in extravagant costumes with his elaborately curled hair so that people would recognize him. Dürer produced thirteen self-portraits in which he depicts himself as divine. In these, he does not portray himself in profile but looking directly at the viewer in the pose traditionally reserved for Jesus. To make certain that the audience recognized it was him, in his most famous self-portrait he placed this inscription: "I, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg painted myself thus with my own colors, at the age of twenty-eight years." To the left, he included the date, 1500, and below it an AD monogram, which not only represents the Latin abbreviation *anno Domini,* "in the year of our Lord" to denote the beginning of the Christian era, but also his initials.[51]

Albrecht Dürer not only became the first modern artist to prominently sign his portraits, but he also purchased his own printing press. He did so to control the design and dissemination of his image, making himself independent from patrons and thereby taking full credit for his work. Dürer hired agents to sell his art at fairs and markets in cheap versions, undermining other artists in the process (Ashcroft, 2017, 66-7). The more his works and portraits circulated among the masses, the more famous he became. With Dürer we see the birth of a new creative class: the self-makers: people who, in the words of the cultural critic Tara Isabella Burton, possessed the creative qualities that enabled them to transform not just art, but their public personality and through it their destiny (Burton, 2023, 14-15). Dürer is an example of the modern phenomenon that the sociologists Donal Hortan and R. Richard Wohl call "parasocial interaction": a psychological experience in which illustrious and influential persons construct a false intimacy with their followers (Horton & Wohl, 1956, 215-9). Like contemporary social influencers, Dürer used visual self-presentation techniques he created and fully controlled to engage with his fans by fashioning a non-existent, but seemingly personal, relationship with them. Although physically distant from his admirers, he came to influence their lives through their adulation of him and their quest to become like him.[52] With Dürer we have the beginning

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[50] For a similar assessment of artists and social class mobility in the modern era, which he describes as "upclassing," see Bourdieu, 1984, esp. pp. 99-168.
[51] For this portrait, see "Albrecht Dürer": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albrecht_D%C3%BCrer. Dürer also signed and dated his other self-portraits.
[52] For parasocial relations created through contemporary technology, see Kim, 2022, pp. 414-34; Dibble, Hartmann, and Rosaen, 2016, pp. 21-44.

of our modern culture of personality, namely the quest for adulation by those without talent who seek to become famous merely for being famous.[53] The philosopher Charles Taylor calls this transition to a more secular age "expressive individualism" in which people are encouraged to find their own path to self-fulfillment and to do their own thing (Taylor, 2007, 299-321). The individual, not the group, matters. The problem is that fame becomes a drug. It afflicts our modern society as evident by the increased quest for fame through social media and rising rates of depression as many today fall into a hedonic lassitude, unable to do anything other than pursue pleasure in their quest for recognition without accompanying deeds rather than through the pursuit of traditional working-class accomplishments (Fisher, 2009, 21-30).

The emerging capitalist industrial class would increasingly emulate Dürer and others like him and use self-promotion to justify their existence, and their exploitation of the working class with their development of the cult of the celebrity. It was a form of social Darwinism in which few entrepreneurs rose to the top to become God-like celebrities while those at the bottom suffered.[54] The famous, typically the affluent, depicted themselves as possessing a charisma they had acquired, they claimed, through hard-work: the proverbial pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. In this new social order those at the bottom, the upper-class were increasingly convinced, deserved their lower working-class status because they lacked the innate charisma of the powerful and affluent or had not worked hard enough.[55] This increased focus on individualism and fame following the widespread implementation of the industrial model of production only made things worse for the working class. We still suffer from it.

Industrialism and "The Invention of Work" (19th-20th Centuries AD)

The rise of industrialism fractured traditional social relations as long-established support networks of households, villages, and guilds vanished. This increasingly left many workers exploited and unprotected since they had to leave their homes to relocate close to factories, forcing them to become isolated individuals devoid of the centuries of working-class culture and community that had anchored their lives.[56] As clashes with management increasingly occurred the working class sought ways to assert their rights and to demand fair wages and safe working conditions. Like those thousands of years before them, they resorted to strikes.[57] There were many successes such as laws limiting the length of the work day, increased wages, and the introduction of statuary health care and accident insurance for industrial workers in several European countries that created a social safety net, which over time increasingly came to be financed by employers and workers alike. However, these reforms led to the creation of what has been termed the "invention of work": a system in which labor is highly regulated between

[53] Susman, 2003, pp. 271-85. See further, "Famous for being famous": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famous_for_being_famous
[54] Nicholson, 1998, pp. 52-68. For the related concept of "virtual self," see Burton, 2023, p. 205.
[55] See further Cain, 2012, pp. 19-33; Burton, 2023, pp. 1-8. Sennett (1998) takes a similar perspective and notes that the disjointed time created by the new capitalism, in which employment is becoming contingent, hampers the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives as they become transient, moving from job to job and making few lasting social or community ties.
[56] For Engles and others, the concentration of large numbers of workers in early factory neighborhoods led to the creation of a new social formation: a proletariat created by the introduction of machinery that led to the formation of a new working class, and the dawn of a new stage of history in which workers were increasingly exploited. See Engels, 1887, pp. 125-42. For the social conditions that led to the creation of the modern factory and how it disrupted traditional working-class village life, see further Freeman, 2018, esp. pp. 1-42.
[57] There are too many to mention, but some of the most important took place in early modern Italy, Holland, England, and other European nations, although statistics show there were over 383 labor strikes in Britain alone between 171 and 1800. See Dobson, 1980. See also, Cohn jr., 1980.

government agencies, companies, and, less so today, by unions that emerged in modern times to replace the guilds.[58] With the advent of scientific management, often called Taylorism after the philosophy of Frederick W. Taylor, the situation worsened. Taylor urged employers to strip workers of their independence and pride by classifying, tabulating, and reducing work to individual tasks to create a system where the worker could perform "…at his fastest pace and with the maximum of efficiency." (Taylor, 1913, 12). He also urged management to make skilled jobs, as much as possible, simplified by breaking them into smaller tasks to be performed by unskilled laborers at a lower rate of pay (Taylor 1913, pp. 37-39). Former craftworkers in factories no longer had any knowledge to pass on as their skills were no longer valued or needed.

With Henry Ford's creation of the modern assembly line a new problem emerged. As Antonio Gramsci recognized, although his workers received greater wages, allowing them to purchase the products they manufactured, Ford's factory workers now faced the dangers of industrialization Marx had warned about, namely the current precarious position of workers as all security has been removed from the workplace.[59] Labor is now in a constant state of flux and workers are unable to keep up the pace of work-place quotas and the speed of modern assembly lines, and forced to continually adapt to their oppressive working conditions, which with the continued introduction of new technologies continues to increase workloads (Atkinson, 2022, 101-4). Max Weber (1978, 973-4) observed that the competitive marketplace, with its demands that workers perform their tasks with as much speed as possible, led to increased bureaucratization. The result is that organizations increasingly became more like one another. This phenomenon is often referred to as isomorphism: a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face similar circumstances (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, 147-60). In the case of the industrial revolution, businesses replicated one another through their use of technology, and their adoption of a brutal pace of work, in a competition for efficiency and profit as manufacturers increasingly sought to resemble one another for fear of falling behind and making less profit. Over time, these unfair working conditions were taken for granted and increasingly became standard. Although professions did not disappear with these changes, their "guild power" has been replaced by the power of capitalists, the state, or both, as even the most accomplished professionals no longer control their workplace as their skills are less valued, and largely subdivided into isolated individualized tasks so that workers become mere functionaries.[60] This has led to the present development of what has been called "the Unwinding," the unraveling of the social contract that has left the working class to their own devices to find success and salvation (Packer, 2013). Yet, despite these negative changes forced on the working-class, I believe that little has changed when it comes to the existence of distinctive working-class culture.

The Persistence of Working-Class Culture (The Present)

In the 1990s the American psychologist Johathan Haidt was interested in how understandings of morality differed across cultures. After attending a conference in Brazil, he decided to conduct a survey in which he asked persons in two Brazilian cities and Philadelphia in the United States questions about what he called harmless taboos: disturbing but innocuous

[58] See further Komlosy, 2018, pp. 93-217; Mejstrik, and Buchner, 2013, pp. 5-11. Komlosy (p. 19) defines work as: "… a targeted, market-oriented, remunerated activity excluding occasional and needs-based non-remunerated activities."
[59] Gramsci, 1971, pp. 277-318; Marx, 1976, pp. 794-802.
[60] See further Krause, 1996, esp. pp. 252-86.

hypothetical scenarios that evoked a judgmental response and therefore provided some insight into the person's moral thinking (Haidt, 2012, 3-186). Haidt expected the answers to vary by city: however, he was surprised by the outcome. Class differences between respondents within each country were the greatest: cultural differences made little difference in the moral values of his subjects. Working-class respondents in both countries emphasized communal standards while those from the upper-class emphasized individual notions of personal freedom to justify acting as they wish. The Anthropologist Richard Shweder in a study of cross-cultural ethics discovered something similar.[61] He found three major clusters of moral themes in society. The first, autonomy, is the idea that people are first and foremost autonomous individuals with wants, needs, and preferences that should be satisfied as one wishes. The second, community, is based on the idea that people are first and foremost members of large entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, and nations. The third, divinity, emphasizes religion to maintain that humans are temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted, consequently it stresses the group and morals. Autonomy tended to cluster among the affluent while the working class characterized the latter two moral themes. In her interviews with working-class men in the United States and France, Michèle Lamont discovered something similar to Haidt and Shweder. She found that morality is a more important criterion of work for the working class than for professionals and managers, and that solidarity is a distinctively working-class virtue grounded in a community of class interest.[62]

The conclusions of these three researchers regarding the differences between the working and professional classes, I believe, is the same as that put forth by contemporary working-class theorists such as Jack Metzger and Barbara Jensen, who find the existence of a distinct working-culture of belonging in contrast to a middle-class culture of becoming.[63] Likewise, in his study of first-generation working-class graduates, Paul Dean (2026, pp. 102-14) found they possess what he terms "working-class cultural capital," which he defines as the skills, cultural knowledge, and attitudes that are rooted in the social and cultural experience of working-class origins. Like Metzger and Jensen, Dean highlights such distinctive working-class cultural characteristics as hard work, practicality, resilience, ingenuity, authenticity, and the importance of sacrifice.[64]

Conclusion

This view of morality grounded in being, becoming, belonging, and community reflects the working class in all the cultures I have described in the present study. Working-class culture has transcended time, beginning with the earliest civilization and continuing today.[65] Its major characteristics tend to be persistence, sacrifice, a communal focus, and an emphasis on social justice. This working-class culture with its ethical system has persisted across time: we find it in the first civilization of the Middle East and in today's workplace. It is a unique culture that

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[61] Shweder's research is most fully presented in Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park, 1997, pp. 119-69.
[62] Lamont, 2000, esp. pp. 17-54, 153-68, 215-49.
[63] See the seminal studies of Jensen, 2012, esp. pp. 79-116; Metzgar, 2021a, esp. pp. 77-76; Metzgar, 2021b, pp. 231-41.
[64] In the influential and widely cited book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,* Robert Bellah and his associates (1985, p. viii) deny the existence of a distinctive working-class culture and write that everyone in the United States thinks largely in middle-class categories.
[65] I could easily expand the present study into a book examining additional studies that would further illustrate my point. For a contemporary example of working-class ethic, see the study of zookeepers conducted by Bunderson and Thompson (2009, pp. 32-57). In their interviews, they found that these laborers kept their difficult, dirty, and poorly paid jobs because of their sense of duty, obligation, and responsibility characteristic of traditional working-class culture.

values integrity and authenticity that has only changed history for the better, but whose contributions to Western civilization remain largely ignored.[66]

My broad historical overview of the persistence of working class-culture across several thousand years on three continents among various races and cultures, I believe, supports the theme of the new working-class studies that puts class at the center because it is so deeply interwoven with other formative elements of society, such as race, gender, work, and structures of power.[67] The lesson to be learned from history is that the working-class as the majority of society's workers has, and can continue to, achieve great things. However, at best, any gains are temporary; continued sacrifice is necessary.[68] Nevertheless, if the working class can adhere to their traditional values in the face of oppression history demonstrates they can better their lives and improve society by restoring its lost working-class values of becoming, belonging, and community, that are essential now more than ever for saving our world. Or, to quote Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor, who, in his citation of the biblical passage in Genesis 4:9 to demand that society treat workers fairly, warned the upper-class: "you are your brother's keeper, and unless you help to lighten his burden yours will be made so much the heavier." (Gompers, 1919, 22).

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[66] In his defense of the existence of a genuine working-class culture, Metzger (2021, p. 233) writes: "My argument is that working-class culture is genuine in the sense that it has an internal coherence that is separate and distinct from middle-class culture; has positive value both in itself and for American society; and vitally contributes to the shaping of middle-class life and culture even as it forms itself within and around that dominant culture." Although Metzger recognizes that working-class culture does have some deficits, the same, as he notes, is true of professional middle-class culture. Nevertheless, the timeless values of working-class culture, which Jensen calls "a roomier sense of now" (2012, 60), has, as highlighted in this study, consistently benefitted Western Civilization from its very beginning. The same cannot be said of other social classes.

[67] This understanding of the importance of class is indebted to Russo and Linkon, 2005, 1-18; hooks, 2000, pp. 1-9

[68] See further the seminal study of Zweig (2012, pp. 4, 11) who, in stressing that the working class are the majority, writes that to be working class is to be in a place of relative vulnerability—on the job, in the market, in politics, and in culture.

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The Academic Echelon: Working-Class Research, First Nations Cultural Load and Relational Ethics in the Settler-Colonial University

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Abstract

Working-class and First Nations communities are among the most governed and researched populations in contemporary Australia. Criminological and socio-legal research routinely produces knowledge about policing, youth justice, child protection, welfare and poverty, yet pays less attention to the academic labour relations through which that knowledge is produced. Focused primarily on Australian universities, while drawing on patterns that also resonate in the United Kingdom and other neoliberal settler-colonial systems, this article argues that research on working-class and First Nations communities is structured by a racialised and classed academic echelon. By academic echelon, I mean the layered division of research labour through which professors and senior investigators, continuing academics, fixed-term researchers, sessional staff, doctoral candidates and community co-researchers are positioned differently in relation to authority, employment security, proximity to participants, cultural load, authorship, data control and aftercare.

Keywords

Working-class academics, First Nations research, cultural load, relational ethics, academic precariat, Indigenist methodologies, research labour, settler colonialism, Australia

Building on new working-class studies, scholarship on working-class academics and precarity, critiques of the neoliberal and colonial university, Indigenist methodologies, and recent work on cultural load carried by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, I treat the academic echelon itself as an object of ethical analysis. The article clarifies how methodological questions of distance and proximity are also labour questions: who remains close to institutions, contracts and public voice; who enters emotionally intense or culturally risky spaces; who is expected to translate, hold, repair and remain accountable once funding ends. Drawing on recurrent patterns observed across youth justice, child protection and labour-organising research, I propose a relational ethics framework organised around design, conduct and aftercare. The central claim is that research ethics in working-class and First Nations contexts must be understood as the organisation and contestation of labour, including cultural load, within the academic echelon, not only as individual virtue or compliance with institutional review procedures.

1. Introduction: Research, labour and the academic echelon

Research on working-class and First Nations[1] communities is often described as a question of method: how to gain access, recruit participants, build trust, collect data, interpret findings and produce impact. It is also commonly framed as a question of ethics: how to obtain consent, protect confidentiality, minimise harm and satisfy university review processes. These questions matter. Yet they are incomplete if they do not also ask how the labour of research is organised inside the university itself. This article examines how research on communities most exposed to policing, child protection, welfare conditionality and other forms of state surveillance is shaped by an unequal division of academic labour. I call that division the academic echelon. The academic echelon is the hierarchy through which secure senior academics, continuing staff, fixed-term researchers, casual teachers, doctoral candidates and community co-researchers are positioned differently in relation to authority, risk, recognition and responsibility. It is not merely a neutral ladder of expertise. In research on working-class and First Nations communities, it often determines who designs the project, who negotiates with funders, who gains authorship, who controls data, who sits with participants in distress, who is expected to translate institutional language into community language, who carries cultural load, and who remains accountable after the report has been delivered. These distributions are classed, racialised and colonial. They are also ethical.

The article is grounded primarily in the Australian settler-colonial university, while drawing on experience and scholarship from the United Kingdom and on patterns that resonate across other neoliberal higher education systems. I focus on First Nations peoples in Australia because the ethics of working-class research in this context cannot be separated from Indigenous sovereignty, colonial dispossession and the ongoing governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families through policing, child protection, youth justice, welfare and prisons. At the same time, the argument also speaks to research involving other racialised and working-class communities who are positioned as policy problems, service users, risk groups or sources of data.

I use ethics in two related senses. First, I refer to formal institutional ethics processes: university review boards, consent forms, data-management plans and compliance procedures. Second, and more importantly, I use ethics to mean the ongoing organisation of responsibility, risk, consent, recognition, care and accountability across research relationships. My argument is that the second form of ethics is often constrained by the academic echelon, even where the first form has been satisfied. A project may have formal ethics approval while still relying on exploitative or unrecognised labour from those least secure in the research team. I write as a First Nations and working-class academic whose research is grounded in youth justice, child protection, carceral systems and community-led practice. My work often occurs in relation with First Nations communities, families, Elders, practitioners, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and working-class families who have been made knowable to the state through risk, removal, surveillance or criminalisation. This standpoint does not resolve the ethical tensions discussed in this article. Rather, it makes them more visible, because proximity to community, culture and institutional systems can generate both responsibility and risk. It also requires acknowledging that I now occupy a relatively secure position within the academic

[1] The term 'First Nations' is used in this paper to refer to First Nation people, groups and communities, who are sovereign people across colonial Australia or where possible the specific identified nations. The terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, is used to refer to First Nations peoples specifically from Australia, where used by the participants in the data or the literature.

echelon, even while much of the research labour that makes projects possible is carried by colleagues, students and community researchers whose employment is more precarious and whose cultural and relational load may be heavier.

Working-class studies emerged in part as a response to the distance between research about working-class life and knowledge produced from within working-class experience. Russo and Linkon (2005) argued that working-class people are not simply objects of analysis but producers of knowledge about their own lives, labour and culture. Fazio, Launius and Strangleman (2021) similarly foreground interdisciplinary work that connects empirical attention to working-class life with struggles for social and economic justice. In Australia, this orientation must be placed alongside Indigenist and decolonising methodologies that insist research with First Nations peoples be accountable to Indigenous sovereignty, governance, relationality and community-defined benefit (Rigney, 2006; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Together, these traditions challenge the idea that universities can observe working-class and First Nations life from a neutral vantage point.

The problem is that universities are not outside the relations they study. They are workplaces, employers, property holders, fund recipients, policy actors and colonial institutions. They are also places where cultural capital, job security, authorship conventions, audit cultures and impact metrics shape whose labour becomes visible and whose labour is treated as natural, informal or supplementary. The contemporary university may celebrate diversity, community engagement and Indigenous research, while still asking First Nations staff, working-class academics and community co-researchers to carry the relational labour that gives these claims credibility. Cultural load becomes especially important here. It is not simply extra work. It is the institutional expectation that First Nations staff will provide cultural knowledge, representation, mentoring, community liaison, racism response and pastoral care, often in addition to formal research duties (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022).

The sections that follow develop the argument in five steps. Section 2 clarifies terminology and positionality for an international readership. Section 3 situates the academic echelon within scholarship on working-class academics, precarity, the neoliberal and colonial university, diversity work and cultural load. Section 4 maps the relational field that connects communities, carceral and welfare systems, universities and funders. Section 5 reframes distance and proximity as differently allocated forms of classed and racialised research labour. Section 6 identifies recurring patterns across youth justice, child protection and labour-organising research and develops a relational ethics framework organised around design, conduct and aftercare. The conclusion argues that research ethics is also workplace politics: who does what work, under what conditions, with what authority, and with what responsibility after the project formally ends.

2. Terminology and standpoint

Several terms require clarification because they carry different meanings across national and disciplinary contexts. I use First Nations to refer to the sovereign peoples, nations, communities and families whose lands were invaded and colonised and whose sovereignty has never been ceded. In the Australian context, the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Indigenous and First Nations appear in policy, community and scholarly settings. I use the terms most appropriate to the source, context or community being discussed, while recognising that specific nation, language group or community names are preferable where known.

Mob is a widely used Aboriginal English term that can refer to family, kin, community, nation, place-based belonging or a wider Aboriginal collective.[2] It is relational rather than merely demographic. In this article, references to mob are not shorthand for an abstract population. They signal relationships, responsibilities and forms of belonging that are often flattened when institutional research describes First Nations people as participants, stakeholders, risk groups or service users. Settler colonialism refers to a continuing structure of invasion, land possession and institutional governance rather than a past event. In Australia, universities are located on unceded Country and participate in knowledge systems historically implicated in the classification, extraction and governance of Indigenous peoples. Moreton-Robinson's (2015, pp. xii-xiii) account of white possession is useful here because it names how property, sovereignty, institutions and knowledge are organised through claims of white ownership. Smith's (2012) critique of research as a colonial practice is equally important because it shows that knowledge production has often been inseparable from extraction, administration and control.

Working-class research refers here to research about, with and from working-class communities and people whose lives are shaped by labour, poverty, insecure work, welfare systems, housing insecurity, education inequality, carceral systems and classed forms of culture and belonging. It does not mean that class operates separately from race, Indigeneity, gender, disability, migration or colonial power. Rather, class is understood as a lived, cultural, relational and political formation, not simply an income category. I use Indigenist research to refer to research paradigms that centre Indigenous peoples, voices, political integrity, sovereignty and accountability to Indigenous struggles (Rigney, 2006). I use relational accountability to describe the obligation to conduct research as a practice embedded in relationships with people, place, ancestors, future generations, institutions and knowledge holders. Wilson (2008, pp. 69-77) describes research as ceremony in this sense: knowledge is not owned by the individual researcher alone but produced within a web of relations. Ali and Talbert's (2024, pp. 139-141) question - accountable to whom, and for what? - helps translate this obligation into the day-to-day ethics of social research teams.

Finally, cultural load refers to the additional and often invisible work carried by First Nations staff and community researchers when they are expected to provide cultural knowledge, educate colleagues, represent Indigenous perspectives, support students and participants, manage racism and hold community relationships beyond the formal requirements of their roles (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022). Cultural load is an ethical issue because the cultural knowledge, relational trust and community accountability that make research possible are often treated as informal or natural attributes of First Nations staff rather than as specialist labour requiring time, authority, recognition and resourcing.

3. The academic echelon in the neoliberal and colonial university

[2] 'Mob' is a colloquial term used in Australia to identify a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place, region or country. It is used to connect and identify who an Aboriginal person is and where they are from. Mob can represent your family group, clan group or wider Aboriginal community group. See Deadly Story, https://www.deadlystory.com/page/tools/aboriginal-cultural-support-planning/cultural-planning---frequently-asked-questions/what-is-the-difference-between-mob-clan-tribe-language-group

New working-class studies has long insisted that universities are themselves classed institutions. Narrative and autobiographical work by academics from working-class backgrounds describes the disorientation and ambivalence of entering spaces shaped by middle-class norms of speech, dress, taste, mobility and self-presentation (Dews & Law, 1995; Muzzatti & Samarco, 2006). Contributors often describe feeling out of place, being asked to translate themselves into respectable academic forms, and managing a sense of distance from families or communities of origin. Attfield (2016, pp. 45-57) refuses this demand through an insistence on being unapologetically working class. Brook and Michell (2012) show that class continues to shape the lifeworlds of Australian academics even when class remains marginal in institutional diversity agendas. Crew (2020, 2021) and Oldfield (2023) further document how working-class academics navigate precarity, informal networks, cultural-capital expectations and subtle forms of exclusion.

This literature intersects with scholarship on the academic precariat. Burton and Bowman (2022) argue that fixed-term contracts, casualisation, performance metrics and audit cultures have produced an academic labour force structured by insecurity. Smyth (2017) characterises the contemporary university as toxic in the sense that managerialism, marketised outputs and reputational competition erode collegiality and narrow the purposes of higher education. Precarity, however, should not be treated as identical with working-class background. Not all precarious academics are working class, and not all working-class academics are precariously employed. The point is that precarity is experienced unevenly. Academics from working-class backgrounds are often less able to absorb unpaid labour, relocation, casual contracts, delayed payment, short-term appointments or reputational risks attached to refusing exploitative work. Figure 1 illustrates the academic echelon as a hierarchy in which authority and recognition tend to accumulate at the top, while proximity, risk, cultural load and aftercare are often concentrated among those in less secure or community-facing roles.

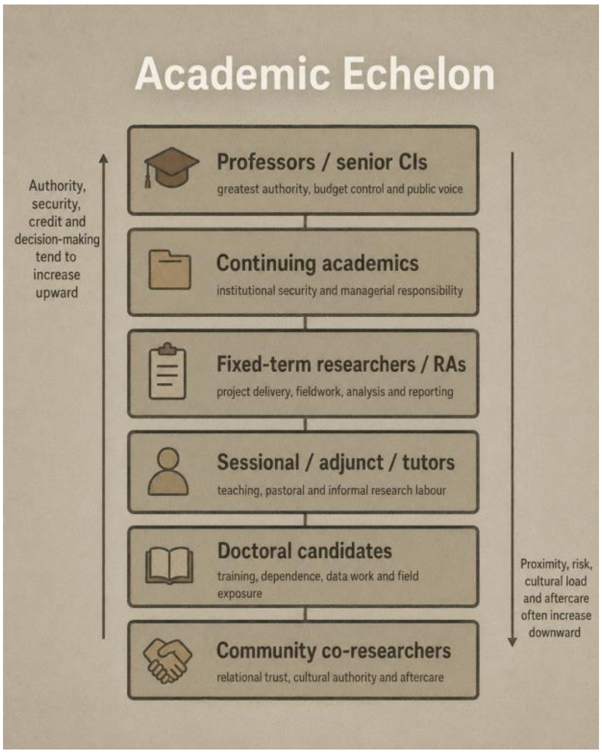

Figure 1. The academic echelon as a layered division of research labour in Australian universities. The figure is a heuristic developed for this article, not a universal career ladder.

In settler-colonial contexts, these classed hierarchies intersect with racial and colonial power. Moreton-Robinson (2015) conceptualises the Australian nation-state as grounded in white possession, a regime in which land, resources and institutions are claimed as white property while Indigenous sovereignty is disavowed. Universities participate in this possessive logic through governance, curriculum, research agendas and institutional claims to expertise, even where they recruit Indigenous staff and students. Smith (2012, pp. 1-3) traces how research has historically functioned as a technology of colonisation, naming the ways Indigenous peoples have been made into objects of study for external purposes. Rigney (2006) responds by insisting on Indigenist research that centres Indigenous voices, political integrity and accountability to Indigenous peoples.

Ahmed's (2012) analysis of diversity work adds an institutional mechanism to this picture. Universities may adopt the language of diversity, equity and inclusion while resisting substantive change. Racialised staff are often asked to sit on committees, advise on policy, mentor students and symbolise institutional progress, yet encounter what Ahmed (2012, pp. 173-187) calls institutional brick walls when they challenge racism or inequity. In Australia, this dynamic is closely connected to cultural load. The Gari Yala: Speak the Truth report documents the burdens of racism, identity strain and cultural load experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers, including expectations to educate colleagues, represent Indigenous perspectives and carry community obligations into the workplace (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020). Universities Australia's Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025 explicitly calls on universities to recognise and support this cultural load for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students (Universities Australia, 2022).

These literatures clarify why the academic echelon matters for research ethics. The echelon is not a benign sequence from student to professor. It is a layered division of labour through which institutional authority, employment security, authorship, proximity, cultural load and risk are unevenly distributed. In the Australian context, the term professor also needs care. Unlike some systems where professor may refer broadly to university teachers, in Australia it usually indicates a senior academic rank. In this article, professors and senior chief investigators name those with substantial institutional authority, grant leadership, public voice and decision-making power. Figure 1 is a heuristic I developed to show how these roles often sit within research teams, not a universal map of all academic careers.

4. Mapping the relational field: communities, systems, universities and funders

Research on working-class and First Nations communities takes place within a relational field rather than between two separate worlds called the university and the community. In the projects that inform this article, research moved across at least three overlapping arenas: communities; carceral and welfare systems; and universities and funding bodies. The academic echelon sits within the university, but it becomes visible as it mediates movement, authority, risk and recognition across these arenas. Figure 2 shows that the academic echelon mediates relationships between communities, carceral and welfare systems, and universities and funding bodies, making research ethics a relational and institutional question.

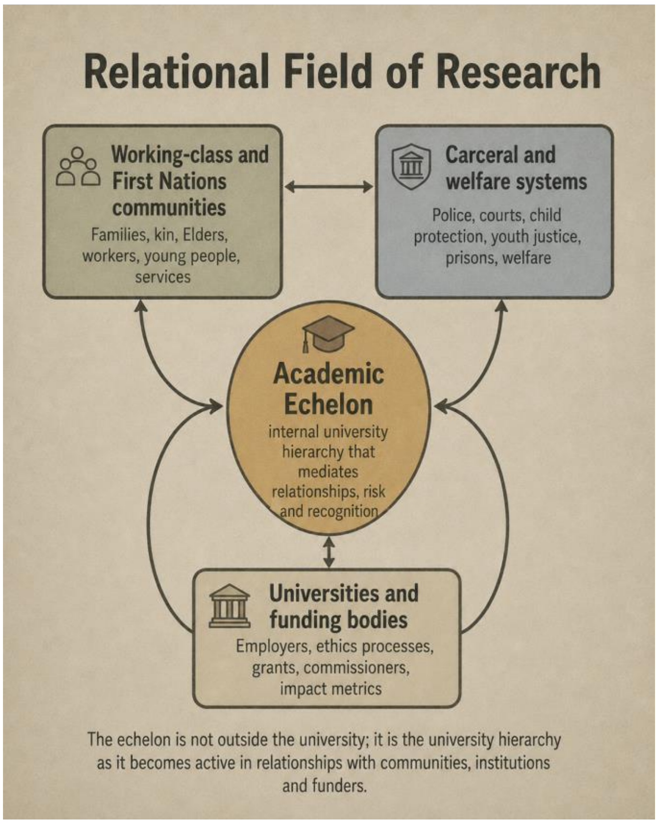

Figure 2. Relational field connecting working-class and First Nations communities, carceral and welfare systems, and universities and funding bodies, with the academic echelon mediating relationships, risk and recognition.

The first arena comprises working-class and First Nations communities: families, kin, Elders, young people, workers, neighbours, peer groups, unions, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, grassroots groups, youth services, sports clubs and informal networks of care. These communities are often described in institutional language through deficit categories such as disadvantage, vulnerability, complex need, non-compliance, risk or service dependency. Working-class studies and Indigenist methodologies challenge this framing by insisting that communities are not simply objects of research. They are producers of knowledge, sites of governance, and holders of cultural, political and relational authority (Fazio et al., 2021; Rigney, 2006; Russo & Linkon, 2005; Wilson, 2008).

The second arena is made up of carceral and welfare systems: police, courts, prisons, youth detention centres, child protection departments, housing authorities, welfare agencies, immigration and border regimes, and contracted service providers. These institutions are not merely background context. They often govern participants' lives directly, set the policy problems that research is asked to investigate, provide administrative data, act as funders or gatekeepers, and become audiences for findings. For example, a youth justice project may depend on access granted by a department whose practices are also being examined. A child protection study may ask families to speak about removal, surveillance or casework decisions while the same department retains statutory authority over their children. A labour-organising project may generate findings about employer surveillance while workers remain exposed to retaliation. In each case, the carceral or welfare system is both part of the research context and part of the risk environment.

The third arena consists of universities and funding bodies. Universities are employers, ethics authorities, grant administrators, public brands, landlords, knowledge brokers and colonial institutions located on unceded Country. Funding bodies, including government departments, research councils, philanthropic foundations and NGOs, help determine which questions are resourced, what kinds of evidence are valued, and how impact is defined. Impact can mean community benefit, but in university systems it is often translated into metrics, policy influence, media visibility, contract renewals, citations, rankings and institutional reputation. These pressures shape what research teams are encouraged to ask, how findings are framed and how quickly reports are expected to move from communities into policy circuits.

Figure 2 clarifies that the academic echelon is not outside the university. It is the university hierarchy as it becomes active in relationships with communities, carceral and welfare institutions, and funders. A senior academic may spend much of their time negotiating contracts, advising departments, preparing reports and speaking in policy forums. A fixed-term research fellow may travel between campus offices, youth centres, courts, prisons or community organisations. A doctoral candidate may be embedded in a union, legal centre or field site while also needing to satisfy supervisory and institutional expectations. A community co-researcher may hold the trust that makes participation possible, while having the least formal control over budget, authorship and data governance.

This relational field produces conflicting accountabilities. A community co-researcher may feel accountable to Elders, families or young people who participated because of personal trust. A fixed-term researcher may feel accountable to participants but also to a principal investigator whose reference, contract renewal or future collaboration matters. A First Nations academic may feel accountable to mob, to younger Indigenous staff carrying cultural load, to university ethics processes and to funders. A professor may feel accountable to communities, but also to management, commissioners and deadlines. These accountabilities are not always compatible. The ethical problem is therefore not only whether an individual researcher has good intentions. It is whether the research structure gives those carrying the greatest relational risk enough authority, time, security and recognition to act ethically.

5. Distance and proximity as classed and racialised research labour

Debates about social research method often contrast distance and proximity. Quantitative and policy approaches are associated with distance, abstraction and scale. Qualitative, ethnographic, participatory and Indigenist approaches are associated with proximity, relationship and situated knowledge. Critical traditions often value proximity because it can counter extractive or detached research. Yet proximity is not automatically ethical. It becomes an ethical question when the academic echelon determines who must be close, under what conditions, and with what authority.

Distance-based labour is frequently concentrated toward the top of the echelon. Senior academics and chief investigators often secure grants or contracts, frame research questions, design methodology, negotiate ethics approvals, manage institutional relationships, supervise teams, interpret findings and present results to policy or academic audiences. Much of this work involves administrative datasets, de-identified transcripts, policy documents, strategy meetings and performance indicators. Distance can be narrated as the capacity to see the bigger picture. It also brings protection. Those who are less present in field sites are often less exposed to immediate participant distress, community criticism, frontline hostility or the consequences of mistrust.

Proximity-based labour is frequently carried by those lower in the echelon or closer to community: fixed-term fellows, research assistants, doctoral candidates, casual staff and community co-researchers. They arrange interviews, conduct yarning sessions, meet families in homes or community rooms, sit in institutional waiting spaces, accompany participants through bureaucratic encounters, manage disclosures of harm, and respond to anger, grief or suspicion. In a youth justice project, the person most likely to sit with a young person after a distressing interview may not be the chief investigator named on the grant, but a fixed-term Aboriginal researcher, doctoral student or community co-researcher whose relationship made participation possible in the first place. In a child protection project, the researcher who hears a parent's account of removal may also be the person approached months later when that parent wants to know what the report achieved.

This division of labour intersects with classed and racialised inequalities. Working-class academics are often concentrated in teaching, pastoral, community-facing or precarious roles (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2020, 2021; Oldfield, 2023). Racialised staff are drawn into diversity work (Ahmed, 2012). First Nations staff are asked to carry cultural load through cultural education, community liaison, student mentoring, ethics advice, protocol work and responses to racism (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022). Research teams can reproduce these patterns when they assume that working-class, racialised or Indigenous researchers are naturally better suited to connect with participants and therefore should carry more proximity-based labour.

Proximity can be politically and ethically valuable when chosen, resourced and governed by those to whom the research is accountable. Indigenist and decolonising methodologies insist that research grounded in relationships, community authority and Indigenous epistemologies can challenge extractive knowledge production (Kovach, 2009; Rigney, 2006; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). However, proximity becomes exploitative when institutions retain control over resources, data and authorship while asking precarious or culturally burdened researchers to contribute trust, cultural authority and emotional labour. Community co-researchers may be asked to mobilise relationships for projects they did not design and cannot control. Early-career researchers may accept unsafe or emotionally overwhelming fieldwork because their contract, scholarship, reference or future employment depends on being seen as committed.

The risks associated with proximity are embodied and cumulative. Repeated exposure to accounts of police harassment, incarceration, poverty, child removal, racism, family violence, grief and institutional betrayal can produce exhaustion, vicarious trauma and identity strain. For researchers who share aspects of participants' histories, community ties or cultural responsibilities, these accounts are not easily compartmentalised. Institutional responses tend to individualise the problem through self-care advice, optional counselling or informal debriefing. A relational ethics approach treats these risks as predictable outcomes of how research labour is organised. Safety, supervision, debriefing, cultural support and authority to pause or refuse unsafe demands should therefore be designed into the project rather than added after harm occurs.

Distance is also not neutral, as senior academics may be deeply committed to social justice, but their positions often afford protection, credit and public voice. They may publish, present and advise on research made possible by the proximity, trust and cultural work of others. Authorship conventions can recognise intellectual leadership while under-recognising relational labour. Reports can cite consultation while obscuring the people who carried the work of making consultation possible. Figure 3 therefore reframes distance and proximity as differently located forms of labour. The ethical question is not whether proximity or distance is better, but how each is allocated, resourced, recognised and governed. Figure 3 shows how proximity and distance operate as differently valued forms of research labour, with community-facing and cultural work often carrying greater relational and emotional demands.

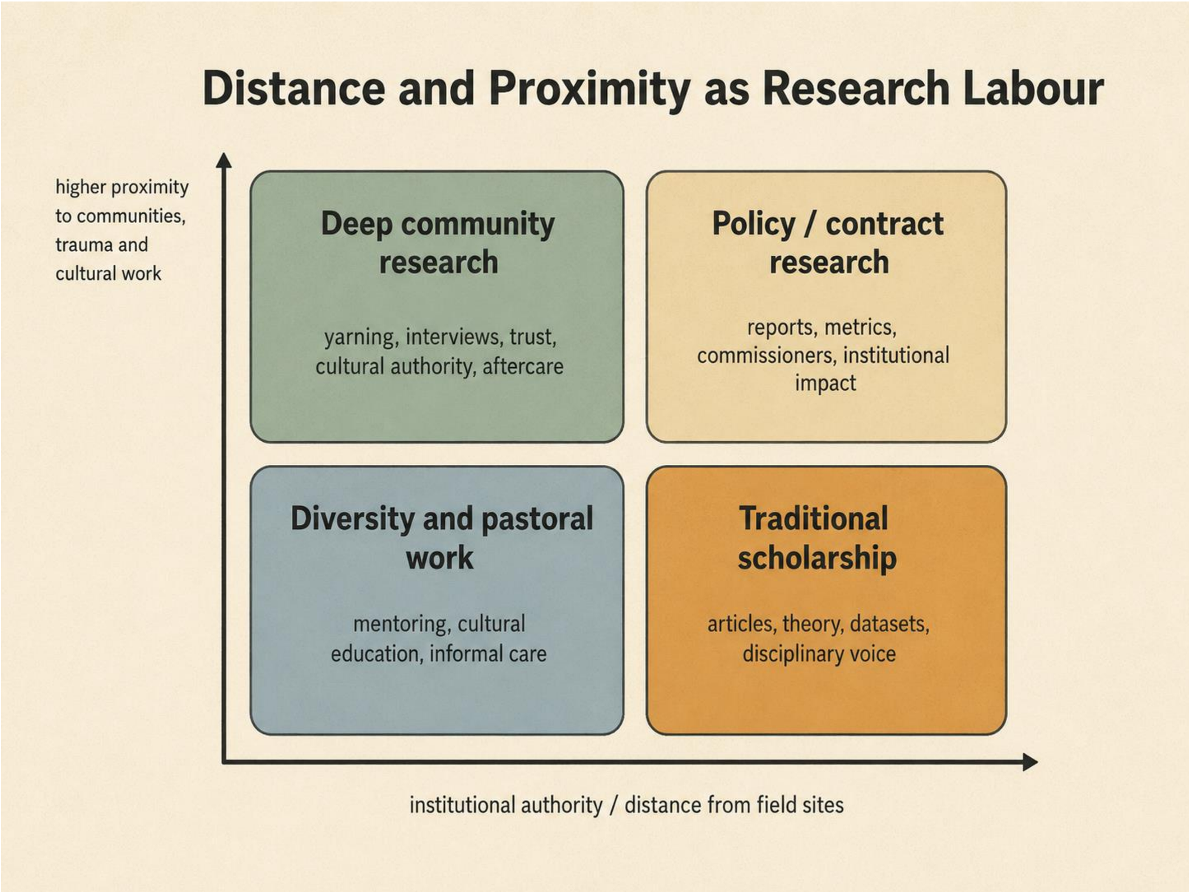

Figure 3. Distance- and proximity-based research as differently located forms of academic labour within the academic echelon.

6. Recurring patterns and a relational ethics in practice

The patterns discussed in this section are drawn from recurrent configurations observed across youth justice, child protection and labour-organising research in Australia and the United Kingdom. I do not present project-level or participant-level data. Instead, I identify patterns that help explain how the academic echelon shapes research ethics in practice.

The first pattern is the concentration of proximity, cultural load and risk among those with less security. Across projects, the people spending the most time in community spaces, institutional waiting rooms, frontline services and emotionally intense interviews were rarely those with the greatest institutional authority. Fixed-term researchers, doctoral candidates, casual staff and community co-researchers were often the first point of contact for participants. They managed disclosure, suspicion, grief and anger. They explained consent forms, translated institutional language and reassured participants about what would and would not happen to their stories. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, this proximity-based work often overlapped with cultural load inside universities: mentoring Indigenous students, advising colleagues, sitting on committees, responding to racism and acting as an informal point of contact on Indigenous matters. The ethical issue is not simply that this work is difficult. It is that it is often necessary to the integrity of research while remaining poorly counted in budgets, workload models, authorship decisions and ethics applications.

The second pattern is conflicting accountability. Research teams often hold relationships with communities, carceral and welfare systems, universities and funders at the same time. Those closest to communities tend to prioritise relational safety: whether findings could identify people, damage trust, reproduce stereotypes or expose participants to retaliation. Those closer to institutional centres of power may focus on deliverables, timelines, policy influence, contractual obligations and reputational impact. These differences are not merely personality differences. They reflect different locations within the relational map and the academic echelon. A community co-researcher may resist including contextual detail that could expose a small community. A commissioning agency may request more specificity to make recommendations actionable. A fixed-term researcher may see the risk but feel limited in challenging the principal investigator or funder. A relational ethics framework must create structures in which those carrying relational risk have authority in decisions about interpretation, reporting and data sharing.

The third pattern is the unequal distribution of data futures and aftercare. Research generates materials whose lives often extend beyond the moment of collection: audio files, transcripts, fieldnotes, consent forms, administrative datasets, workshop notes, photographs, reports and publications. Institutional consent processes may make storage, retention or secondary analysis technically permissible, but participants do not always understand how long material may remain accessible, who may use it later, or how future publications may reanimate stories they believed belonged to a completed project. This is especially sensitive in First Nations contexts where Indigenous data sovereignty and community governance are central ethical concerns.

Aftercare is the work of remaining accountable after data collection and formal reporting, including returning findings in accessible forms, explaining what changed and what did not, responding to community concerns, managing media or policy consequences, supporting community partners, protecting data from harmful reuse and ensuring that relationships do not simply end when funding ends. Yet aftercare is often under-resourced compared with recruitment and data collection. The burden falls on those who did the proximity work: community researchers, First Nations staff, doctoral students or early-career academics who are approached by participants months or years later. Senior academics may remain involved where they have long-standing relationships, but institutional attention often shifts to the next project once contractual obligations are fulfilled. This tapering is itself a feature of the academic echelon.

These patterns point to a relational ethics framework organised around design, conduct and aftercare. In the design phase, teams should map the academic echelon explicitly. This means asking who is shaping the research questions, who holds budget and data authority, who will carry cultural load, who will enter emotionally intense spaces, and what forms of community governance will have decision-making power. Red lines around data sharing, participant protection, community representation and authorship should be discussed before funding obligations or partner expectations harden. Cultural work, safety, supervision, community engagement and aftercare should be costed as core research labour.

In the conduct phase, teams should pay attention to how proximity and distance are allocated. Intensive fieldwork should not default to the most precarious or culturally burdened researchers simply because they are trusted by participants or more available. Those undertaking proximity work need time, debriefing, cultural supervision, psychological support and authority to pause, change or refuse unsafe research activities. Relational ethics here includes care for participants and care for colleagues. It also requires channels for disagreement that do not punish early-career, casual, community-based or First Nations researchers for raising ethical concerns.

In the aftercare phase, teams should plan for the continuing life of research relationships and data. This includes accessible community feedback, plain-language summaries, community presentations, co-authored outputs where appropriate, data-governance agreements, clear limits on reuse, and workload recognition for those who remain accountable after formal funding ends. Authorship and public voice should be treated as ethical matters. If a community co-researcher or First Nations staff member contributed relational trust, cultural interpretation and aftercare, that labour should be recognised in authorship, remuneration or other forms determined with them, not merely acknowledged in a report.

Figure 4 summarises this framework. Its purpose is not to replace institutional ethics approval, but to reveal what institutional ethics often misses: the internal labour relations through which research becomes possible. A project can meet formal ethics requirements while still reproducing classed, racialised and colonial hierarchies within the team. A relational ethics attentive to the academic echelon asks whether the people carrying risk, cultural load and aftercare also hold authority, security, recognition and protection.

Figure 4. Relational ethics across design, conduct and aftercare, showing how labour, risk, cultural load, governance and recognition need to be organised across the life of a project.

7. Conclusion: ethics, echelon and working-class struggle

This article has argued that research ethics in working-class and First Nations contexts cannot be reduced to individual good intentions or compliance with university ethics procedures.

Ethics must also be understood as the organisation of labour within the academic echelon and the wider relational field in which research takes place. By bringing together new working-class studies (Fazio et al., 2021; Russo & Linkon, 2005), scholarship on working-class academics and precarity (Brook & Michell, 2012; Crew, 2020, 2021; Oldfield, 2023), critiques of the neoliberal and colonial university (Ahmed, 2012; Burton & Bowman, 2022; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Smith, 2012), Indigenist and relational methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Rigney, 2006; Wilson, 2008), and research on cultural load (Diversity Council Australia & Jumbunna Institute, 2020; Universities Australia, 2022), I have treated the academic echelon itself as an object of ethical analysis.

The central contribution is to show that methods are also labour relations, including research questions, ethics approvals, fieldwork, data analysis, reporting, authorship, impact and aftercare are distributed through hierarchies of authority, security and recognition. Those at the top of the echelon often hold design authority, budget control and public voice. Those lower down, or those closer to communities, often carry the proximity work, cultural work, emotional labour and relational accountability that make research possible. This division is not accidental. It reflects broader patterns of class, race, Indigeneity, precarity and colonial power in the university.

For working-class studies, the argument is that universities are not only places where working-class lives are studied. They are also workplaces in which class relations are reproduced. For First Nations research, the argument is that cultural load must be treated as central to ethics, not as a marginal workload issue. The cultural knowledge, community trust and accountability carried by First Nations researchers and community co-researchers are forms of expertise and labour. When universities rely on that labour without redistributing authority, time, remuneration and recognition, they reproduce the extractive relations that decolonising methodologies seek to challenge.

The relational ethics framework proposed here asks research teams to attend to design, conduct and aftercare. In design, the team should map labour, risk, cultural load, authority and data governance before the project begins. In conduct, proximity work should be resourced and supported rather than naturalised as the responsibility of working-class, racialised, Indigenous or precariously employed researchers. In aftercare, the continuing life of data and relationships should be planned, funded and recognised. These are not only methodological questions. They are workplace questions, authorship questions, governance questions and questions of justice.

Changing these structures requires more than better consent forms or more reflexive paragraphs. It requires universities, funders and senior academics to treat community engagement, cultural work, relational trust and aftercare as core research labour. It also requires working-class, First Nations and community-based researchers to have authority over the conditions under which their labour is used. If class is understood not only as a subject of research but as a relation that shapes who does what work, under what conditions and with what recognition, then research ethics must encompass the hierarchies through which our own labour is organised. Attending to the academic echelon is one way for working-class studies, First Nations research and critical university studies to take up that challenge.

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Beyond the Knapsack: Rethinking Whiteness, Privilege, and Class in Rural America

William Matthew McCarter

Over the past two decades, the terms “white privilege” and “whiteness” has moved from the seminar room at the university to mainstream American culture. What began as the language of ethnic studies and sociological theory now surfaces in college orientations, TED Talks, HR workshops, and celebrity interviews. These terms are widely circulated, but their meaning is often contested and misunderstood. For some, they illuminate structural inequities. For others, they provoke confusion or resentment.

This essay does not deny the reality of racial hierarchy in American life. Instead, it argues that the discourse of “white privilege,” as it is commonly deployed, often obscures class difference. Whiteness is not a monolith, nor is privilege evenly distributed. To speak meaningfully about privilege, we must attend to how race and class intersect—especially in the context of rural, working-class white communities in places such as Appalachia and the Ozarks.

James Baldwin observed that “being white means never having to think about it” (*The White Man’s Guilt*). However, for poor rural whites, whiteness has always been a site of awareness and anxiety. They have always had to think about it. Epithets like “redneck,” “white trash,” and “hillbilly” remind these communities of their conditional belonging. The media and popular culture amplify these stereotypes: sitcom caricatures (like My Name Is Earl), exploitative reality television (Cops), and reductive portrayals in crime shows render the rural white underclass visible only as objects of ridicule. Kirby Moss discusses this paradox in his book, "The Color of Class" Poor Whites and The Paradox of Privilege." Rural whites are positioned as the cultural default in national mythology, yet stigmatized when they fail to embody bourgeois norms of education, speech, or political behavior.

Here Du Bois’s concept of *double consciousness* resonates. Although developed to describe African American identity, the experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of a hostile culture is not unfamiliar to the rural white poor (Du Bois, 1903). bell hooks illustrates this in her book, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, when she claims that the white underclass frequently functions as a foil through which more affluent whites define themselves as enlightened and cosmopolitan (hooks). Similarly, Tressie McMillan Cottom has argued that “whiteness is a resource. And like all resources, it is unevenly distributed” (Cottom, 2012).

The unevenness is evident when we return to Peggy McIntosh’s seminal 1989 essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” Her list of privileges—seeing one’s race represented in media, or moving through public space without suspicion—reflects a particular class position (McIntosh). A child raised in a double-wide in Shannon County, Missouri, does not see themselves reflected positively on television. Nor do they experience whiteness as an unmarked norm. Instead, their whiteness is coded through figures like “Cletus the Slack-Jawed Yokel” or the methamphetamine-addicted suspects of *Cops.* The “invisible knapsack” is not carried equally.

This cultural marginalization of poor rural whites is compounded by the structural neglect of rural America. For example, Iron County, Missouri, (where I grew up) and Ferguson, Missouri, had nearly identical median family incomes in the 2010s—approximately $38,000. National media attention focused on Ferguson, Missouri while Iron County, just 80 miles south, struggles with deindustrialization, waste dumping, and state dependency and no one notices. This selective focus reflects what Michael Zweig, in *The Working Class Majority,* refers to as the deliberate omission of class from American racial discourse (Zweig, 2000).

The point is not to deny that whiteness functions as a system of advantage. Instead, it is to insist on a more nuanced analysis: one that acknowledges class stratification within whiteness itself. Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* makes this explicit: "We must stop assuming that every white person in America has always had access to the same systems of power. They have not. That is the dirty secret of whiteness: some whites have always been more white than others" (Isenberg, 2016).

Academics must stop reducing complex social identities to a single register. Privilege is not just racial or ethnic. It encompasses geographic, economic, and cultural aspects as well. Poor white communities are not exempt from systemic disadvantage simply because they are white. They occupy a fraught position: stigmatized for failing to embody the normative expectations of whiteness, while simultaneously excluded from discourses of racial oppression.

If conversations about whiteness are to be productive, they must integrate class. Otherwise, the language of privilege risks silencing precisely those voices that could complicate our understanding of race and inequality in America.

Author Bio:

William Matthew McCarter, PhD, is a writer and literature scholar based in Southeast Missouri. My work examines U.S. myth, empire, and regional cultures with a focus on the South and Appalachia.

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Academic Difficulties: The Enemies of Clarity

Kristian Williams

It is generally assumed that academic writing is bad writing. This reputation is not merely a product of anti-intellectual prejudice — the feeling that any writing that is difficult or abstract is inherently worthless — but it is an opinion equally accepted, with chagrin or resignation, by the very practitioners of the type of writing we are discussing. Most academics regard poor prose as an inevitability, despite having the contrary evidence readily available in the library, if not on their own shelves. One need only gain a passing familiarity with the work of Terry Eagleton, Martha Nussbaum, or Edward Thompson to realize that intellectual depth and graceful prose are not incompatible, and that in fact the clarity of its expression can sharpen an idea and aid in the evaluation of an argument.

That academic writing is often, or even usually, dull, opaque, and inexcusably ugly, it is impossible to deny. The reasons for this are many and can only be disentangled, and thus addressed, with some difficulty. Apart from the ordinary laziness and incompetence of any individual writer, there are also a host of conventions, some formal and others informal, which together make good writing — the kind that communicates clearly and is a pleasure to read — even more difficult than it is already. Among the formal impediments I would count the rote chapter summaries appearing in so many introductions, first chapters entirely devoted to proving that one has done the required reading, and citation regimes that clutter up each paragraph with parenthetical lists of surnames and dates. Each of these, being part of the apparatus of a work, may have its place and purpose, and depending on the project and the discipline may even be mandatory. So my point is not that these must be given up entirely. But it must be admitted that such nominally utilitarian elements often stand out as blemishes on an otherwise pleasing work; and worse, frequently fail to add to its utility. The effect is like that of an elegant theatre marred by the architect's failure to account for heat ducts and plumbing; these necessary features get added in as afterthoughts, spoiling whatever aesthetic effect was initially intended. The solution, somewhat paradoxically, is to so far as possible make a virtue of necessity, treating these elements with the same care and attention as the rest of the composition and where (as with citations) beauty might be beyond reach, at least seeking to render them as unobstructive as possible. That approach would suggest the adoption of a principle of minimalism, carefully selecting a few representative sources rather than ostentatiously hoarding them all.

More avoidable, and thus more pernicious, are those *informal* conventions which we might, consciously or not, even consider part of what marks a piece of writing as *academic*. Some of these, such as the hourglass structure, are offered as supports for new writers but quickly turn into straightjackets. Equally inhibiting is the convention of tediously declaring what one intends to say, then saying it, and then summarizing what has just been said. As always this can be done well, adding clarity and guiding the reader, or badly, adding only to the word count and boring everyone. In the very worst cases, a writer might become so preoccupied with the "I will argue," "I argue," "I have argued" recitations that they forget to provide an actual argument to justify the declarations about what they intend their paper to be doing.

The greatest sin, the least forgivable though also the most tempting, is to fall into the fallacy of believing that an opaque style indicates depth or rigor. On its own, it does not, and should generally raise our suspicions. Baroque prose can serve to cover any number of structural flaws and sophists may adopt an overwrought style for this very purpose, because they know their arguments are weak or, more likely, absent. But much more common, and in its own way worse, is the honest thinker who feels compelled to employ a pretentious and obscurantist style because that is what they think is expected. Worst of all, they may be right. Readers, including editors, might disdain an argument that is too plainly put; I suspect it offends their sense of status to think that an important idea might be conveyed in such a manner as to be understood by the cafeteria staff.

None of this, I should repeat, is an argument against difficult writing. The serious questions of the humanities and the social sciences often *are* difficult. Sometimes they are hard to correctly formulate before we can even begin to answer them. And every field accumulates a certain amount of necessary technical language. The problem comes when a piece of writing is made more difficult than it needs to be — more difficult, that is, for the reader; often it will be just as easy for the writer, if not more so, since they have surrendered the burden of making themselves understood. Jargon has a way of reaching beyond any technical use to take on a political function as well, serving as a kind of secret handshake to distinguish the initiates from the outcasts.

Nothing I have said should surprise anyone who has worked in a formal academic setting, whether or not they would have formulated the matter in quite this way, or indeed whether or not this situation had previously seemed to them like a problem. The crucial question is not what is wrong with academic writing —plenty!—but whether anything can be done about it. In his famous 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell offers six rules for better writing:

> "(i) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
> (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
> (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
> (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
> (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
> (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous."

These should of course be kept in mind and followed as far as possible. I have found that a new writer's work can often be improved *just by reading Orwell's essay*. However, as we have discussed, the very nature of academic writing, the conventions that set it apart as a genre, will sometimes frustrate the attempt to apply these rules in practice.

There is one final problem, which I believe underlies all the others: Academic writing always suffers from divided aims. Part of the motive behind an academic work is, surely, what we might call intellectual: a sense of curiosity, a desire to explore ideas, the excitement of discovery, and the urge to engage with others in pursuit of knowledge. But often more important are motives that might best be characterized as bureaucratic: the completion of an assignment, the receipt of a passing grade, obtaining a degree, building a resumé, applying for grants, receiving tenure, and so on and so on until the institutional demands swallow and impede the intellectual drive in much the same way that academic language can stifle meaning and suffocate thought. It is, from the perspective of the individual and the institution, more important that a dissertation be completed than that it be good; but that is precisely the reverse of the attitude we as readers might expect of any writer worth our bother.

The crucial thing, when one sits down to write, is to put out of mind all extrinsic considerations in order to focus on the piece itself, and what the piece demands. There really is no secret to writing well apart from caring about the writing. It helps of course if one has something to say and feels strongly about it, and so wants very badly to make oneself understood. After that, it is just a matter to working at it, and working at it, and working at it — until one gets it right.

Author Bio:

Kristian Williams is the author of *Between the Bullet and the Lie: Essays on Orwell*, *Resist Everything Except Temptation: The Anarchist Philosophy of Oscar Wilde*, and *The Illuminist: Philosophical Explorations in the Work of Alan Moore*, along with numerous books on the history of policing.

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Factory Existentialism: The Machinery Of Meaning

Wayne Mason

Pour Soi, En Soi?
Dans l'usine
Il n'y a pas de soi

The smell hits you before you even get out of your car. By the time you are walking into the old factory, it's already clinging to your clothes and hair. You can almost taste it. Your co-workers quip that it smells like money, but really, it's chemicals and machinery- so thick it settles in the back of your throat like defeat washing down the taste of swallowing your pride on a daily basis. You think about this as you march past aging machines and flickering lights like some forgotten post-Soviet dystopia.

This is how the shift begins. As a swing shift worker, it's never quite day or night, just some industrial purgatory between worlds. Everything becomes more disorientating- more dreamlike- maybe that is a good thing.

You make it to the lab and close the heavy doors behind you muffling out the sounds of the machines, people, and forklifts into a uniform roar. Inside this lab is alive to a similar degree, a cleaner microcosm of the factory at large… the hum of precision machines and water baths, whir of vacuums sucking out the stench of industry. The sounds are as familiar as your own breath. Your lungs sucking air in and out intertwine with the rhythm of the lab. Sometimes you mistake the sounds of the machines for your own breathing. The machinery doesn't replace you, it absorbs you.

There is an odd comfort in the ceasing to exist. Repetition dulls sharp thoughts and mutes awareness. You run your samples, document numbers, enter data, repeat times infinity. On the good nights when the cheap coffee really hits, soundscapes form in the monotonous tones of the machines, you etch lines of poems in the margins of stained clipboards. Other nights, your brain comes to a halt just like the clock that seems to be running backwards.

In the break room, no one talks too much, it's a strange liminal space of people doom scrolling on their phones, drink coffee, or lay their heads on the table in sleep or meditation. Sometimes there is laughter, but its contrived and hollow, desperate even, and often short lived. The guys that are talking are usually going on about sports or something or other that I can't really care about. Other than one or two other kindred spirits, I don't really talk to much of anyone. It's safer that way.

It is on these breaks the intrusive thoughts grow. You half serious/ half joking think about quitting. You imagine yourself just walking out mid-shift, but then what? The system won't stop grinding because of one defiant cog… but there are still bills to be paid.

But you think that there has to be some meaning to all of this besides money. Not meaning in just the factory, because the factory is just a symptom of an entire system. Not that this place is entirely meaningless. It is a factory and it makes real product, some people way further up the ladder than me make real profit. The entire place is lousy with operating procedures, and MSDS's all with meaning. But what meaning for us? We are ghosts, and we are replaceable.

Ultimately, one day you realize that life in the factory is no different than life outside of the factory- it is entirely up to you to give it meaning. It is up to you take what you can from it, and not just a paycheck.

You find cracks in the concrete where flowers can grow, even in a place this ugly and maybe you just find out that this place is not without its own kind of magic. I've written tons of poems here about this place. I have an entire publishing career I owe to this place or places like it. Its influenced my sound art. It has influenced my philosophy. Maybe that is the meaning and the liberation, to carve out a small sacred place in the middle of industries endless grind- to give a soul to a soulless place.

Maybe you escape this place early, maybe you get to retire one day. But until then you keep clocking in and out. As tired and defeated as you feel, you do not let the machines win.

Author Bio:

Wayne Mason is an experimental writer, sound artist, and factory worker from central Florida whose work explores industrial landscapes, existentialism, and the interplay of text and noise. His words and sounds have been published widely in the small press and his new book, *The Death Factory* (LJMcD Communications) is out now.

Working-Class Wheel of Fortune

Erin Vincent

Working-class people are stupid.
Working-class people are miserable.
Working-class people drink tea out of chipped cups, have bad teeth, are loud, and drop their g's and don't cross their t's.
Working class people aren't creative like other people, they don't write books and make films.
Working-class people are kind of...
less than.

*

It turns out I am working class. I just didn't quite know it, but I knew I wanted to escape it.

Every Saturday night, when I was a child, my mother and I would watch old black & white movies where the people were nothing like us; they smoked but the smell didn't stick to them, drank but didn't get drunk, and wore glamourous gowns and said things like:

I *am* big. It's the *pictures* that got small.

or

Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night.

and

Life's a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death!

There in the dark, sitting side by side, we would secretly and privately dream of escape to a place better than this... this place where my delivery-driver father went gold panning on the weekends with a machine he'd built that was almost the size of a small car, and my stay-at-home mother, who occasionally worked in factories, swallowed Bex Powders daily, and wished for a mink but got a coat made of cow hide.

And I, who got my first job at thirteen and joined a theatre company in the hope of a discovering a great talent that would save us all.

At school, instead of the required English essay, I dressed up as Chaucer's dirty, gap-toothed woman and performed for the class.

At school I auditioned for the role of Nancy but was cast as a poor little orphan who sat on the floor and ate gruel.

Little did I know, I was performing my future.

My parents, who yearned for better life, died in the process, hit by a speeding tow truck when I was fourteen and they were 41 and 43.

I was determined to not have their fate. I would do what they couldn't; achieve all they aspired to and more.

At fifteen I realised education might be my only way out. I was not going to be the poor little orphan. My *picture* might have been small, but I was going be BIG!

I would become – as Robin Leach said on my then favourite show, *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* – 'one of the lucky winners who hit the jackpot in life's wheel of fortune.'

I had to get moving. I had a lot to do. No more acting. Time to get serious.

So, I spun that wheel.

I put my head down and worked hard. Up at 4 study till 7, home by 5 study till 12. Working at my part-time job on Thursday nights and Saturday mornings and devouring the work of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf whenever I had the chance.

At seventeen I asked my teachers what I might become and got no answer. I dreamed of university, but it appeared it was not option for someone like me.

Spin the wheel.

At eighteen I got a job as a copy girl at Rupert Murdoch's News Limited emptying ashtrays for angry subeditors and running to the cuts library for arse grabbing journalists, and at night, to make ends meet, I worked until late in a food truck selling pies and mushy peas to sailors, night-shift workers, and drunk people on their way home from parties.

At twenty I finally became a cadet journalist but after five years I knew it wasn't for me when I was still getting the crumby assignments and the graduates were getting the cream jobs, and when one day I was forced to do a 'death knock' on a family whose daughter had just been murdered.

Memories of my own front door being knocked when I was 14, for a glimpse of the "poor little orphans," danced around in my head.

Time again to spin the wheel.

They say clothes maketh the man (or woman) and I had learnt to sew when young, making my own clothes and even my school uniform. So, I did some courses in fashion design and pattern making and learnt to make glamorous gowns and then got on a plane and moved to Hollywood, as far from my past as I could get.

There I would become someone else.

Spin! That! Wheel!

In my late twenties and living in Los Angeles, my past, and especially my voice, was not a problem, it was an asset. No working-class twang here; all people heard was a cute 'Ossie' accent that made them think of kangaroos and cockatoos.

I was, somehow, going to be a designer to the stars, making those great and glamorous gowns for the Hollywood elite, but instead I got a job as a well-paid tailor, cinching in the waist and kneeling at the feet of the likes of Sandra Bullock, Meg Ryan, Jennifer Lopez, and Jennifer Aniston.

After a few years of this, Cameron Diaz did me in. When I walked into the Rodeo Drive boutique to hem her dress for the Academy Awards, I was invisible, as I always was on those jobs. I did not exist. Kneeling at her high-heeled feet as she laughed and chatted with her 'team', I put pins in her dress and held my breath...

…Then ran out to my bomby little car (parked around the corner so no one could see it) and sat down and cried. This was not who I was supposed to be! Someone was supposed to be hemming *my* dress.

Time to spin the wheel.

Next, I worked as my boyfriend's (now husband's) photographic assistant on *People Magazine* jobs. Once again... celebrities. There we would be in the famous person's backyard, me standing in front of them with the light meter... yawning. It turns out (surprise, surprise) most celebrities are narcissists, kind of boring to be around.

'Stop yawning,' my boyfriend-now-husband would whisper while the actor or actress was inside doing a costume change. 'You're meant to act like you're thrilled to be in their presence.' But it seemed I didn't have much control over it. I was, in fact, depressed, I just didn't know it yet. So, my husband eventually had to fire me.

Time to spin the wheel again.

In those days I was spending a lot of time in a bookstore, one of the biggest I had even seen, so I applied for job and got one. I was now a bookseller, making $7.50 an hour and happier than I'd ever been, spending my days around books, talking about books, recommending books, shelving books, selling books, stroking books, smelling books, more books than I could have ever imagined.

How strange, I thought. Here I was broke again, but blissfully happy.

And then I read Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and was shocked to discover that people like me actually could, and did, write books.

Maybe I could too.

Spin that wheel.

I thought, as a former journalist, who said things like, 'So my parents died, what the big deal?' that I could knock out a grief memoir in six months. It took six, long years, and a few more years to find a publisher.

By now I was the event manager at the bookstore, a job I loved and excelled at, a job I made look easy, so easy that the powers that be decided that a younger, less expensive, bookseller could do it, so they pushed me out, and after a year discovered it wasn't so easy after all... but that was too late for me.

Depressed, unemployed, and in the US without a college degree, and seemingly unemployable (I couldn't even get a job bagging groceries at the local Ralphs supermarket) I was forced to move back to Australia.

Spin the wheel.

At the age of forty I was back where I started, but worse. I wondered if I was being punished for all that ambition.

Having a book published did not change my life. Well, it did. But not in the way I'd hoped.
I was not transformed into some bright, sparkly new person, I was still me.

So, I applied for jobs I was overqualified for, and didn't get them, most times didn't even get an interview.

I couldn't work out why. Was it the slim education section on my resume?

Out of options, I went to work at a pub, where, as the newbie, I was required to the scrub the floors and clean the men’s and women’s toilets at the end of every shift, something I didn't even have to do when I was fresh out of school with no experience whatsoever.

On the train ride to work I read books like George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* and started compiling a list of writers who worked menial jobs without the kind of shame I carried.

Then I found a better job, at a nicer bar, where my much younger boss asked me if I knew how to cut a lemon and then proceeded to stand over me, and criticize me, as I nervously cut up a bucket full of lemons.

And next, a job at a residential care home where I thought at least I could be of help to someone, where I had to wipe faeces off walls and people, and strip off my clothes at my front door when I got home after every shift so as to not take the smell inside.

It was official. My life really was in the toilet. I was the world's greatest failure.

I began to wonder if one day *I'd* end up in a home, or maybe even on the street.

At 49 I felt like I'd reached the end of the line.

So, I started seeing a therapist who one day asked a strange question... 'Have you ever thought about going to university?'

I laughed; I scoffed. 'What a ridiculous notion,' I said. 'How would that even be possible?'

But a seed was planted.

And eventually, I decided to...

Spin the wheel.... one... more... time.

At the age of 51 I attended university, sneaking in via the professional pathway, thanks to my past as a journalist and author. I felt like a fraud and hoped nobody would notice that I didn't belong there.

So, I began crossing my t's and not dropping my g's. At home, talking to my husband this way, felt like a kind of betrayal. This surprised me.

Who was I betraying? What was I betraying?

At university, I did not find my people, but I found me. I rediscovered my writer self and my bookish self, that girl who dressed up as The Wife of Bath, who read *The Bell Jar* when grieving, and *A Room of One's Own* when desperate to find her place in the world.

As a creative writing master's student, I read, I wrote, I researched. I felt alive, energised. This was the place for me. I wanted it to never end. So, as my studies came to a close, I wondered...

Could someone like me get a PhD?

Spin! That! Wheel!

The first person I asked about doing a creative writing PhD ignored my question and proceeded to tell me which of my fellow students would make *oh so perfect* PhD candidates and how much she would love to supervise them; this despite the fact that I graduated top of the class, top of the whole faculty, and was already a published author in Australia and the US.

When would it ever be enough?!

I thought the universal law was, that if I worked hard enough, harder than everyone else, I would be rewarded.

The next person appeared to physically recoil when I asked them if they would supervise me.

I wondered what I was doing wrong.

And then, finally, someone told me about an academic, saying, 'I think you and she would be a great fit.'

So, at 54...

My *last* spin of the wheel.

I had nothing to lose.

And she said yes. Just like that. Via email. Having never met me.

Ha! Maybe that was the key.

With that yes, this academic opened up a whole world to me, one I was beginning to think I'd never be allowed to enter.

I later found out that she comes from a working-class background, and is proud of it, embraces it, celebrates it in fact; has *not* spent a lifetime running from it.

...And has me thinking, maybe I don't have to hide anymore; maybe I could learn to celebrate it too.

*

Working-class people...... contain multitudes.

Working-class people... are me.

Author Bio:

Erin Vincent is a former journalist and author of *Fourteen Ways of Looking* (2026), which was published in Australia (Upswell), the UK (CB editions), the US (A Strange Object/Deep Vellum), and Canada (Strange Light/Penguin Random House), and was named one of Lit Hub's most anticipated books of 2026. Her first book *Grief Girl* (2007), published in Australia (Pan Macmillan) and the US (Penguin Random House), was named a New York Public Library Best Book. Erin's work has also appeared in *Meanjin, The Guardian, Electric Literature, Kill Your*

Darlings, Literary Hub, The Offing, and elsewhere. She holds an MA in creative writing from the University of Technology Sydney and is currently studying for a PhD in creative writing with a focus on fragmentary literature.

Adjunct (2024): Contingent Academic Worker Endures Dehumanization, Desperation and Indignity in a Hilariously Impossible Quest for a Tenure Track Dream Job.

Review by Katherine Arnoldi

Adjunct (2024), deftly directed, written and staring Ron Najor hits almost every note, both high and low, in the expendable, beleaguered life of an adjunct professor, but falls short of long term answers for the half a million adjuncts working in the United States. This is not *On the Waterfront*, *Norma Rae* or *Matewan* but instead focuses on the hilariously tragic life of one adjunct, Amer, who clings to the impossible dream of a tenure track academic job.

We first see Amer (Ron Najor) facing the camera, making a video presumably soon to be used to make his English teaching job obsolete, discussing "writing what you know," which is precisely what Najor, an ex-adjunct in real life, does in this film. The young student videographer tells Amer he is finished, never looking up from her phone, prompting Amer to compliment her for multi-tasking. She smirks a disgusted "you are such a loser," which is just the beginning of the escalating indignities Amer will face. Next, we see the definition of adjunct: a thing added to something else as supplemental, not an essential part.

True, indeed. According to a Cengage blog (2024) seventy percent of faculty are adjuncts who make an average of $3,700 for a semester long course and fifty-seven percent have no medical benefits. A student wants Amer to stay after class for consultation, and, when Amer says he cannot, the student asks who his supervisor is. Amer will clearly be reported. But Amer cannot stay after because, in the car which we understand is also his home, he replaces the college parking sticker for the UBER sign as he heads out to his next job. Later, we will see him at the cash register as a night clerk in a liquor store.

Working on a novel which his family assumes will be an Oprah hit, Amer is also in the running for a full time tenure track job at the college where he works, while a fellow adjunct in the windowless office is so desperate to advance, he takes a trial lecture position at UCLA for no pay.

Najor hits note after note in the dehumanization of the adjunct. His boss, Tom (Ross Turner), who has a $50,000 Tesla in the driveway of his swanky suburban home asks Amer to judge the creative writing contest for the department for, surprise, no extra pay. Amer tries to make a doctor appointment for treatment for an infected ear and the doctor, looking at his insurance, says he cannot see him for six to eight months. Meanwhile, there is nowhere to have sex with his girlfriend, Layla (Nikohl Boosheri) but in his car. After, she admonishes him for being cheap.

"I'm not cheap. I'm broke," Amer says, but the girlfriend is already long gone.

Amer is summoned to his supervisor's office, because the student did file a complaint, which, the supervisor says, will be added to his permanent file. The snarky head of the department, Tom, offers Amer a class that is not "official" and so he will not qualify for insurance next semester. But, despite all this dehumanization, Amer is human, he is, really, and, in a moment, at a family wedding with another adjunct, Kristen (Kristen Erickson), Amer and the woman dance in what may be the sexiest dancing scene in a film ever (Sorry John Travolta and Patrick Swayze) and he is all hopeful for love until the new girlfriend moves to Arizona for a real job in journalism.

The high notes, helping and mentoring students whose lives are forever changed, writing the recommendation for the student who gets the job, an apology from a student whose friends humiliated him in the UBER are there, but an entire symphony of adjunct notes are missing. Missing are the adjunct offices that are not only windowless, but without ventilation because it was intended as a supply room where fifteen adjuncts, shoulder to shoulder, try to have "conferences" with students amid the distracting roar of conversations while the full time faculty's spacious offices with floor to ceiling windows looking over the river and the skyline are never, ever occupied because, well, the full time faculty are never on campus. There are the hours of unpaid "training" sessions where full time faculty who clearly know nothing about teaching drone on and on about the time their mother left them in the car, holding back tears that break into sobs. What does this have to do with teaching we eye each other, but, we know, it is just another injustice to be endured along with the more likely than not abusive "observations" by same full time faculty. Worse is the constant semester anxiety as adjuncts wait, sometimes until the last minute, to find out whether or not they have classes. Missing, too, according to Dinno in "How Administrative Bloat is Killing Higher Education," is any mention in *Adjunct* of the horrendously exorbitant high salaries of the various dubious administration departments, who make their realms bigger and bigger, holding the budget hostage from the students and any future solvency for the college, which, like so many permanent closure announcements recently, will go under like the sinking ship it is.

I should know all this. I am an adjunct still working at 74 because, well, I have to, but what about Amer? Oh, the stories adjuncts could tell and I am happy that Najor told his here so hilariously and with such powerful, logical coherency as each scene builds, following the through line of his obvious impending demise. What will Amer do in the face of constant humiliation and degradation? Will he continue to be dehumanized without the prospect of a home, love, family or any semblance of safety, dignity and, even less, the pursuit of happiness? What will be his bottom? I hope you will watch this magnificent film to find out what happens to Amer and then contemplate what might be a real solution for the half a million adjunct laborers.

Adjunct. Directed by Ron Najor, Atlas Brave, 2024.

Author Bio:

Katherine Arnoldi, Ph.D., is the author of the graphic novel *The Amazing True Story of a Teenage Single Mom* (Hyperion, 1998) which was named a Top Ten Book of the Year by *Entertainment Weekly*, and *All Things Are Labor, Stories* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), which won the Juniper Award. A McDowell Fellow, she is also the recipient of two New York Foundation of the Arts Awards in Fiction and Drawing, the Henfield TransAtlantic and DeJur Awards, a Fulbright to Paraguay, two American Library Association Awards and was nominated for an Eisner Award.

Clayton, O. and McIntyre, I., eds. (2025) *The Popular Wobbly: Selected Writings of T-Bone Slim*. University of Minnesota Press.

Review by Jennifer Forsberg

I was unfamiliar with T-Bone Slim when this volume came into my hands. That admission feels a little embarrassing as a literary scholar who has spent nearly two decades studying the rhetorical posturings of hobo raconteurs. But the unassuming tone of *The Popular Wobbly* is one of the most compelling accomplishments of editors Owen Clayton and Iain McIntyre, whose careful curation of Slim's work welcomes new readers and serves as a comprehensive compendium for existing fans.

After an insightful foreword by David Roediger, the editors' introduction explains the particulars of Slim's biography and archive. This helpful context addresses Slim's complicated bilingual and immigrant status and denotes the challenge of curating a large body of work riddled with significant gaps, omissions, and ambiguities. Presenting Slim's fragmented history, as evidenced by editorial language such as "might," "could," or "may," underscores the need for an intentional selection methodology. Further, they expose Slim's own editorial process, which often relied on fragmented pieces stitched together by an editor over days or weeks (p. xxxiii), reinforcing the recommendation that readers sample Slim's pieces incrementally or risk encountering trouble finding continuity (p. lii).

Clayton and McIntyre have selected Slim's "best" work, what they consider "the funniest, most interesting, and most profound" (p. li). With this guidance, the reader can witness the development of Slim's style, wit, and longstanding themes over a career spanning just over twenty years. The editors' organization of the volume leans into usefulness, whether for one's increased understanding of Slim's career or as an archive with teaching potential: they even cross-list 6 central topics in Slim's work, and offer a comprehensive list for further reading at the end of the volume. For activists, scholars, and artists within Working-Class Studies, the volume provides ample material to showcase the specific material conditions of the period, Slim's insightful and innovative rhetorical moves for critique and protest, and finally, a compelling collection of calls for solidarity over time. As Slim writes in "Untitled Article" (1933): "Join the I.W.W. There is no other time like NOW. Today is too late. Tomorrow is never. Yesterday never was. NOW is forever" (p. 276).

Organized chronologically, the opening section features Slim's work from 1919 to 1921, and evidences his developing style. Each piece exposes Slim's burgeoning self-confidence through experimentation, wordplay, and recurring imagery. This sampling of early work is self-aware and referential, but candidly captures growing trends of violence and oppression against working people. This opener successfully offers a snapshot of the world Slim is writing about, and allows his voice to construct a biographical map and a political survey of the time.

The six sections covering the entire 1920s show how carefully Clayton and McIntyre worked to present a well-rounded, insightful engagement with Slim's work. This includes the continued development of Slim's style, perhaps most notably in his word games in 1923's "Prepare for the Worst" (p. 71) and the delightfully humorous "The Passing Show" from 1925 exploring "Soup! Souperb soup! Soupblime soup!" (p. 133). The editors do a phenomenal job letting Slim speak for himself, showcasing his interests in labor and its impact on gender, race, and age. As a columnist for the IWW, Slim's political engagement and investment in drumming up membership take on the role of historian and commentator. The editors' choices allow the reader to recognize the power of Slim's language and style to call for solidarity. For example, 1925's "Cross Word Puzzle" celebrates the ability of language to "lay out the facts, fancies and fakes before the folks," while also highlighting their limitation: "[n]othing happens without work, effort, deeds and action" (p. 134). Slim's wordplay conveys the severity of a worker's situation, stressing the pressing need for change. Satirical pieces like 1927's "Boneyard" critique the financial cost of suicide, calling for more affordable ways to kill oneself, exposing the dark, material effects of the system and conditions of the time (p. 177).

The three sections covering the 1930s feature Slim's responses to the increasing economic strain of the Depression and the growing concern with international conflict. The editors offer pieces that both show Slim's critical eye and reflect an increased desperation for improved conditions in the material everyday, as representative of the future of the nation. Moments like 1930's "On Popular Sanitation" capture an embodied intensity, offering that "A man has certain inalien-rights such as strife, tribulation, pursuit of sappiness and among these we find sickness" (p. 237). The body in turmoil is common throughout Slim's work but is especially powerful here, as it speaks to systemic mistreatment and institutional mismanagement. Another embodied discussion occurs in "A Mosquito's Lunch" (1931), which argues that "homeless men" are "public benefactors, to be paid for ridding [Detroit, Michigan's] thriving community of all those winged-demons of the soft and stilly night" (p. 252). Once more, the editors successfully display Slim's humor and the reality of everyday life for the unhoused and unemployed, lambasting "a city … so deeply concerned about the welfare of such a thirsty bunch of bloodsuckers" rather than its people (p. 254).

The editors present Slim's late work in the 1940s as driven by an interest in worker solidarity as an answer to the horrors of global war. One of the most impactful selections was Slim's 1941 piece "Warning of Cannon Fodder Shortage for War of 1960," which argues that a low birthrate at the time will result in fewer disposable bodies later. This kind of sobering truth-telling, often made palatable with humor, is what makes Slim's work most impressive. Without Clayton and McIntyre's smart editorial decisions throughout, Slim's crystalized visions of the world, still largely applicable in our contemporary time, might be altogether lost to most readers.

The volume follows Slim's own words with a selection of responses to his work. Some, like George Baker and Sam Murray, champion him in his own time, calling for increased attention to Slim's skill. One 1930 response aptly characterizes Slim's writing as having "the force of Hemingway plus the sting of Swift," situating him within literary history more generally (p. 340). Other selections, like those from Franklin Rosemount and Ville-Juhani Sutinen, offer a memorialization and reflection on legacy that complement the three-dimensional understanding of Slim that Clayton and McIntyre have carefully constructed. In doing so, the volume does great service to interested readers looking to revisit Slim or even encounter him for the first time.

Reviewer Bio:

Dr. Jennifer Forsberg is a Senior Lecturer in the English department at Clemson University where she teaches a labor-focused survey of American literature and a course on the culture industry. Her research focuses on class performativity across literature, pop culture, and the visual arts.

McKelvey, P. (2024) *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation*. NYU Press.

Review by Julie Assouly

A 1958 *Life* magazine spread on "astonishingly bright" nightclub acts closes on an image that is easy to miss: Bernard Bragg, a deaf schoolteacher, masked and miming life on a San Francisco cable car. Through that single image, *Disability Works* by Patrick McKelvey reconceptualizes the postwar American settlement linking disability, theatre, and work. This combination of public pedagogy, theatrical labor and disability aesthetics is a significant achievement.

Rather than viewing performance as a reflection of social policy, the book demonstrates that vocational rehabilitation unfolded as a performance in itself: "the ability to compete in the labor market by undergoing physical and psychological transformation with the temporary, limited support of the state." (p. 5) Scripts, rehearsals, tours, management protocols, training curricula, and publicity campaigns redefined disabled citizenship as competitive employment. Naming this repertoire "disability works," the author reconstructs the consolidation of "disability arts" during the period shaped by the rise of disability rights activism (1960s-1990s).

The study's methodological approach is infrastructural. It shifts focus from individual events to the underlying structures — funders, unions, contracts, schools and benefit rules — that bring aesthetic forms and labor regimes together. Through a great range of detailed case studies, the book puts forward the idea that the same stages that normalized rehabilitation's common sense also provided techniques for disabled people to reject the system and create alternative futures. The cases studied include Plays for Living, the National Theatre of the Deaf, Ron Whyte's administrative experiments, the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped, and Alvin Ailey's New Visions Dance Project.

The opening chapter traces how Mary E. Switzer's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR, established in 1950) transformed theatre into a policy infrastructure. Following President Eisenhower's 1953 directive to establish vocational rehabilitation as the "cornerstone" of domestic welfare and deliver hundreds of thousands of successful rehabilitations, Switzer combined statecraft with stagecraft (p. 35). Her early training at Radcliffe's 47 Workshop and her proximity to elite theatrical networks help explain why demonstration clinics (live performances of instruction), the Functional Home (a staged model of ideal domestic life), and the circulation of success stories became performative instruments of persuasion (p. 39). Within this context, OVR commissioned Plays for Living (1961–1965), a series of reproducible one-act plays designed to convey the story of rehabilitation to civic groups, schools and employers.

The chapter's most notable analytical term, "functional imitation," describes the plays' austere realism: bare living rooms, armless chairs, imaginary props and a narrator who encourages identification and directs discussion. This aesthetic minimalism exposes policy minimalism and an unethical labor economy. Equity actors performed in the plays for small fees, rehearsals were unpaid, and the scripts excluded disabled performers through simulation and narration. Theatre was used to find employment for disabled people elsewhere, rather than to employ them onstage.

Founded in 1967 with a significant federal grant channeled through the O'Neill Center, the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) initially appears to be a response to Plays for Living: a professional company of deaf performers paid to showcase deaf culture. Chapter 2 convincingly reframes NTD as a rehabilitation instrument whose aesthetic form — "sign-mime," developed through the correspondence between Bernard Bragg, a Deaf actor and director, and David Hays, a hearing Broadway set designer — served Cold War cultural diplomacy (p. 90). By fusing American Sign Language with pantomime to promise transnational legibility, NTD embraced a style of universality accessible to hearing audiences at home and abroad. The company toured as a U.S. answer to the Soviet Union's Theatre of Sign and Gesture (1963); its representational labor folded Deaf employment into a script of American benevolence (p. 76). This universality was racially structured. Early companies recruited almost exclusively from Gallaudet College (p. 74), and Black Deaf actors only joined later.

The third chapter is the historiographic keystone of the book. "After rehabilitation" does not refer to a period that follows vocational rehabilitation, but to an infrastructural afterlife in which overlapping eligibility regimes — such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (504), the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), and independent-living centers — synchronize rather than supersede one another. The figure who anchors this analysis is the playwright and administrator Ron Whyte (one of the figures to whom the book is dedicated).

Through CETA stipends and a modest salary, Whyte created the time and space to develop projects in which disabled artists could flourish without having to prove their employability. The administrative imagination became the avant-garde. The analysis of Whyte's $10,000-a-year CETA income shifts the question from 'How did disabled artists get work?' to 'How did they design work worlds? (p. 109) The chapter's interpretation of Whyte's "Super-Market" (p. 132), where goods circulate outside of profit, shows a staging of an economic system based on sharing and collective access, right in the heart of New York, a city defined by profit-driven capitalism.

The fourth chapter identifies "bureaucratic drag" as both a temporal condition and a performance idiom. Waiting rooms, intake forms, benefit caps and appeals processes are not merely settings; they provide the framework through which disabled artists can express themselves and become visible. Apartments functioned as postal nodes and documents stand in for bodies that are constantly required to act as documents. Although this is not mail art as a formal movement, it is a disabled performance culture in which paper is both a weapon and a prosthesis. The "drag" is durational harm: a prolonged experience of bureaucratic or social harm that disabled artists had to live through, not merely perform. In the 1970s, the avant-garde of disability performance emerged from administrative settings.

Chapter 5 emphasizes the historically rich and ideologically complex nature of the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped (NTWH). Seatedness, promoted as a neutral, professional stage presence, becomes the sign through which disability becomes visible and manageable, aligning with the static figure of realist theatre and the hegemony of the wheelchair icon. The system’s prejudice against physical differences — such as spasms being seen as a loss of control or a ‘crippling’ distraction — mutates into a useful resource when authenticity can be commodified. The rise of management consultants, the uneven enforcement of the 504 Act, and airline deregulation mean that 'communication skills' have become the portable currency of self-reliance. Curry’s advice to “leave three hours earlier” (p. 190) reframes access as a matter of personal time management, with predictable racialized outcomes across New York’s transport networks. The chapter’s central argument is clear: NTWH created the concept of ‘employability’ without actual employment, helping to translate disability into human capital, a resource that could be developed, managed, and marketed within capitalist frameworks.

The last chapter, and the most synthetic, traces the history of the New Visions Dance Project, which was founded under the guidance of Black choreographer Alvin Ailey in collaboration with the Lighthouse for the Blind (p. 210). Rather than presenting a neat moral narrative, the chapter brings together two genealogies: a Lighthouse lineage that reflects the austerity era of vocational rehabilitation, and a Dunham/Ailey tradition in which Black modern dance served as a form of rehabilitation for communities that had been structurally weakened by racial capitalism. While the project’s emphasis on self-esteem reflected 1980s ideas about the economic value of personal growth, the author explains that its movement techniques, rooted in Afro-diasporic rhythm and the mobility of the pelvis and spine, drew on a Black modernist tradition that transcended the logic of work and productivity. This point is illustrated by the example of Suleiman Rifai, a blind Tanzanian immigrant who was integrated into the Ailey School. Rifai’s repeated ‘failed’ laterals are not viewed as a therapeutic deficit, but as an aesthetic choice that embodies a refusal of exactitude, reflecting race, disability and migration (p. 245). Once again, the chapter’s conceptual payoff is significant. Rehabilitation is framed as a multifaceted concept with an ever-present afterlife, and Black modern dance is presented as both a vehicle for and an interruption to neoliberal rehabilitative individualism.

In the epilogue, the author reinterprets the public celebrations surrounding the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as theatrical performances that perpetuate, rather than challenge, the logic of rehabilitation. They depict access as a branded, feel-good spectacle rather than a structural change. In opposition to this vision, the author unexpectedly turns to popular culture. Indeed, the sitcom *Roseanne* offers an alternative perspective, portraying disability as a common consequence of working in the service industry rather than an exceptional condition. Roseanne’s sister Jackie’s post-injury pension and community theatre role, as well as Roseanne’s rejection of the “deep acting” (p. 259) demanded of customer-facing service industry workers point towards a different disability politics — one based on the right not to work, or to work differently.

Reviewer Bio:

Julie Assouly is an Associate Professor of American Studies specializing in cinema at Université d'Artois (Arras, France). She is director of the Praxis et Esthétique des Arts research group (Textes et Cultures laboratory UR4028), and the author of several books and edited volumes on US cinema, including *Wes Anderson: Cinéaste Transatlantique* (CNRS 2024). Her current focus of interest is the representation of the working class in US films and TV series set in the Rust Belt.

Miller, R. J. (2021). *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration*. Little, Brown and Company.

Dettlaff, A. J. (2023). *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition*. Oxford University Press.

Reviews by James C. Beaufils

Reuben Jonathan Miller's *Halfway Home* begins from a simple but devastating proposition: in the United States, punishment does not end at the prison gate. Instead, it lingers in neighbourhoods, in welfare offices, in housing policy and labour markets, shaping the everyday lives of those who carry a record and of the families who live with them. Rather than treating "re-entry" as an exceptional transition, Miller insists that what he calls the afterlife of mass incarceration is now an ordinary condition for many poor and working-class Black communities.

Written from Chicago but attentive to national patterns, the book blends ethnography, sociology and memoir. Miller is not a detached observer. He is a Black scholar, a pastor's son, and the brother and son of men who have been incarcerated. The book moves between interviews with men coming out of prison, observations in halfway houses, bus journeys and welfare offices, and reflections on his own family's experiences. The result is a text that feels restless and unsettled: part field report, part family album, part indictment.

For readers in working-class studies, one of the most striking contributions of *Halfway Home* is the way it reworks our understanding of work and class under conditions of extreme criminalisation. Miller shows how the formal end of a sentence is overlaid by a dense web of probation conditions, registry requirements, fines and fees, and informal surveillance by employers and landlords. These constraints structure decisions about where people can live, which jobs they can take, how they can move around the city, and even who they can visit. They also shape the labour of those around them. Partners, mothers, siblings and friends shoulder the costs of court dates, transport, childcare and commissary, while managing the risks that flow from living alongside someone who is formally "free" but still under constant institutional scrutiny.

Miller is at his strongest when he stays close to these entanglements of labour, kinship and punishment. He details the hustle of low-wage work that men and women with records take on—temporary warehouse shifts, restaurant jobs, informal day labour—only to discover that the stigma of a felony, or a parole requirement, makes those jobs contingent and revocable. At one point he describes a man sent back to prison for missing an appointment because he had finally secured a shift that might cover the rent. These are not only stories of “recidivism”; they are stories about how carceral logics seep into workplace scheduling, landlords’ risk calculations, and welfare eligibility rules.

Gender runs quietly but insistently through the book. Many of the people Miller follows are men, but the narrative repeatedly circles back to the women—mothers and grandmothers in particular—who hold families together in the wake of incarceration. Their homes become de facto re-entry programs, their wages and benefits the safety net that allows men to comply with conditions that the state imposes but does not resource. The afterlife of mass incarceration, in Miller’s account, is carried disproportionately by Black working-class women whose labour is made both indispensable and invisible.

Formally, *Halfway Home* resists a neat divide between “data” and reflection. Miller writes in the first person, moves in and out of scenes, and allows his own doubts, weariness and love for his family to shape the story. Readers looking for a conventional policy blueprint may be frustrated; the book does not offer a ten-point reform program. Instead, its political force lies in the way it renders visible the thick mesh of policies, practices and everyday decisions that make up what he describes as a regime of “punishment work.” It suggests that tinkering with sentencing laws, or adding a re-entry program here and there, will not be enough while housing, employment, welfare and family regulation remain organised around suspicion of those branded criminal.

For working-class studies, *Halfway Home* is important for at least three reasons. First, it insists that class in contemporary urban America is inseparable from the criminal legal system. The “afterlife” it chronicles is not an add-on to working-class experience; it is one of the primary ways class is lived in many Black communities. Second, the book offers a method for writing about over-studied communities that is both accountable and experimental—Miller’s refusal to separate his family story from his academic analysis challenges the convention that legitimacy requires distance. Finally, it directs attention to the vast amount of unpaid, feminised labour that holds together lives marked by criminalisation: the rides, the phone calls, the beds made up for men coming home.

There are places where readers might want more. At times the book gestures towards but does not fully develop connections to prison abolitionist organising, union campaigns or tenant struggles that could situate its stories within broader working-class movements. Some of the analytic vocabulary, particularly around “civic death,” may feel more familiar to sociologists than to community organisers or formerly incarcerated readers. Yet these are minor reservations next to the book’s overall achievement.

Halfway Home is a demanding, often painful read, but it is also deeply humane. It refuses to reduce people to case studies or “re-entry clients,” and it refuses to let the rest of us imagine that mass incarceration ends at the prison wall. For scholars, students and activists in working-class studies, Miller offers both a conceptual lens on the carceral afterlife and an example of what it means to write from, and with, communities living it.

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Alan J. Dettlaff’s *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System* is a slim volume with a very large ambition. In just under two hundred pages, Dettlaff asks readers to look squarely at the history of family separation in the United States—from slavery, through the post-emancipation era and the rise of “child rescue” schemes, to contemporary foster care and mandatory reporting—and to accept a hard conclusion: the harms inflicted on Black families by the child welfare system are not accidental side-effects of a well-intentioned project. They are the predictable outcomes of a system designed to police, punish and control poor Black communities.

Dettlaff writes as both scholar and former child welfare practitioner. He spent years inside the system he now argues must be abolished, and the book carries the clarity that comes from having tried reform and finding it wanting. Each chapter pairs historical analysis with contemporary evidence and, crucially, with insights from Black parents, youth and organisers. The argument unfolds along two intertwined tracks: a genealogy of family policing and a sustained challenge to the profession of social work, which has often provided the system with its language, legitimacy and frontline workforce.

A central strength of the book lies in its insistence on seeing child welfare as a **carceral** institution. Dettlaff traces how practices of forced family separation developed as tools of racial domination: the selling of enslaved children, the apprenticeships and indentures imposed on Black children after emancipation, and the removal of Indigenous children to boarding schools. Contemporary foster care, he suggests, continues these logics under the cover of “best interests” and “safety.” What has changed is not the basic function—regulating and fragmenting Black family life—but the bureaucratic and therapeutic vocabularies through which that function is justified.

For readers in working-class studies, the book’s focus on race is inseparable from class. The vast majority of families investigated and separated by child welfare agencies are poor; many are also entangled with low-wage work, housing precarity, debt and the criminal legal system. Dettlaff documents how conditions labelled “neglect” are often straightforward consequences of poverty: inadequate housing, lack of childcare, leaving children with older siblings while working, relying on informal networks when formal services are inaccessible or punitive. Instead of providing material support, the system removes children, imposes “service plans” and orders parents to perform compliance in order to regain custody.

One of the most powerful through-lines in the book is the way Dettlaff dismantles the myth of benevolence. He shows how, across decades, reformers have framed child welfare interventions as acts of rescue, even as Black parents describe them as experiences of invasion and terror. He attends carefully to language: the shift from “child saving” to “child protection,” the euphemism of “placement,” the bureaucratic flattening of experiences into risk categories and case notes. Drawing on emerging abolitionist scholarship and organising around family policing, he argues that such language is not neutral; it is part of how the system defends itself against accountability.

Some of the most compelling chapters are co-authored with Black scholars and organisers, including Victoria Copeland and Maya Pendleton. These sections bring in voices from the upEND movement and other abolitionist formations that call for dismantling, rather than reforming, the family policing system. The co-authored chapters help prevent the book becoming a solo expert lecture; instead, it reads as a contribution to an already-existing Black-led conversation about abolition and care.

Where *Halfway Home* chronicles the afterlife of a carceral sentence, *Confronting the Racist Legacy* asks us to see child welfare itself as a carceral regime, one that targets Black working-class families even where no criminal conviction is present. For those of us working in youth justice and child protection in other settler states—including Australia—the resonances are immediate. Over-surveillance of Indigenous and racialised communities, the pathologising of poverty, and the deployment of "neglect" as a catch-all category are familiar patterns. Dettlaff's historical lens invites comparative work on how family policing has operated alongside mass incarceration and border control as technologies of classed and racial domination.

The book's abolitionist stance will trouble some readers, including those in social work who recognise deep problems in the system but remain committed to reform. Dettlaff anticipates this unease and refuses the temptation to offer an easily digestible middle ground. Instead, he patiently unpicks the logic of recurring reform waves—better training, new assessment tools, family preservation programs—that leave core structures intact. Abolition, for him, is not a demand for instant dismantling but a call to take seriously the idea that a system so deeply rooted in racial terror cannot be made safe through incremental adjustments.

For working-class studies, the book offers at least two key provocations. First, it insists that any analysis of working-class family life must grapple with state violence not only in prisons and police stations but also in child welfare offices and foster placements. The removal of children is not just an emotional catastrophe; it is a reorganisation of household labour, income and social reproduction. Second, it challenges us to think about solidarity across sectors: what it might mean for unionised child welfare workers, teachers, healthcare staff and community advocates to take abolitionist critiques seriously rather than treating family policing as an unfortunate necessity.

Stylistically, *Confronting the Racist Legacy* is accessible and direct. Dettlaff writes in plain language, with minimal jargon, making the book suitable for undergraduate courses in social work, criminology, sociology and working-class studies, as well as for community reading groups and practitioner trainings. Its brevity is a virtue; there is little padding, and the argument is all the sharper for it.

If there is a limitation, it lies less in the book itself than in the enormity of the project it calls for. Abolishing the child welfare system and building community-led structures of support, housing and income security is a generational task. Readers may finish the book hungry for more concrete pathways, more detailed case examples of alternatives in practice. Dettlaff points towards mutual aid, community-based support networks and economic redistribution, but he does not pretend to have a ready-made blueprint.

That said, this is a book that does what the best abolitionist writing does: it shifts the horizon of what readers think is possible and necessary. For scholars and activists in working-class studies, *Confronting the Racist Legacy* is a reminder that the frontlines of class struggle run through child welfare courts and visitation rooms as much as through workplaces and polling booths. It is essential reading for anyone concerned with how states manage and fracture Black working-class families—and for those of us trying to imagine, and build, something different.

Reviewer Bio:

James C. Beaufils is a criminologist based at the Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney. His work focuses on youth justice, policing, child protection and First Nations and working-class communities in Australia.

Thomas, C. (2024). *Scrip: How the Coal Companies Impoverished Harlan County.* County Line Books.

Review by Nathaniel Heggins Bryant

"*Scrip is the physical evidence of subsistence wages"* declares Charles Edward Thomas in the introduction to his wonderful new book (p. 3). And yet, outside of niche collector's guides to exonumia—to coin-like objects or the paper equivalent that are not state-issued—scrip is rarely acknowledged as an important material, economic, and cultural dimension to the many resource extraction industries that historically used them. The term scrip or related synonyms are rarely, if ever, formally indexed in the academic histories and monographs on banana empires, Latin American coffee plantations, and Appalachian coal mines, which usually focus on the macroeconomic, the national, or even multinational economic dimensions. At best, scrip might get a single passing reference in a paragraph about forms of payment used at the company store or commissary, an anecdotal gloss of the way scrip functioned as a small but central and nasty metonym for complex forms of labor and economic exploitation. Enter Charles Edward Thomas, who refocuses long-standing conversations about exploitation, violent labor struggles and worker resistance, unionization attempts, and popular cultural memory through labor songs and memoir in Harlan County, Kentucky. He does so by purposefully *centering* scrip as an essential item worthy of inspection, examination, and analysis on its own terms. Perhaps the most important intervention of Thomas's book is that it moves well past mere collecting and cataloguing, which is what most other prior books on scrip emphasize. These prior books, mostly out of print, emerge out of the niche exonumia collector community. While Thomas does in fact draw on that community's expertise to frame his own book, he nevertheless moves past it; his is possibly the first critical book about scrip that centers the object in domestic and global labor studies and culture, as a crucial element worthy of inspection and analysis. Hopefully there will be future books like this one to come out as object and material culture studies continue to make inroads into labor history and working-class studies.

Why Harlan County? For one, the archives that exist about the struggles in the remote southeastern county of Kentucky are deep and robust, and Thomas draws on newspaper and political reports, personal narrative, snippets of song and poetry, and a fairly robust use of scholarly and historical monographs throughout his book to leaven this intriguing examination of coal company scrip. This is also a personal story for Thomas, who was born and grew up in Harlan County and began collecting scrip as a child; interspersed throughout his telling or retelling of moments like the Battle of Evarts in 1931 are moments where Thomas refers to his family's deep roots in the area. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, scrip absolutely saturated the county, which Thomas carefully and lovingly documents in the second half of the book, a full-color collection of close-up photographs of scrip that he amassed with the help of fellow collectors, most of whom descended from other Harlan County miners. As he notes in an explanatory note before the scrip gallery, "at least 110 coal companies in Harlan used scrip. Together, they issued at least 976 different pieces of scrip," of which "798 different metal pieces and 16 different paper pieces" are included in the book (p. 99). (There is an attendant website, harlanscrip.com, that is updated as the collection expands.) The sheer number and variety of scrip, in just one small county, forces us to imagine the enormous scale of scrip usage across the broader region—and, again, this doesn't begin to describe the other industries that also employed scrip in the United States and elsewhere. Harlan County might be Thomas's particular case study, but one valuable contribution of his book is the way it forces readers to contend with the global practice of using scrip writ large.

For decades, scrip served as a means of depressing wages and propping up an intricate debt cycle that helped amass fortunes for various coal companies, many of which operated as self-regulating mini-monopolies in Harlan hollers. Thomas sets out to explain just how all of this worked in great detail, far beyond the somewhat comic and superficial notion that miners "owed their souls to the company store," as Merle Travis and Tennessee Ernie Ford famously sang. This is a decidedly unfunny story that Thomas tells, and as a haunting reminder, many pages feature, in chronological order, small close-up photographs of a single year and the names of miners who died that year taken directly from The Harlan County Miners Memorial. Other pages feature images of coal company scrip that Thomas links directly to the most abusive coal operators in the region, tying together the often-unpunished anti-union violence of the region with the most ubiquitous symbol of worker repression and marginalization these miners were forced to use to stay alive.

Of the many examples in his book, two illuminating moments help illustrate the centrality of scrip to the broader debt cycle that miners experienced in Harlan. Following the deadly Zero Mine explosion on December 9, 1932, in which twenty-three miners were killed and another fourteen were injured, the Harlan Fuel Company blamed miner incompetence rather than lax and underfunded safety standards for the blast, but the owners nevertheless decided, at the behest of state inspectors, to replace new electric Edison headlamps with unsafe open-flame carbide lamps. New pieces of scrip were issued for the sole purpose of effectively renting to individual miners the use of the new headlamp for a single shift. Each time a piece of headlamp scrip was issued, the miner could expect a payroll deduction. The net result? "Once the lamps were paid off, the company actually made money on the deal. They had transformed a safety requirement into a profit center!" (p. 83-84). Thomas's photo gallery also includes similar metal and paper scrips issued for the use of a single blasting cap; dynamite; powder; and monobel (another type of explosive). The use of each essential item resulted in payroll deductions, as did the sharpening of tools; using company-owned bathhouses; renting company-owned housing; and even employing anti-union preachers! Another key moment in the book are photos of paper scrip instructions from the Lynch 1728 coal company, a subsidiary of U.S. Steel, which were published in six different languages (English, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Czech, and Slovenian) to ensure the proper usage of them, a reminder of the complex linguistic density in the immigrant communities working Harlan mines (p. 208).

There is so much more that could be said about this fine and far-ranging history of scrip in Harlan County. Suffice it to say that it is a necessary and long overdue supplement to our understanding of the region and its history because it attends to the material reality miners and their families faced during the leanest of times. Thomas's book helps us to see scrip both for what it was, materially, and what it meant to owner and worker alike. As we peruse his gallery we would be hard-pressed to not imagine the indignities these workers felt using fake money, one of cheap metal or paper that weighed lightly in the hand, whose tinny sounds rang false in the ear, that never meaningfully filled the pockets the way real money did. Hopefully, too, this helps readers historicize and contextualize scrip not only as meaningful artifacts of the past, but as one of the present and future, too. The recent trend to pay workers in digital point schemes and cryptocurrency or internal company currency like Amazon Swag Bucks should have us both considering these overlooked forms of payment and resisting the vicious return of scrip-like schemes in seemingly new and shiny forms that nevertheless reproduce the worst forms of historical exploitation.

Reviewer Bio:

Dr. Nathaniel Heggins Bryant is Associate Professor of English at California State University, Chico, where he also serves as the Chico State chapter president of California Faculty Association, the labor union representing faculty, counselors, librarians, and coaches in the CSU system. He is the author of several articles dealing with the intersection of labor studies, prison studies, and prison writing on individuals like the Soledad Brother George Jackson and Caryl Chessman. He has served as the Working-Class Studies Association secretary and is currently working on three book-length research projects: a critical reassessment of Robert F. Stroud, better known as the Birdman of Alcatraz, a second on prisoner unionization efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, and the newest one on the history of company scrip throughout time.

Roper, L. (2025) *Summer of Fire and Blood: The German Peasants' War*. Basic Books.

Review by Jack Metzgar

The are hardly any workers in this book – not in the modern sense of workers as free wage labor, workers hired for a specified period of time for a specified wage. There are some artisans in the towns, some in powerful guilds that set their own wages and conditions just as shopkeepers set their prices, and some copper and silver miners who worked for a wage while workmates were serfs. But with a few, important exceptions, these toilers did not participate in the Peasant War in Germany in 1524-25.

Peasants, of course, worked, very long and hard, but they were not part of what for the past few hundred years we have called the working class. They were a very different breed altogether, living in a very different social system at a very different time. But for all that, reading *Summer of Fire and Blood* by English scholar Lyndal Roper resonated with many aspects of the contemporary working class. It was a large majority of the population, for example, and when it knew it had power in numbers, it was indeed very powerful. Like large portions of the American working class, it was inspired by religious fanatics who had a not-always-intentional political edge to them. And when they organized themselves into roving armies, they were ingeniously creative in making do with what they had – though that would turn out to be a military mistake as what they had was no match against men with superior gear on horses. Still, the making-do ingenuity is recognizable.

There are other more subtle resonances. The German peasants were almost uniformly illiterate, and while Roper is diligent in trying to figure out what they thought and felt, she is reliant on allies from towns – innkeepers, artisans, some rogue nobles and knights, but above all renegade priests and monks. These were often leaders, and especially the outlawed clergy made rousing speeches that inspired peasants to action. But still, we never hear from the peasants themselves, either during the war or in the bitter aftermath. We do not know what they thought and felt, how they interpreted their experience, except through what preachers were popular in their area.

This is actually not that different from today, when the American working class is uniformly literate, but seldom speaks for itself. Despite modern polling, which atomizes and then aggregates responses to pre-formed questions, social media, and voting results, the working class, when it is not ignored, is a vacuum most often filled by middle-class professional projection. The German monks in the 16th century saw the peasants as crude and incapable of complex thinking or feeling as they were isolated in their monasteries, just as so many of our opinion-makers today feel free to make up social-psychological characteristics they claim are shared by millions of people of whom they know few, if any.

The issues the war was fought over, however, could not be more different. Though Roper is masterful at consistently showing the complex entanglement of religious and economic issues, it is easier to treat them separately here. The peasant war was very much a part of the Protestant Reformation, which was kicked off with Martin Luther's 95 Theses against the Roman Catholic Church in 1517. Though Luther focused on the Church's sale of indulgences and other corruptions, he started a stream of thinking that de-emphasized the role of the priest, insisting that common people could and should develop personal interpretations of the Bible. He translated the holy book into German, which was often read to and discussed by peasants with priests and monks who were becoming Lutherans. There was an egalitarian and sometimes a democratic vibe in much of the preaching by outlaw priests, though Luther himself bitterly opposed the peasant uprising and defended the political status quo. A few of the key religious issues that sparked individual rebellions were peasant (and many town folk) demands for parishes to choose their own priests, for congregants to drink communion wine themselves rather than having the priest drink for them, and for recognition that the bread and wine of communion were symbolic of Jesus Christ, not the actual substance of the Savior.

These issues became entangled with economic ones because monasteries often owned vast tracks of land, which serfs worked on and paid steep "tithes" with their produce. Serfs, who also worked for noble land-owners, were not slaves. Their masters could not sell them or their children. But, besides the produce they owed the land-owner, they were obligated to perform tasks for him, often quite extensive; could not move off the owner's land; and their children had to marry someone from among the serfs which were beholden to their landowner. While the peasant war did not advocate the abolition of serfdom, it sought limits to all these and other practices. One especially salient one was to be able to hunt and fish on the landowner's land, from which they were forbidden. As with their other demands, this had a religious rationale in that God had created the land and the waters for everybody to use (if not to own).

From the winter of 1524 into the summer of 1525, the peasants had the upper hand. At first they organized gatherings by simply marching through the countryside and gathering peasants as they went. In most places, they asked people to sign on to a set of shared principles, which the peasants numbering in the hundreds and later the thousands would then take to towns, asking them to sign on, which many of the small towns did. Eventually, however, as their numbers grew, they attacked, pillaged, and burnt both monasteries and castles owned by nobles. The pillaging was sometimes simply draining a monastery's kegs of wine and sometimes outright individual theft of jewels and other valuables, but more often the theft was organized to be shared among the peasant army as it marched to the next place. During these months, peasants would leave their land for a few weeks at a time, return to till the land, and then mass again with larger and larger armies. There was violence, but very few killings – though one, the Weinsberg Massacre, killed 27 captive knights and became a key motivator for the nobles' slaughter of peasants in the summer of 1525.

It took a while for the German princes and the Austrian government to organize their forces, but when they did, the peasants were no match. As many as 100,000 peasants were killed in a series of full-dress battles in central Germany, and almost nowhere were any of their economic demands conceded, even in part.

Despite the huge differences between then and now, them and us, I see continuities in the peasants' will to fight for enhanced control over their lives – and in the relative modesty of their demands. They did not aspire to overthrow the feudal system and escape entirely from their serfdom. They risked (and lost) their lives fighting for better wages and conditions. Working classes historically have not been dreamers of grand schemes, but as today, given the opportunity they will fight valiantly for more autonomy and concrete improvements. Over time, their accomplishments argue that the arc of history bends toward justice. It is well to remember that.

Reviewer Bio:

Jack Metzgar, a retired adult educator at Roosevelt University in Chicago, is a founder and past president of the Working-Class Studies Association. He is the author of *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* and *Bridging the Divide: Working-Class Culture in a Middle-Class Society*.

Roediger, David. (2025) *An Ordinary White: My Antiracist Education*. Fordham University Press.

Review by Scott Henkel

David Roediger was scheduled to speak about his wonderful new book, *An Ordinary White: My Antiracist Education* at an event hosted by the University History Institute in Little Rock, Arkansas in April, 2026. The institute has a decades-long partnership with the University of Arkansas, its History department, and local historians. But university administrators worried that the event would arouse conservative legislators, who had passed the Arkansas ACCESS Act, one of several recent laws around the country that ban efforts to address inequality. The university administrators believed that the event would not violate the law but nevertheless asked the organizers to change its content. The organizers refused, stating correctly that attempts to guess what would or would not merely displease conservative lawmakers would be "a fool's errand." Still, the university administrators, out of an abundance of timidity, insisted upon the changes. The department chair resigned in protest and the faculty took a series of votes to defend academic freedom. Ultimately they moved the event to Little Rock's Main Library so Roediger could speak freely. Let's give cheers to historians who protect academic freedom when administrators don't and to the librarians of the Central Arkansas Library System for welcoming Roediger to tell his story.

But still, this incident must give Roediger heartburn. The assumption that undergirds legislation like the Arkansas ACCESS Act is that efforts to address racial inequality are unjust, rather than the injustices that led to the inequality. This bit of upside-downism is as old as Reconstruction, and Roediger has spent much of his career explaining why it is spurious, but here it is nevertheless. *An Ordinary White* is Roediger's autobiography. If it comes out in a second edition, it could have an epilogue about the University of Arkansas incident that says: see? This is what I've been talking about. Look at what whites will do to protect their power.

This incident is Roediger's most recent experience with censorship. The first he mentions in the autobiography was his high school-era underground newspaper *Huggermugger*, which aroused a guidance counselor to contact prospective universities to warn them about Roediger's radicalism, and from which he learned lessons about how power works, he writes, at least in the cornfields of southern Illinois (p. 45). Roediger co-wrote his first book, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day*, with Philip Foner, whose decades-long blacklisting made publishing the book difficult (p. 126-9). The list goes on, like a thread through *An Ordinary White*.

That thread is woven with another: Roediger notes his early realization that "the most influential revolutionary theorists wrote to be understood" (p. 64). It is in fact a fool's errand to predict what will attract a censor's ire, but it's a safe bet that the more power a writer has to attract readers, the more agitated a censor gets. Early on and throughout the book, Roediger insists that the ideas he's spent his career writing about are "fathomable," by which he means that ordinary people can understand antiracist ideas through their own experiences and their own study of those experiences. Of course, those views do take effort and study to achieve, and Roediger is an expert guide in that effort. What emerges in the pages of Roediger's autobiography is a picture of a smart, and sometimes smart-alecky, self-deprecating, working-class human being, the kind of person who recognizes the roadblocks to and possibilities for human equality, but also doesn't take himself too seriously. He insists that the processes that perpetuate injustice are fathomable, that ordinary whites and everyone else can discover that this is not the best of all possible worlds, not even close. That some whites have made this discovery is certainly a threat, so it's no surprise to see a backlash.

It makes sense to see these threads woven in Roediger's autobiography--a writer who wants to be understood is met by censors who want to block others from understanding. So don't be fooled: censors know that ideas have power--that's why they want them censored--and Roediger's work is powerful. He writes that his book *The Wages of Whiteness* made him "low-key famous" (p. 138). Additional books built his ideas further, to name just a few that are significant to his life story: *Class, Race, and Marxism*, a collection of essays on his methods; *History Against Misery*, a book published by the Charles H. Kerr company, a publisher he has been affiliated with since the 1970s; the anthology *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means To Be White*; and *Seizing Freedom*, which builds from W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the general strike of slaves during the Civil War to show that "when it proceeds from below, the good example of freedom struggles spreads in unpredictable ways" (*Seizing* p. 14). Roediger's body of work shows his insistence that radical scholarship must have a high quality because its slightest imperfection will receive a challenge (p. 114).

In his autobiography, as in these other books, Roediger is at pains to point out that he was one of several writers, especially Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, who reminded their readers of the tradition of Black authors who argued that racism was a problem of whiteness. As obvious as this argument may sound now, reading those books when I was a student hit me like a flash of insight; rereading them feels like noticing again the air I breathe. For me, someone who has a working-class white upbringing not too different from Roediger's and who, like him, was shaped by--he says "saved by"--movements for labor, racial, and gender justice (p. 34), it's difficult for me to express adequately how much Roediger's work influences my thinking. Not only because we share life experiences, but because he's done the work to show how bosses and white supremacists can manipulate those experiences to perpetuate injustices and how white workers can also perpetuate them.

In perhaps the most compelling, and certainly the most feisty, chapter of *An Ordinary White* Roediger reviews the era when the critical study of whiteness, part of the larger field of ethnic studies, came to fruition. By the chapter's end, the feistiness mixes with mournfulness, given the current backlash to that body of work. Later, he summarizes the ideas he has consistently argued since his earliest publications: "That meaningful change comes from below, that there is no serious US study of class that does not also take full measure of race and gender, that the way to nonracialism is through the consideration of race--not around but through it--that we need more imagination and less polling data" (p. 215). Far be it from me to argue with how a person understands their own life's work, but I don't believe that summary, while correct, makes the best picture of why Roediger's work is worth reading and why reactionaries feel threatened by it.

Years ago I broke the spine of my copy of *The Wages of Whiteness*--so badly that now only the cover and a hair tie bind it--at page twelve, at the moment Roediger mentions Sterling Stuckey, Morrison, C. L. R. James, and Baldwin writing about "the white problem" and then cites Du Bois's description of the public and psychological wages of whiteness from *Black Reconstruction*. The idea that whites don't get hassled as much by cops; are assumed to be competent, even against evidence; have better schools and opportunities; and don't deal with the daily degradations that people of color endure is sufficiently well-rehearsed but still has explanatory power. What was a thread in *Black Reconstruction* and summarized late in the book in a particularly vibrant metaphor became the idea that motivates *The Wages of Whiteness* almost entirely. That's a fundamental move in a scholarly argument, but more humanly, it's a lovely example of the ties that bind readers and writers together, across generations, hopefully without end--more on that in a moment.

To my eye, most writers who have built upon Roediger's work emphasize the privileges of the wages of whiteness, rather than the detriments. It genuinely pains me that these conversations have often turned a ruthless criticism of existing whiteness into a weaker sauce, into what Devin Thomas O'Shea correctly calls, also in a review of *An Ordinary White*, "professional-managerial bric-a-brac," the result of which is that "Everyone feels guilty and angry about our failing systems, but no one gets a raise."

What makes Roediger's work worth reading is not just pointing out that the wages of whiteness, although substantial, are also spurious, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as "Superficially resembling or simulating, but lacking the genuine character or qualities of, something; not true or genuine; false, sham, counterfeit." He builds from this, and from Baldwin, to remind readers that refusing the spurious wages of whiteness means holding out for something genuinely better--a richer, fuller, shared humanity, which is the last word of *An Ordinary White*. He writes, "It is knowledge--often incomplete, fleeting, and contradictory--of what whiteness separates whites from--a vital labor movement, an even rudimentary welfare state, a critique of empire and settler colonialism, meaningful planet-saving political coalitions, and humanity" (p. 219). Thinking about that problem is a better reason to read Roediger's work. It's a reason why white workers, but not only white workers, should strike a different path. It's also the key to why conservatives, not only in Arkansas, not only in supposedly enlightened but merely liberal college towns and larger cities, think that it's in their interests to keep people from hearing what Roediger has to say.

Censorship sometimes has a clumsy way of making people talk more about the ideas that censors would wish silenced. I hope that's the case here. Roediger writes that it "is now clearer than ever that the right understands the battle as precisely over the production and dissemination of knowledge about the racially unequal past and its impact on an unequal present" (p. 145). To be fair, I don't believe any of those Arkansas legislators know who Roediger is, so it's lucky for them to have university administrators think for them. But regardless of who does the censoring, the effect is the same: humanist scholarship is an eternal conversation, tying Du Bois to Morrison, Baldwin and Roediger, and to all of their many readers. Censorship attempts to break that tie, making it harder for working-class whites and everyone else to see ideas that Roediger insists are fathomable.

As of this writing, a person can get on the waiting list to check out *An Ordinary White* from the Central Arkansas Library System. Your library probably has a copy, too, although for how long is anyone's guess. Go read it.

Reviewer Bio:

Scott Henkel is an associate professor in the department of English at the University of Wyoming. He is a past president of the Working-Class Studies Association and is currently

writing a book, *Oligarchy in America: Slavery, Democracy, and W. E. B. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction*.

Streib, J. and Leondar-Wright, B. (2025) *Is It Racist? Is It Sexist?*: *Why Red and Blue White People Disagree, and How to Decide in the Gray Areas*. Stanford University Press

Review by Karen Gaffney

If you focus just on the primary part of the title of this book, *Is It Racist? Is It Sexist?*, then you might think you don't need to read this book because you already know how to identify racism and sexism. However, if you take a look at the subtitle, *Why Red and Blue White People Disagree, and How to Decide in the Gray Areas*, I hope you're already starting to reconsider that initial impression.

In explaining the motivation behind this book, co-authors Jessi Streib and Betsy Leondar-Wright explain early on that, "From the 1980s until the early 2000s, most white people tended to hold stable views of what's racist and sexist" (p. 4). However, since then, "their views are increasingly up for grabs" (p. 4). In other words, white people disagree with each other much more about racism and sexism than they did in the recent past, and exploring the reasons behind that is a valuable and much-needed direction for research. So, the authors interviewed over 125 white people ages 35 to 59 from different parts of the United States. Selfishly, as a person who fits this racial and age demographic, I was particularly curious about their results. I also thought it was noteworthy that they created a cleverly ambiguous title for their interviewee recruitment that would attract white people with a range of perspectives: "American Lives and Viewpoints Study."

In order to analyze "white people's judgment calls," (p. 6) Streib and Leondar-Wright create what they call a "courtroom metaphor" (p. 20) as a framework to investigate their results, focusing on "acquitters" and "convictors" and then splitting each of those groups into "motivated" and "moderate." Acquitters tend to search for proof of explicit intention of racism or sexism in order to convict, which is often difficult to identify, leading to many acquittals. Convictors, on the other hand, focus more on a broader landscape of injustice that can be much less explicit, leading to their convictions.

Why would white people of a generally similar age demographic disagree with each other so much about racism and sexism, and why has that disagreement increased? Ultimately, the authors explain that the results point to what is called "motivated reasoning," which involves how we filter and interpret information in relation to our preexisting beliefs, which are also connected to our values and group identities (p. 9).

Interestingly, the authors share that they initially looked to explain their results using the demographic information about the people they interviewed, but that was not sufficient. They also explain why a variety of other sociological theories (standpoint theory, materialist theory, and class theory) likewise did not satisfactorily explain their results, leading them back to the role of motivated reasoning to "serve as the primary explanation for white people's judgment calls" (p. 15). This approach involves "how people think, not just who they are" (p. 16).

After the book maps out the framework described above, the six chapters that form the core of the book are divided based on acquitters and convictors in general, and then more precisely with chapters on both motivated and moderate forms of each of these groups. These chapters focus on scenarios presented to interviewees, which prompt their judgment calls, which the authors then analyze by focusing on motivated reasoning. As the authors share the scenarios, they also provide background information about their interviewees, including what, if any, news media they follow, their socio-economic status, education, job, political affiliation, family, and childhood experiences. Some also reference personal experiences with trauma. This context is more three-dimensional than a simple profile would provide.

The opening Acquitters chapter shares cartoons shown to the interviewees with accompanying short scenarios. For example, one scenario reads: “A white cop shoots an unarmed black man who’s holding up his cell phone. Afterward he said he saw a gun, and he’s sure he’d fire on a white person who made the same threatening gesture. Is this a story about racism?” (p. 25). As Streib and Leondar-Wright analyze the motivated reasoning behind people who say this is not a story about racism, they share questions and comments from the interviewees, who tend to focus on this scenario in isolation (rather than as part of a larger systemic pattern), the intention of the officer and his history, what preceded the shooting, and so forth. The interviewees also consider other possible explanations. The chapter explains that acquitters tend to give the benefit of the doubt unless they identify malicious intent. I will note that one aspect of this book that I especially appreciate is the use of footnotes to fact-check the points interviewees make, providing an additional layer of valuable context, particularly when interviewees provide rationales that are not supported by evidence.

The first chapter on Convictors explains how interviewees included under this category responded to the same scenarios described earlier, and here, these interviewees don’t need to see evidence of explicit intent to identify a scenario as racist or sexist and rather look at the impact and whether it is disproportionately negatively impacting people of color or women. Instead of focusing on the scenario as an isolated event, as acquitters do, convictors focus on “pattern-matching,” sometimes in ways that are insightful and valuable and other times in ways that ignore the role of other aspects of systemic injustice like classism and xenophobia (p. 71).

Ultimately the authors share concerns about both the mindset of acquitters and convictors because they focus on confirming their pre-existing beliefs rather than taking all of the evidence into consideration, but at the same time, the authors are much more concerned about how acquitters cause harm. In particular, “acquitters’ repeated not-guilty calls affirm and spread a false message that racial and gender inequality and mistreatment are rare, while convictors’ repeated guilty calls affirm and spread a true belief that they are common” (p. 69-70). In other words, it’s quite harmful that acquitters think racism and sexism are highly unusual, while it’s significant that convictors recognize the systemic nature of racism and sexism, though the concern is that “sometimes the patterns they rely on are inaccurate or too broad” (p. 71).

The final chapter, “A Better Method for Making Judgment Calls” highlights the high-stakes nature of our role in making such calls because of the impact such calls can have, from voting to human resources decisions to decisions educators make every day. Making judgment calls based on how our pre-existing beliefs might be affirmed is clearly not the way to go, as the authors explain. They advocate for shifting away from “belief-based” and focusing on a more “evidence-based” approach (p. 152). They also introduce a new metaphor of the “surveyor” approach rather than the “courtroom” metaphor to emphasize a way of measuring the “landscape and working to improve it” (p. 154). Moreover, they envision “how everyone can become better surveyors" (p. 172). Part of this involves becoming "more comfortable with ambiguity" (p. 173).

There is incredible value in the approach of this book. I think it could be particularly interesting in classroom discussion, along with community conversations. The book was published in 2025, and the interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020. If those same interviews were conducted and analyzed in 2025 and 2026, what would be similar and different? That's a question I am left with. Some interviewees already expressed limited awareness of what racism and sexism even meant, and some expressed an individualistic mindset. Likewise, some interviewees also expressed limited engagement with any news media or awareness of current events, and some expressed significant engagement with right-wing media. In 2025, with massive funding cuts to public broadcasting, with demands to whitewash museum exhibits about racism and sexism, with mandates to eliminate DEI and courses related to racism and sexism from high schools and colleges, how do we shift towards the authors' vision of a society with more surveyors?

Reviewer Bio:

Karen Gaffney, PhD is a Professor of English at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey. She facilitates anti-racism workshops and serves in local anti-racism coalitions. In 2025, the second edition of her book *Dismantling the Racism Machine: A Manual and Toolbox* was published by Routledge. This book is an accessible introduction to race and racism with tools for action. Her website dividednolonger.com provides a variety of anti-racism resources to support the book.

Kahlenberg, R.D. (2025). *Class Matters: The Fight to Get Beyond Race Preferences, Reduce Inequality, and Build Real Diversity at American Colleges*. Hachette Book Group.

Review by Kenneth Oldfield

In *Class Matters*, Richard Kahlenberg argues that America's top colleges should redefine merit to include socioeconomic obstacles overcome when considering an applicant's qualifications. He supports this change, believing it will lead to many more students from low-income and working-class backgrounds gaining admission to these premier schools. Kahlenberg makes a strong case for why these exclusive colleges are justified in democratizing their student ranks according to socioeconomic background. He reports, for example, that 1) wealthy students at the University of North Carolina campus, the so-called "university of the people," outnumber low-income students sixteen to one (p.3); 2) there are more legacy students at UNC than first-generation students, notwithstanding the fact that "there were *451 times* more American adults age twenty-five and older without a college degree compared to adults in the world who graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill" (p. 215, emphasis in original); and 3) anyone who visits one of American's top colleges is "twenty times as likely to bump into a wealthy student as a student from a low income background. The über rich – students from families in the top 1% of income nationally – often took up more seats than students from the bottom 60% by income combined" (p. 121, citing Chetty et al., 2017).

For present purposes, think of Kahlenberg's hypothetical individual, let's call the person "Chris," of humble beginnings as an applicant with high SAT (or ACT) scores, strong personal recommendations, and an impressive grade point average whose parents quit school in the eleventh grade to work at minimum wage jobs all their lives. For Kahlenberg Chris is prima facia meritorious and should receive special attention from admissions committees at any of the nation's best colleges. (Hereinafter, Kahlenberg's proposal that affirmative action be based on obstacles overcome is called SESAA for socioeconomic status affirmation action.)

Kahlenberg wants to increase social class diversity at America's top colleges for two interrelated reasons, including (a) a highly disproportionate number of those leading the nation's most influential public and private organizations graduated from one of these schools, and (b) SESAA will cause these organizations to better reflect the country's demographic characteristics and thus expand the range of viewpoints considered in discussions and decision making. For those claiming that despite their on-paper qualifications, SESAA students are not academically suited to study at a top-ranked school, Kahlenberg cites empirical evidence to the contrary.

In *The Remedy: Class, Race, and Affirmative Action* (1996), Kahlenberg argued that American colleges should adopt SESAA plans. His primary focus in that book, however, was reviewing the legal precedents showing that college admissions committees are free to employ SESAA criteria without fearing the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) will declare the practice unconstitutional as it has done with race-based affirmative action programs. Kahlenberg demonstrated that the Justices had never rejected a public policy employing social class distinctions, a conclusion that remains true. He was not the first person to make this claim about prior Court rulings. In a *Connecticut Law Tribune* essay, Stuart Taylor Jr. called SESAA "legally unassailable" (1991, p. 23).

The American legal and political (to make an admittedly artificial distinction) environments have shifted markedly in Kahlenberg's favor since he published *The Remedy*. Using varied tactics including executive orders and public referenda, California, Florida, Washington, and Michigan, among others, outlawed race-based affirmative action policies in higher education. Most importantly in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* (2023), SCOTUS ruled 6-3 that it is unconstitutional to weigh racial criteria when deciding student admissions. At the same time, the Court readily acknowledged the social class distortions associated with attending a top-rated American college. In a concurring opinion, Justice Gorsuch (note 3, p. 14) cited Bazelon's 2023 *The New York Times* article showing that, "In the Ivy League, children whose parents are in the top 1 percent of the income distribution are 77 times as likely to attend as those whose parents are in the bottom 20 percent of the income bracket" (p. 41).

Using *Students for Fair Admissions*, historical events, and statistics to buttress his proposal, in *Class Matters* Kahlenberg argues that America's prestigious colleges have good reason to replace the now unconstitutional practice of race-based affirmative action policies with SESAA alone. He references sources showing that SESAA initiatives can improve racial *and* socioeconomic diversity among students attending these exclusive schools.

Despite *Students for Fair Admissions* and evidence justifying SESAA, Kahlenberg explains that the nation's selective schools have five reasons for being slow to recruit and support more students of humble origin. *First*, SESAA means selective colleges must expand the amount of financial aid they provide to a much larger number of students whose families could not otherwise afford to send their children to an exclusive school, assistance these institutions claim is beyond their means.

A *second* reason is legacy preferences. Kahlenberg believes legacy admissions should be abolished. This change is easier said than done, as he acknowledges. He points out that legacy students are more likely to come from families, sometimes legacies themselves, who can pay full price to attend an elite school. Besides their family's financial ability, legacy students may later make large donations to their alma mater. Finally, wealthy family members who graduated from an exclusive college but not an Ivy League school may donate money to an Ivy to help a son or daughter gain admission. Although he was not a Harvard graduate, Jared Kushner's father, Charles, a New York University alumnus, donated $2.5 million to Harvard to improve his son's chance of being accepted. Kahlenberg describes Jared, President Trump's son-in-law, as a less than stellar student and quotes a Harvard official he interviewed who explained, "There were at the time other kids we thought should really get in on the merits, and they did not" (p. 191). Jared is now a Harvard graduate.

Third, America's selective colleges do not want to jettison legacy preferences because of something both Kahlenberg and SCOTUS recognize. In *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.*, the Court noted that, "College admissions are zero-sum; a benefit provided to some applicants but not to others necessarily advantages the former at the expense of the latter" (p. 7). In other words, because there are a fixed number of seats available at each college, reducing or abandoning legacy preferences to admit more SESAA students risks losing the financial benefits of legacy admissions, a one-for-one tradeoff the schools want to avoid.

Fourth, "Universities," according to Kahlenberg, "take great pains to signal their virtue on issues of race, [but] turn a blind eye to class" (p. 9). He mentions, for instance, that minorities at these exclusive colleges closely mirror majority students in having upper-middle or upper-class roots, meaning that racial affirmative action policies have primarily advantaged the advantaged. Kahlenberg's reasoning is evocative of Robert Michels's observation that, "Who says organization, says oligarchy" (2001, 1911, p. 241). In his book *Political Parties*, Michels reported that even when an organization starts with a flat, democratic structure, it inevitably evolves a governing class whose selection process favors new members of like mind and circumstances, a self-perpetuating elite. Even when pressured to alter their admissions criteria, the ensuing reforms are modest, just enough to satisfy the political zeitgeist. Michels described this situation as "new conductor, but the music is just the same" (n.330, p. 266). *Class Matters* offers a way of lessening this problem of structural sclerosis by granting access to many students who would otherwise be denied entry, a major democratic reform that can significantly alter how these exclusive colleges operate.

Last, Kahlenberg argues that the continuing emphasis on racial and ethnic disparities in higher education (and most other aspects of American life for that matter) pits poor and working-class people of all stripes against each other, a red herring that, again, advantages the advantaged. He asserts that when poor and working-class people join forces, every member benefits from the amalgamation no matter their otherwise differing characteristics. An example of Kahlenberg's interests-in-common argument is television news reports showing racial, ethnic, and gender integrated union members picketing for better wages, working conditions, and other benefits. (See, for instance, the *Point of View* broadcast on PBS recounting the efforts of a diverse mix of current and former warehouse workers who founded a union at an Amazon Fulfillment Center in Staten Island, New York (*Union*, 2025)).

It is impossible to read *Class Matters* without hoping that Kahlenberg persists in his pursuit of equalizing learning opportunities and intellectual diversity in higher education. Based on the ideas he presents in *Class Matters*, here are three topics he should consider addressing in his next book about classism in American higher learning.

First, in *Class Matters* Kahlenberg focuses exclusively on having America's leading colleges adopt SESAA policies, because, as noted, so many of these schools' graduates become leading figures in major businesses, industries, and the federal government. Certainly, the same logic applies to the country's remaining colleges. These institutions feed membership in state and local governments and other influential institutions such as the press, financial establishments, K-12 schools, the Better Business Bureau, and Planned Parenthood. Shouldn't the rewards of diversity flow to all organizations where the evidence shows SESAA policies are justified? Besides, calling attention to the long-overlooked effects of social class origin on the trajectory of people's lives will generate still more support for SESAA policies in higher learning and elsewhere by expanding the interpretation of "merit" to include Kahlenberg's idea of socioeconomic hurdles overcome.

Second, the bounties of social class diversity in higher education do not apply to students alone. The logic and benefits of SESAA that Kahlenberg lists in *Class Matters* apply equally to those teaching these predominantly younger learners (see, e.g., Morgan et al., 2022). Professors have considerable power over the ideas students encounter in and out of class. Faculty select lecture and discussion topics, textbooks, writing assignments, and which classes students must complete to graduate, to name only a few instances of this influence. Kahlenberg should amplify his efforts to overcome classism in higher learning by expanding his SESAA concerns to include professors everywhere. This integrative reform will spread diversity's payoffs to both sides of the podium.

Finally, Kahlenberg should detail ways to hold colleges accountable for their successes and failures in implementing widespread SESAA diversity plans for students and professors. Currently, many schools list racial and gender figures and related visuals on their websites. Kahlenberg should devise ways to measure and publicize information showing the socioeconomic origin of students and faculty at every American college. Otherwise, the things you can count, but don't count, can't count.

In *Class Matters* Kahlenberg offers a highly readable, well-researched, and persuasively argued case for why America's exclusive colleges should adopt SESAA policies to accommodate the Court's *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.* ruling. He shows that this reform will democratize student ranks by both race and class. He further demonstrates that this approach will help unite working class people in general and counteract the divide-and-conquer consequences of using racial affirmative action plans. Once SESAA becomes commonplace, this reform will speak to the leitmotif in Kahlenberg's writings: the unstated complaint that "class rooms" aptly describes the workings of America's top-rated colleges, and the rest of tertiary schooling for that matter, if only to a lesser extent.

Reviewer Bio:

Kenneth Oldfield is an emeritus professor of public administration at the University of Illinois-Springfield. He has published articles on various topics including property tax administration, Graduate Record Examination predictive validity, the Office of Economic Opportunity, personnel selection and orientation, community college funding disparities, property-assessment uniformity, tax increment financing, the human genome project, graduate internships, the philosophy of science, and the sociology of knowledge. His current research, conference presentations, and publications focus on democratizing higher education by recruiting more students, professors, and administrators who are first-generation college and of poverty or working-class origin.

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Review by D-Jay Bidwell

In academic archival studies, the historical record has long favored institutions of power: the state, the university, the corporation, and the elite. When working-class lives enter these spaces, they are frequently mediated through the lens of records created by others, including court documents, union records, and economic data. In *Worker Writers: Community Archiving in Action*, Jessica Pauszek delivers a powerful, methodologically innovative counter-narrative that shows that the community of working-class writers should not only be included in those spaces of power, but their work should be available and easily accessible for study by students and scholars or for anyone who may be interested in their work.

By documenting her decade-long collaboration with the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP), Pauszek shows working-class people as more than just subjects being studied. Instead, she presents them as people who create knowledge, tell their own stories, and preserve their own histories and experiences. Moreover, Pauszke's goal with this book is to "highlight the valuable work done by the FWWCP/FED and the collaborative process we navigated though the moments of precarity, to foreground community values, community representation, and archival access for working-class communities" (p. 4).

Pauszek asserts her ethos in the preface, where she provides a detailed account of her family's working-class lineage. She connects her family's stories that have always been connected to labor, but Pauszek also connects them to stories of literacy. She asserts, "my family never saw themselves as having permission, intelligence, or knowledge to write and publish their stories—despite making the ink for publishing, printing the worlds and images of other people, or writing every single day" (p. xxiv). Here, Pauszek sheds light on her father's many years working in a commercial print shop, where he printed those words and images of the elite. Furthermore, Pauszek's use of narrative style and storytelling throughout the book helps capture the passion and dedication of her and her colleagues' efforts to preserve and share the work of voiceless and overlooked working-class writers.

Although archival work is nothing new in academia, this book centers on Pauszek and her journey of immersion in archival construction. When she first started, she found a lack of scholars who built archives within communities. What's more, she discovered that there were few examples of any archives that centered on working-class writings by any community members. When Pauszek began thinking about creating an archive of working-class writings, she was a novice at developing one. The questions she started with were, "Where are working-class writers and writing represented? Where is working-class community writing stored, preserved, perhaps even taught?" (p. 5).

One important step in her journey is Pauszek's highlighting of her identity as an American graduate student from a prestigious university traveling abroad in London. She notes that "the short story is that in 2013 I traveled to England as a graduate student with the goal of researching working class community writers. It was the first time during my graduate education that I had seen similarities to my own upbringing" (p. 6). She continues throughout the first chapter to talk about the struggles the FWWCP faced, including the organization's bankruptcy and a struggling membership base.

Pauszek explores the history and significance of the FWWCP in chapter two. She builds on her argument that the work of the working-class community should not be viewed as mundane personal narratives but rather as work that creates community and constructs culture. She further shows how members of the FWWCP used writing to document workplace experiences, family histories, migration stories, and community struggles that were often absent from mainstream media and institutional records.

Chapter four is where Pauszek really gets into the creation of the archive. She does an excellent job of comparing and contrasting what a typical scholar might encounter during archival research and what she and her colleagues experienced. For example, in most instances, the archival research will be conducted at an institution, and the collection they request is set up for them to review. By contrast, Pauszek's experiences included no institutional setup, and she talks about not only the emotional and academic labor but also the physical labor of transporting the materials they collected from one available space to another. These are just further examples of whose work is chosen to be preserved and available for research and whose is not.

The book brings something new to the conversation in community literacy by bridging archival studies and working-class community activism. Pauszek does not simply analyze working-class texts from a distance; instead, she foregrounds collaboration with community members, emphasizing co-curation, shared authority, and participatory archival design. Furthermore, Pauszek pushes the notion that those who lack access to or privilege in entering elite spaces, such as attending a college or university, are not good enough to participate in showcasing their work. It would seem that those who take up elite spaces are concerned that allowing working-class writers into their private spaces would overshadow them.

Worker writers: Community archiving in action makes a meaningful contribution to Working-Class Studies because it combines archival research, literacy studies, and community collaboration to demonstrate how working-class histories are created, preserved, and sustained. The book offers not only a study of worker writing but also a methodology for conducting ethical, community-centered research that acknowledges the material realities of labor, precarity, and collective memory. It also serves as a very inspirational narrative for those who want to create something that can help those on the margins of elite spaces.

Reviewer Bio:

D-Jay Bidwell is a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in the Rhetoric, Theory, and Culture program at Michigan Technological University. His research focuses on technical and professional communication, usability, accessibility, and disability studies, with an emphasis on how these areas intersect in theory and practice. He is particularly interested in teaching accessibility in TPC classrooms and preparing students to design inclusive, user-centered documents and digital environments. His work is grounded in social justice and equitable design for individuals with disabilities. He also teaches composition and technical communication courses, emphasizing usability testing and accessible design practices.