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Edited by Jay Winter

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Introduction: labour history and labour historians

JAY WINTER

Labour history in Britain has changed substantially since its emergence as an academic discipline in the years following the Second World War. Against the background of the defeat of fascism and the sweeping victory of the Labour party in the 1945 general election, the first generation of labour historians aimed to reconstruct the evolution of labour movements. This they did through a painstaking retrieval and reconstruction of the record of the institutions of labour – trade unions, political parties and sects, cooperatives, and educational and religious societies. In terms of this aim, their achievement is undeniable. The question remained, however, as many of them would admit, as to how representative of the history of labouring men and women as a whole is the record of organized struggle? Of course, without institutional history, this question simply cannot be answered. But while admitting that in aggregate terms the labour movement has never recruited more than a minority of the working class, labour historians until recently shared a consensus that the record of its struggles expresses, and indeed embodies, both the aspiration of ordinary people to have a better life and their commitment to change the world in which they live and work.

In contrast, recent developments in labour history reflect a different approach to the question of the relation between movement and class. The aim is to complement (rather than supersede) earlier research by defining labour history as the social history of the working class and not primarily as the political history of militants and militancy. The claim of some earlier historians that labour movements reflect the progressive ideas and commitments of the rank-and-file of the working class has been challenged. This is not because labour historians now subscribe to the view of G. M. Trevelyan that social history is history with the politics left out. It is rather that these historians believe that the true political character of the labour movement in modern Britain, and its limitations in outlook and organization in the past, can be identified only when set in the context of the social history of stable working-class communities which by and large have accepted their subordi-

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nation in the capitalist social order. If the commotion of struggle gave to the earlier studies of labour history their particular tone, it is the silence of political submission which later labour historians have asked us to hear. In the first phase of labour history, the customs and traditions of labouring men were shown to be sources of revolt. In the second phase, other aspects of working-class culture and community become the sources of passivity. There is truth, of course, in both camps. And it would be wrong to exaggerate the extent to which the study of apathy has displaced the study of activism as the dominant theme in recent labour history. Still, it is apparent that a change of emphasis has taken place.

This historiographical development reflects more than a change in transient academic fashions. Its sources partly lie in the disappointment of hopes that fundamental social change would follow the election of Labour governments in the years since the Second World War. There are also more particular generational differences at work. The first phase of the development of labour history in Britain was dominated by the work of a remarkable cohort of historians whose outlook reflected a number of shared experiences. Most were educated at Oxford and Cambridge in the 1930s and 1940s and thereafter began to teach in provincial universities or in adult education. Most saw military service in the Second World War. Most passed through the Communist party in the 1930s and 1940s, and most left after 1956. Most retained the following belief.

The atomized and predatory logic of capitalism (which persists even within static forms) can only be displaced by the alternative intentions and aspirations of a social consciousness which can (as empirically-given historical fact) be shown to find partial and fragmented embodiment in the actual working-class movement. British history, over 150 years, has shown this alternative possibility to be waxing and waning and waxing again – not as *exactly the same* possibility, but the same in terms of an alternative, socialist logic.¹

This view had been voiced even earlier by the socialist historian and economist, G. D. H. Cole, whose teaching, encouragement and inspiration were instrumental in launching the post-war generation. Evidence of Cole's influence can be found in *Essays in Labour History*, the *Festschrift* published shortly after his death in 1960, in which some important aspects of the work of the first phase of labour history may be surveyed.² In addition, when a professional organization of labour historians was founded, consideration was given to naming it the 'G. D. H. Cole Society'. A more descriptive title was adopted, and it has been through the 'Society for the Study of Labour History' and its *Bulletin* that the subject has developed in the last two decades.³

The achievement of this group of historians has been to transform the way history is studied in Britain. Undergraduate and post-graduate courses in labour history have multiplied. Conferences and publications have pro-

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liferated. In the early 1960s, it probably would have taken an afternoon for a student of labour history to catch up on what had appeared recently in the field. Twenty years later, reading the literature (not to mention adding to it) has taken on the character of a full-time job.

The influence of labour history extends well beyond the parochial boundaries of a sub-discipline. The work of Asa Briggs, J. F. C. Harrison, Royden Harrison, Eric Hobsbawm, Sidney Pollard, John Saville and E. P. Thompson,⁴ among many others, has made it virtually impossible for general historians to relegate discussion of working people and their lives to the background chapters of political histories or to describe them as quaint examples of local colour. Furthermore, the élitist assumptions that workers propose but propertied people dispose (and that this has always been the case) have been banished from the pages of serious historical writing in Britain.

Given the passage of time, the failure of the student revolts of 1968, the fate of the Prague 'spring' of the same year, the onset of an international economic crisis and in Britain the recrudescence of mass unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s, it was perhaps inevitable that a change in direction among labour historians would take place. Some drew on the writings of Antonio Gramsci to explore aspects of cultural history and to investigate the nature of the working-class community as both a realm apart *and* an area where the 'dominance the employers exerted' was manifested in 'the ordinary business of people's lives, inside and outside the factory'.⁵ The explanation of political attitudes was still the objective of many of these studies, but others forsook the political realm entirely in order to concentrate on aspects of working-class social history.⁶ In recent years, some have sought in the work of historians of France ways to escape from the primacy of political activism. The example of historians wedded to both the concept of *histoire totale* and the resurrection of the unchanging mentality of the masses was of particular importance in this regard. Other scholars have also proved willing to apply to their own work independent advances in historical demography, family history and the history of ritual and religion.⁷ In addition, an older suspicion that quantitative techniques and economic theory in general were in some way intrinsically right-wing tools of analysis has largely faded away. Consequently, statistical studies of aspects of working-class life and analyses of business behaviour and entrepreneurial strategies have become a recognized part of the study of labour history.⁸ It has recently been claimed that the trend in historical study is to move away from analysis and back to the narrative.⁹ Whatever the truth of this claim in general terms, labour history, it appears, is moving in precisely the opposite direction.

Among the pioneers of the subject in Britain, Henry Pelling has had a distinguished and influential career. His first publications were concerned with the emergence of independent labour politics and the 'socialist revival' of the

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1880s and 1890s. His edition of writings from Tom Paine to Richard Crossman entitled *The Challenge of Socialism* (1953) set these phenomena in a long-term perspective and provided a sympathetic introduction to the ‘richness of debate and controversy on distinctly socialist lines that has been an invigorating influence throughout the political life of this country’.¹⁰ One year later his *Origins of the Labour Party* was published. It was the first major work of scholarship on the subject which was not written by a party activist, past or present. In place of what may be called the ‘sixty years’ march syndrome’ of labour history, Pelling quietly and authoritatively provided in this, as in later work, a rigorous and accurate account of the evolution of the institutions of the modern labour movement. In subsequent studies on trade-unionism, the Labour party and the Communist party in Britain, as well as in writings on the American labour movement,¹¹ he has shown that it is possible to write about the past of organized labour without adopting a plebeian version of the Whig interpretation of history through which we see the struggles of the past moving inexorably to the victories of the present. In a sense, his political histories have helped to fulfil the classic aim of historical scholarship: the replacement of mythology or vague memory by painstakingly-researched and documented historical analysis. In the process he has produced books which are still indispensable introductions to the subject a generation later.

He has devoted his later work to more general aspects of the social and political history of modern Britain. In his book of collected essays, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (1968), he developed incisive and provocative interpretations of key problems in the history of the British working class. In this studies of the labour aristocracy, the ‘labour unrest’ of 1911–14 and of popular attitudes to welfare and to empire, he has offered challenging reappraisals of the relation between political and industrial activism and the class structure of modern Britain. A similar concern to deepen the social historical content of political history marks his *Social Geography of British Elections 1885–1910* (1967). This book is a meticulously-researched unique guide to the study of regional and local politics, an area in which much more work still needs to be done.

In more recent years, his interests have centred on the period of the 1940s, when his own historical work began. In both his *Britain and the Second World War* (1970) and his biography of Winston Churchill (1974), which naturally covers a much longer period, we see further examples of Pelling’s considerable skill in reducing an enormous literature to economical proportions and in writing history that both scholars and general readers will understand and appreciate. His latest research on the Attlee government of 1945–51 is informed by the same concern to place the history of labour in the context of the wider political and social history of Britain which is the hallmark of all his historical scholarship.

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In a sense, Pelling's work spans the historiographical divide described above. His major studies chronicle the history of activism and struggle but do so in a way which makes us take full account of the coexistence of 'profound class consciousness' and popular conservatism and apathy.¹² Even those whose interpretations differ from his recognize that his work has contributed to a better understanding of the multiple political and social meanings of the experience of class in modern Britain.

The essays in this book are intended as further explorations of this complex historical problem. They reflect as well the dual character of much recent writing about the history of the British working class. The first section focuses on the outlook, organization and policies of the Labour movement. Three essays deal with political choices; three with political achievements. The first three chapters describe the major forms of left-liberal politics which have emerged over the last three generations. The labourism of Keir Hardie (and others) created the Labour party and remains in it to this day. It displaced liberal paternalism, like that of Churchill, which made the running in working-class politics before 1914 but faded rapidly after the First World War. Whether or not both will be superseded by 'social democracy', in the shape of a party separated from the trade union movement but representing traditional Labour commitments to equality and social justice, remains to be seen. But as the essays of Peter Clarke, Fred Reid and Paul Addison show, each of these options has a history which contemporary observers ignore at their peril. Chapters 4–6 focus on the vicissitudes of Labour politics in the period between 1920 and 1950. The image of the shaky local foundations on which the Labour party rested in the 1920s, presented by Christopher Howard, contrasts sharply with the record of the Attlee government, examined by Partha Gupta in terms of Imperial policy and by Kenneth Morgan in terms of post-war reconstruction in Wales. Perhaps the Labour party did not fully realize the hopes of its founders in this period, but under the circumstances its record was not inconsiderable, as these essays demonstrate.

The second section is concerned with central aspects of the social history of the British working class. Ross McKibbin's study of work and hobbies and Paul Johnson's essay on credit and thrift tell us much about the nature of working-class culture and the working-class domestic economy. Alastair Reid contributes to the discussion of the labour aristocracy with a close examination of the ideas of Thomas Wright, a Victorian metal worker and social commentator often taken to be the exemplar of that problematic social formation. Chushichi Tsuzuki's account of the National Council of Labour Colleges in the period 1920 to 1950 raises intriguing questions about the nature of British Marxism and the meaning of socialist education. José Harris furthers the debate on the working class and social policy by an analysis of the findings of G. D. H. Cole's 1942 survey of popular attitudes to welfare. Arthur Marwick's

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essay challenges the view that since the 1930s the distinction between working class and non-working class has faded and emphasizes the centrality of cultural and economic, rather than political, manifestations of class sentiment. The stubborn persistence of the trend towards improving health among the working population in the period of the interwar depression and during the Second World War is the theme of the editor's contribution, which is the final essay of the book.

Taken together, these studies provide striking evidence of two central points. First, they document the ways in which the experience of class has pervaded virtually every corner of this nation's public life. Secondly, they show that the mixed political record of organized Labour, its hesitations and failures as well as its struggles and successes, cannot be understood without a full appreciation of the collective and individual lives of working people outside the political arena.

This book does not claim to provide a complete or comprehensive history of the working class in modern British history. No single volume could even begin to approach that task. If space permitted, there would be a separate section in this book, entitled 'The Working Class in British Industry', which would reflect new approaches to the study of trade-unionism and the labour process.¹³ Many historians working on these themes are as indebted as the authors of this book to the work of Henry Pelling. In a way, anyone working in labour history today is informally one of his students. It is appropriate, therefore, that to mark his retirement from his Readership in History in the University of Cambridge we collectively dedicate this volume to him.

Pembroke College, Cambridge

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