

In April 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated while organizing mass protests in support of an illegal strike by Memphis sanitation workers. Like many activists of his day, he saw a profound *intersectionality* between discrimination by race or sex, and workplace exploitation. He asked, “What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?” In response to intersecting modes of oppression, King and others believed that, almost inevitably, most liberatory social movements pursued at least some shared goals. Calling the struggle for economic equality a “new era” for the civil rights movement, King believed that the shared experiences of workplace oppression prepared the way for solidarity and equality. In doing so, he belonged to a broad, activist intellectual tradition. The long tradition of intersectional labor analysis includes the oratory of Frederick Douglass and the sociology of W.E.B. DuBois, the feminist anarchism of Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman, the revolutionary communist poetry of Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka, and the socialist feminism of Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (*Red Dirt*), Donna Haraway (“The Cyborg Manifesto”), Angela Davis (*Women, Race and Class*), Barbara Ehrenreich (*Nickel and Dimed*), and Leslie Feinberg (*Stone Butch Blues*), among countless others.

The intersectional view is in significant tension with common uses of the term labor to indicate a distinct or “special” interest group. In mainstream journalism and school curricula, the term most commonly refers to organized labor, especially politically influential trade union membership. For many, this narrow mainstream usage calls up images of sweat and industrial grime, especially the meatpackers, miners, and auto workers in films like Paul Schrader's *Blue Collar* (1980) or Barbara Koppel's Oscar-winning documentaries (1976, 1991). This usage obscures a very different, far more

diverse reality. At present, the most-unionized U.S. occupations are education and civil service (about 40%), as compared to 10% of miners and factory workers (BLS 2010). If image reflected reality, our notion of a typical union member might be fiftyish, female, an Inuit teacher, a Puerto Rican corrections officer, or a Korean-American clerk at the DMV. The gulf between simplistic media imagery and diverse reality raises critical questions regarding the tendency to stereotype labor as a chiefly white and male, well-organized, “blue collar” special interest group characterized by a culture of rough, manly, almost effortless solidarity.

In fact, the overwhelming majority of American labor is non-union. Today, 88% of wage workers in the regulated formal economy do not bargain collectively, often because worker-hostile laws deny basic protections from employer retaliation. The height of union density in the United States (about 1950) was a lifetime ago; even at that peak, only one in three American workers were represented by unions. From this perspective, the study of workers who bargain collectively is the study of a steadily-shrinking workplace minority. In fact, many observers argue that some contemporary union members represent a *labor aristocracy*, a small, unusually privileged sector of the workforce whose experiences are unrepresentative of the norm.

**New Labor History.** The diversity of the labor movement isn't a recent phenomenon. It's hard for most contemporary Americans to grasp the vitality, breadth, and scope of influence exerted by the U.S. labor movement before 1980. Some labor organizations tended to reinforce the worst aspects of the status quo; others embraced radical political ideals: The socialist Albert Einstein and anti-communist Ronald Reagan were both active union members. Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the Women's Trade Union League, played a critical role in drafting Article 23 of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), securing the “right to form and join trade unions” as a universal human right.

Ironically, *Amnesty International* and numerous other observers now view the United States as among the biggest systematic violators of those rights among developed nations.

Women mill workers organized some of the first militant labor unions in the country and, like their male counterparts, produced a counter-cultural literature of dissent, provocation, and solidarity.

Between the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, some dominant strands of the union movement engaged in sex and race discrimination, but countless workers led vigorous opposition, notably through the “one big union” model of *industrial unionism*, as practiced by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies), the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the pioneering Knights of Labor. Influenced by E.P. Thompson and the Birmingham school of cultural studies, American scholars like Stanley Aronowitz (1974), Sean Wilentz (1986), David Montgomery (1987), and Paul Buhle (1987) began to understand working people as cultural producers, not merely the consumers of cultural artifacts produced for them by others. Michael Denning (1997) chronicles how the rich culture produced by and for union members—often dissident or radical union members seeking to change the culture of their unions for the better-- shaped the broader culture and its politics immeasurably, most notably in the left-wing popular art of the 1930s and 40s. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the present, “the other women's movement” of U.S. women self-organized in the workplace has provided critical, transformational leadership to labor movements worldwide (Cobble, Faue, Brenner).

As these historians and sociologists make clear, sometimes the most influential forces in the US labor movement weren't trade unions in the traditional sense but political parties and organizations. Even the most mainstream unions had significant membership cross-over with socialist, communist, or anarchist movements aimed at revolutionary working-class liberation. Between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the

1940s, millions of working-class Americans believed that a democratic culture and polity was impossible without meaningful workplace democracy (eg Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left*; Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*; Coiner, *Better Red*; Kelley, *Race Rebels*). Losing ground since the Reagan presidency, the struggle by women and men for democracy in the workplace has been erased from school curricula and mainstream historical narrative. There is, in Howard Zinn's still-best-selling formulation, an entire, suppressed “people's history” that is inextricably intertwined with the radical imagination of possibility, hope, change, and empowerment. Zinn and new-labor historians like Herbert Gutman (1977) wrote history from the standpoint of ordinary persons, most of whom must work in order to live. This decision mattered profoundly. Historiography that centrally features the experience, values and agency of working people leads us to understand, in David Montgomery's indelible formulation, how by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century “modern America had been created over its workers' protests.”

Accompanying the large void in mainstream history syllabi are parallel gaps in the literary and cultural curriculum. Even doctoral-level work in American cultural studies is frequently possible without a meaningful encounter with the vast U.S. output of radical poetry, literary naturalism, and proletarian fiction (much of which is more widely-read abroad) represented by George Lippard, Upton Sinclair, Carl Sandburg, Tillie Olsen, Jack London, Meridel LeSueur, A. Philip Randolph, Mike Gold, Chester Himes, Dalton Trumbo and their comrades. Even the vast literature of radical, labor-inflected writing for children has been overlooked (Mickenberg).

**Unwaged and discounted labor.** Today, largely as a result of feminist activism and research, the activities that we understand as labor have expanded enormously since the 1970s. Pointing out that the creation, training, and care of (traditionally) male wage workers depends, all over the globe, on the

often unwaged, traditionally female *labor of reproduction*, Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa (1972) simultaneously led an innovative “wages for housework” campaign and radicalized our understanding of the labor process.

In its narrowest usage, *reproductive labor* refers to the generally unwaged activities of childrearing by parents and other caregivers in the family and community. But James and Dalla Costa usefully expanded the insight that capitalism's visibly-waged activities depends upon an elaborate supporting network of unwaged effort. This altered a longstanding agreement between Marx and other nineteenth-century analysts with Adam Smith that economic analysis of capitalism should focus on wage labor, particularly labor that led directly to the employer's profit, such as factory work.

For both mainstream and dissenting observers of capitalist production, this agreement created a long-standing series of fundamental blind spots regarding:

- unwaged labor, as in childrearing and housework;
- donated labor, as in volunteerism or internship;
- waged labor in the nonprofit sector, such as teaching, policing and civil service;
- free creative or intellectual work;
- subsistence labor in small agriculture;
- forms of forced labor such as slavery, indenture, and prison labor;
- labor in illegal or unregulated circumstances, as in sweatshops, sex work, etc.
- working “off the books” in otherwise legal activities such as babysitting and food service

Underscoring all of the teaching, feeding, nursing, transportation, clothing and training involved in “producing” an industrial worker, feminist analysis shifted our gaze from the labor process on the factory floor to the broader network of activities that make the factory possible. From the point of view of many feminists and analysts in the Italian autonomist tradition such as Paolo Virno and Tiziana Terranova, the value represented by consumer goods is produced in a *social factory*, a vast web of effort that intersects at the point of assembly but is not limited to it.

As should be obvious from the partial list above, the labor performed in the “blind spots” of both traditional and Marxian economic analysis is actually far greater than the labor performed within it.

**Ain't I a worker? Are you?** As nearly every college student or recent graduate can attest: Nearly all forms of contemporary enterprise are restructuring the labor process to maximize the contributions of unwaged, under-waged or donated labor: from volunteers, students, apprentices and interns; from regular wage workers who do email and take phone calls at home or in transit; from local government, which pays for worker training and security services; from permanently “temporary” workers that are not entitled to benefits, or from outsourced workers super-exploited by contractors, often in another country. In both developing nations and Western democracies, this has meant a steady shift away from the stable “job” as the form in which labor is provided, precipitating a crisis in countries such as the United States, where many dimensions of social wellbeing (health insurance, basic shelter, retirement security) are dependent on traditional forms of employment.

The persons who contribute much of this unaccounted-for labor include women; students and teachers; migrants, guest workers and the undocumented; workers in the service economy; clergy and civil servants. Many of them are directed into their economic position in relation to their race or ethnicity.

Others are seduced into donating or discounting their labor by canny management that portrays the discount as a fair exchange for workplaces that are perceived as fun, creative, or satisfying, as Andrew Ross has documented (2004, 2009). Persons in all of these intensely-but-less-visibly laboring groups played a leading role in the worldwide revolutionary ferment of the 1960s. While they often intersected with each other in both planned and spontaneous ways, the new social movements were largely independent (or *autonomous*) of traditional sources of power to shape the course of the state, such as political parties and the dominant trade unions. The school of thought that came to be known as autonomism, therefore, emphasizes their power independent of organized political parties and trade unions, and the intersection of workers' interests across economic sectors and national borders.

The broadest sense of social productivity includes the crucial understanding that contemporary capitalism captures profit from many activities not generally understood as labor. These include pursuits more typically associated with consumption, leisure, education, community service and socializing. It's important to grasp that this is not a theoretical or abstract observation by academics: Many kinds of businesses directly monetize recreational or self-expressive social activity, as in the *social sourcing* of revenue-producing content on YouTube, Huffington Post, and other media sharing sites.

For contemporary capitalism, tapping the labor power of social media goes beyond donating media content. Users also make a second, less obvious gift of countless related activities—eg, the labor of rating content, publicizing it (by passing links along) and surrounding the content with entertaining commentary. This phenomenon (“the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion”) was notably described by Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) as *immaterial labor*; a kind of labor previously

reserved to privileged or professional taste-makers such as professors, critics, public-relations and advertising workers, and journalists. Now, much of that activity is the product of a *mass intellectuality* expressing itself in social media. For many observers, some consequences of this shift include a welcome popularization and democratization of aspects of the culture industries, including culture criticism, product reviewing, and journalism.

The broadest sense of this *social productivity* can be illustrated by campus life. Students' low-wage, under-waged, and donated labor in work-study or internship arrangements (and the resistance to that exploitation represented by soaring indebtedness) is really just the tip of the iceberg. Students create value for campuses in myriad ways. College athletics has already been examined as a form of undercompensated work in which student athletes create revenue-generating spectacle in exchange for dubious education goods. But athletics for broadcast television is just one way that students donate or partially donate labour to schools in the creation of campus culture--from the creation of consumable content (student newspapers, weblogs) to participation in plays, singing groups, orchestras, dance troupes, service organisations, religious activities, business clubs, fraternities, honor societies, political campaigns, student government and so forth. Students participate in the labour and culture of administration, by completing evaluations forms, exchanging notes and opinions regarding faculty, maintaining files of term papers, and so forth. One might easily argue that the time spent by students in gyms and tanning salons--presenting themselves for student-photographers in official campus publications and unofficial fraternity/sorority blogs is a donation to the campus brand. Indeed, where these contributions don't really exist--on commuter campuses with a moribund student culture, for instance--they generally have to be manufactured for the cameras of paid marketing professionals (passage adapted from Bousquet 2009; I could rewrite). This pervasive harvest of value by way of ordinary activities and everyday life shapes the way we understand ourselves and manage our futures,

as recounted by such histories of late-capitalist subjectivity as Randy Martin's "financialization of the self."

**Globalization and the Informal Economy.** In developing countries, seventy to ninety percent of work for income is performed outside the formal economy of regulated wage labor. Even in the United States, there are tens of millions of persons working for income illegally or informally. Many enterprises engaging in legal commerce operate by preference in the informal economy in order to maximize profits. A recent study of Los Angeles County found twenty kinds of legal, mainstream enterprise with 15% to 30% informal employment, among them: auto repair, nursing homes, dry cleaning, construction, hotels, restaurants, furniture manufacture, textile milling and garment sewing. Within an industry, such as food service, some workers will be more likely to be visible in the formal economy (such as waitstaff) while at the same establishment many other positions may be filled informally, such as dishwashers, prep cooks and delivery personnel, may be filled informally.

The capitalist reaction to twentieth-century working-class revolution worldwide has been state adoption of economic *neoliberalism* and the steady *globalization* of the production process (Harvey, 1989).

Taken together, trade policy and technological change has helped employers to cross national borders with ease, pitting the most impoverished populations on the planet against each other in a relentless competition to lower wages—what is often called the global "race to the bottom." Manufacturing positions that left the United States for Mexico left a decade later for China and Malaysia, and, as Chinese capital quests relentlessly for labor even cheaper than China's few dollars a day, even departs China for Africa.

Saskia Sassen's critical observations regarding these forces is that the "formal" and "informal"

economies are not separate, as most mainstream economists would have it, but inextricably intertwined, such that the apparent stability and “formality” of contemporary formal economies requires the pervasive support of illegal, un- and under- regulated labor: “To put it bluntly,” Samir Radwan characterizes Sassen's analysis, "If the informal economy did not exist, the formal economy would have to invent it!"

This means that much of the labor involved in goods consumed in the United States--even eponymous “American” brands like Apple, Levi's and Harley-Davidson—is the labor of Chinese, Mexican, Indonesian, African, and Indian workers. Organizations like China Labor Watch and films like *China Blue* document , across industries, persistent patterns in Chinese manufacture: typically hiring primarily young, single, female workers between the ages of 16 and 25, who will burn out or be fired of worker abuse ranging from violence and toxic chemical exposure to 80- and 90-hour workweeks, often with net salaries (after deductions for employer-provided dormitory housing, food, etc, often for less than 30 cents an hour, sometimes subjected to abuse, toxic chemicals, and violence.

To describe the forces at work in the immiseration of workers in global manufacturing, David Ricardo and Karl Marx formulated the revolutionary *labor theory of value*, the idea that the value of goods derives from the labor necessary to their production. While praising its “constant revolutionizing of production” and agreeing that capitalism was generally an improvement for many ordinary workers over previous forms of economic organization, Marx observed that the system operated, in a sense, vampirically, ie, by diverting a large fraction of this labor-generated value to persons who own industry (ie, the investing class who purchase the means of production, hire the brain power of inventors and engineers, pay workers in advance of sales, etc). In this sense, capital is nothing more than “dead labor,” Marx said, thriving and accumulating “by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more

labor it sucks.”

Works Cited

Aronowitz, Stanley. *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*. Duke UP, (1974; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1991).

Brenner, Johanna. *Women and the Politics of Class*. Monthly Review Press, 2000.

Bousquet, Marc. “Take Your Ritalin and Shut Up.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2009 Volume 108, Number 4: 623-649.

Buhle, Paul. *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left*. Verso (1987, rev. ed. 1991).

Cobble, Dorothy Sue. *The Other Women's Movement: Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America*. Princeton UP, 2005.

Coiner, Constance. *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur*. U Illinois P, 1995.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. NY: Random House, 1981.

Denning, Michael. *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Verso, 1997.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. NY: Metropolitan Books, 2001.

Faue, Elizabeth. *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Stone Butch Blues*. Firbrand Books, 1993.

Gutman, Herbert. *Work, Culture, and Society*. Vintage, 1977.

Dunbar-Ortiz, Roxanne. *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2006.

Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", *Socialist Review*. Vol. 80, 1985, pp. 65-108. 1985

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

James, Selma and Mariarosa Dallacosta. *The Power of Women & the Subversion of Community*.

*Wages for Housework*, (1972; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1975).

Kelley, Robin D.G. *Race Rebels : Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. Free Press, 1996.

Kopple, Barbara. *Harlan County, USA* (film), 1976.

----. *American Dream* (film), 1990.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. "Immaterial Labour" in Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy*. U Minnesota P, pp. 132-146.

Martin, Randy. *The Financialization of Daily Life*. Temple UP, 2002.

Maxwell, William. *New Negro, Old Left*. Columbia UP, 1999.

Mickenberg, Julia. *Learning from the left: children's literature, the Cold War, and radical politics in the United States*. Oxford UP, 2006.

Montgomery, David. *The Fall of the House of Labor*. Cambridge UP, 1987.

Rabinowitz, Paula. *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America*. UNC 1991.

Ross, Andrew. *Nice Work if You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times*. NYU, 2009.

---. *No Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs*. Temple UP, 2004.

Sassen, Saskia. "Informalization in Advanced Market Economies." (*Issues in Development Discussion Paper #20*; isbn 92-2-110715-9), 1997. Preface by Samir Radwan. Geneva: International Labour

Organization (Online). Available at:

<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/strat/publ/iddp20.htm>

Schrader, Paul. Blue Collar (film),1980.

Terranova, Tiziana. Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age. Pluto Press, 2004.

United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, "2010 Union Members Summary." Released January 21, 2011. Online at: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>

Virno, Paolo. "The Soviets of the Multitude: On Collectivity and Collective Work." Interviewed by Alexei Penzin. Mediations 25 (Fall 2010). Online: <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/the-soviets-of-the-multitude>

Wilentz, Sean. Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class: 1788-1850. Oxford UP, 1986.

Zinn, Howard. People's History of the United States, rev. ed. Harper, 2003.