

Five Suggestions for Teaching Working-Class History in a Classless Society

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1. Talk about Class.

One question that arises out of the history of labor history is whether class—as E.P. Thompson saw it—has any meaning in the case of the United States. Thompson defined class as both historical and subjective. That is, class becomes important only in particular historical moments when people think it is important. There are two other ways of understanding class, both of which are objective—meaning that people don't have to recognize the significance of class in order for it to be significant.

Two objective measures of class are income and property. Income is a fairly standard measure used in the media and by the social sciences today. The Census Bureau has no official definition of class, but it divides Americans into three classes based on household income. Roughly 3 in 5 of American households have an annual income between \$25,000 and \$100,000 per year—a group that journalists often refer to as “middle-class.” Upper and lower, or rich and poor often refer to the top and bottom 20% of American households.

While this is a measure of class that makes sense to many of us, it would not have made sense to Americans two centuries—or even a generation—ago. Until the late 19th century, the most important measure of status in America was ownership—not only of land and machinery, but perhaps most importantly, of oneself. The earliest Census forms divided Americans into four major groups, free white males, free white females, free blacks, and slaves. There were then smaller categories that we might call occupations—which were specified only for free men. They included owners of land, merchants, sailors, etc. These categories reflected the belief that ownership—first of one's body and

then of property—provided an individual with the social investment and financial independence necessary to act freely in a democratic society. They also reflected the fact that very few Americans worked for a wage—the simplest measure of income.

The term working-class emerged during the 19th century, as the number of wage earners increased in both Europe and the United States (the earliest recorded use of the term comes from England in 1789). Like landowner, merchant, or slave, working-class refers to ownership rather than income. A working-class person owns no productive property, like land or machinery, but does own him or herself and can therefore earn an income by selling their labor. Since Thomas Jefferson and other founding fathers believed social responsibility and political independence came only through ownership of productive property, they excluded the working-classes from political participation. Wage workers gained the right to vote and run for office only as their numbers and organization increased in the mid-19th century. Until the 1960s, a majority of Americans would have used that term to describe their social status. Even today, when given the choice between poor, middle, upper, and working-class, just over forty percent of Americans still choose working-class.

One place to start talking about class is to ask students whether they share the founding fathers' definition of class. Should democratic participation be restricted to those who own property? Why or why not? A theme to carry through a course on American history might be the expansion and democratization of ideals about freedom, a model for which is given in Eric Foner's excellent, *The Story of American Freedom*. Student's might initiate a discussion of class by comparing the accounts of slaves, indentured servants, and skilled craftsmen and European and Native American farmers in British North America.

Suggested Secondary Sources:

1. Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).
2. Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975)

3. Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985)
4. Gary Nash, *Race, Class and Politics: Essays on American Colonial and Revolutionary Society* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1986)
5. Billy Smith, *The “Lower Sort”: Philadelphia’s Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990)
6. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1987)
7. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Knopf : 1982).
8. Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2000).
9. Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and John Schmitt, *The State of Working America, 2000-2001* (Washington, DC : Economic Policy Institute, 2001)

Suggested Primary Sources:

1. For first hand accounts of work in British North American go to the “History Matters,” a web project of the American Social History Project/Center for Media & Learning and the Center for History and New Media. Look under “Many Pasts” -- <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/browse/manypasts/> Good pieces for comparison include:
 - a. “Work and labor in this new and wild land are very hard”: A German Migrant in Philadelphia, 1750,” & “Packed Densely, Like Herrings,” by Gottlieb Mittelberger.
 - b. A Letter Home From Massachusetts Bay in 1631.
 - c. “We Unfortunate English People Suffer Here”: An English Servant Writes Home.
 - d. “Thus This Poore People Populate This Howling Desart”: Edward Johnson Describes the Founding of the Town of Concord in Massachusetts Bay, 1635.

- e. “They Live Well in the Time of their Service”: George Alsop Writes of Servants in Maryland, 1663.
 - f. “A Most Awkward, Ridiculous Appearance”: Benjamin Franklin Enters Philadelphia.
 - g. “Their Extraordinary Great Labor”: Roger Williams Observes Indian Customs and Language, 1643.
 - h. “Our Plantation Is Very Weak”: The Experiences of an Indentured Servant in Virginia, 1623
 - i. “They That Are Born There Talk Good English”: Hugh Jones Describes Virginia’s Slave Society, 1724
2. American Social History Project, “‘The Terrible Transformation’: From Servants to Slaves in Virginia,”
<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ashp/doing/terribletransformation.html>
 3. The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War:
<http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/>

2. Talk about Culture

Central to Thompson’s work was that class was “a cultural as much as an economic formation.” He and other new labor historians argued that class consciousness emerged through workers’ interactions with each other, not only at work but also in their social and cultural lives. “Class-consciousness is the way these experiences are handled in cultural terms,” Thompson wrote: “embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas, and institutional forms.”

A wealth of cultural material exists through which students can explore not only the experiences of working people but also the ways in which they made sense of those experiences in their cultural productions. You might have students examine working-class cultural expression from the mid-19th century, for example, and compare the ways in which they expressed class-consciousness. Possible sources for analysis include photos showing working-class dress and leisure activities, drawings and cartoons expressing working-class social or political views, or songs.

Suggested Secondary Sources:

1. John Spitzer and Ronald G. Walters, "Making Sense of American Popular Song," essay and resource guide at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/Songs/>
2. E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56-97.
3. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Knopf, 1975)
4. Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).
5. National Archives and Records Administration, "Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan. Affidavit and Flyers from the Chinese Boycott Case." http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/chinese_boycott_case/chinese_boycott_case.html
6. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
7. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).
8. Linda Schelbitzki Pickle, *Contented Among Strangers: Rural German-Speaking Women and Their Families in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
9. Tanea Stewart, Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds., *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: The New Press, 1998). This book has a teaching supplement available online at: <http://www.thenewpress.com/guides/guide1.htm>
10. Charles Joyner, *Down By the Riverside: A South Carolina Slave Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

Suggested Documents:

1. *The Chinese in California, 1850-1925*:
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award99/cubhtml/cichome.html>
2. *Stephen Foster*, A PBS American Experience Film:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/foster/filmmore/index.html>
3. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*:
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>
4. *Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters, 1862-1912*:
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhtml/psbibCorrespondents1.html>

3. Talk About Work

One suggestion for relating the history of work to student's own lives is to talk about the work of young people and how it has changed over time. You might ask students to look at pictures of child workers and to think about how their own lives have been shaped by work (or their ability not to work).

Suggested Secondary Sources:

1. Lynda DeLoach, "Reformers and Child Labor in the Early 20th Century," National History Day Curriculum Book, 2002:
http://nationalhistoryday.org/03_educators/2001-2002curbook/new_page_16.htm
2. National Archives and Records Administration, "Teaching With Documents Lesson Plan: Photographs of Lewis Hine: Documentation of Child Labor."
http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/hine_photographs/hine_photos.html
3. Shelley Sallee, *The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004)
4. Marvin J. Levine, *Children for Hire: The Perils of Child Labor in the United States* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2003).

Suggested Documents:

1. The History Place has a wonderful collection of photos taken by Wisconsin native, Lewis Hine, during his investigation for the National Child Labor

Committee between 1908 and 1912. They also have essays on child labor in history and today:

<http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/childlabor/index.html>

2. The Library of Congress' American Memory website also has hundreds of photos showing children at work, particularly during the 1930s. Enter the words "children" and "work" in the search engine at:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mdbquery.html>

4. Talk About Politics

Lizabeth Cohen's *Making a New Deal* provides a model for examining the interactions between working-class culture and state and federal politics. You might integrate some of her points into lessons on the 1930s and 1940s by showing how workers understood and shaped the development of the welfare state.

Suggested Secondary Sources:

1. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990)
2. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989)
3. Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987)
4. Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000)
5. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997)
6. Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)
7. Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002)

Suggested Documents:

1. New Deal Network, "The Great Depression and the Arts: A Unit of Study for Grades 8-12," <http://newdeal.feri.org/nchs/index.htm>
2. Studs Terkel, "The Hard Times Recordings." <http://www.studsterkel.org/htimes.php>
3. "Voices from the Thirties: Life Histories from the Federal Writers' Project," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/exhome.html>
4. Oral History in the Classroom (created by Beth Collins, Distance Learning Center Coordinator, Chicago Historical Society) is a lesson plan for high school students. The plan supplies teachers and students with a set of questions that use Studs Terkel's interviews as a starting point for having students do their own oral history interviews: <http://www.studsterkel.org/education.php>

5. Talk About the Present

Perhaps the best way to get students thinking about labor history is to connect questions raised by that history to their own lives. There may be no more direct connection to labor history than through a discussion of the production and distribution of clothing. Students can start that lesson by looking at the labels of their own clothing and thinking about where its component parts were produced, manufactured, and packaged for their own consumption. They can then think about the significance of clothing production in American history, from the homespun movement during the Revolution through Progressive era campaigns against sweatshops and to contemporary discussions of globalization. You might ask students to think about continuity and change in the interrelated histories of garment production, immigration, and gendered divisions of labor.

Suggested Secondary Sources:

1. Daniel E. Bender, *Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004)

2. Daniel E. Bender and Richard A. Greenwald, eds., *Sweatshop USA: The American Sweatshop in Historical and Global Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2003)
3. Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors : Immigrant Women Workers Take On the Global Factory* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2001)

Suggested Documents:

1. Triangle Fire Online Exhibit: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>
2. David Shiman, "Wages, Earning Power, Profit, And Responsibility: International Lessons,"
<http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/hreduseries/tb1b/Section2/activity3.html>
3. Peter Liebhold and Harry Rubenstein, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A History of American Sweatshops, 1820-Present,"
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/145>
4. BehindThe Label.org is a campaign project of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE), a union representing more than 250,000 apparel, textile and other industry workers in the U.S. and Canada.
<http://www.behindthelabel.org/>
5. New Deal Network, Photo Gallery, "The Triangle Fire, March 25, 1911,"
http://newdeal.feri.org/library/d_4m.htm