

# SUGGESTIONS AND DEBATES

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## THE FUTURE OF BRITISH LABOUR HISTORY\*

Just over ten years ago the future of labour history in Britain seemed assured. A self-confident, burgeoning field, it lay at the centre of the most innovative contributions to British historiography in the post-war era, and could claim as its own some of the most impressive historians of the time. Since the founding of the Society for the Study of Labour History in 1960, the field had moved from the periphery of historical concerns to occupy a central position in the spectrum of history writing.

Labour history's agenda was ambitious and wide ranging. Leading members of the profession such as Eric Hobsbawm and Edward Thompson had shifted focus from the hagiography of labour *movement* history to the social history of the working class. Similarly, the task of the field had been defined as the recovery of the daily structures of life of ordinary people in their communities, workplaces, homes and societies in the belief that this would explain not only the history of labour but also its contribution to the history of society. The organizing categories of the field – such as class – were clearly delineated and widely accepted as unproblematic.

But now this future seems darkly clouded. The thirtieth anniversary conference of the Society for the Study of Labour History was entitled “The Future of Labour History” with a question mark and consisted of critical reviews of the main trends and absences in the field.<sup>1</sup> As the papers at this meeting emphasised, what has happened in the meantime is that the organizing categories of the field have been called into serious doubt. Class, for example, is no longer regarded as given, but is even questioned as a useful or meaningful category at all. The agenda items for research that seemed to serve ten years ago are not only being queried but also dismissed as the wrong interrogations to ask. Thus, the assumption that oppositional tendencies within the working class are a driving force of its history is now challenged by historians who argue that cross class cooperation is equally

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<sup>1</sup> See the reports in *Labour History Review*, 55 (Winter, 1990), 3, pp. 5–16.

visible in labour history and, perhaps, the dominant tendency. It is not too much to say that the field is in crisis, a crisis that flows from an erosion of confidence that the questions it has asked and the assumptions upon which it has operated are valid and useful.<sup>2</sup>

There are two, related, reasons for this crisis. One lies in the political context of the last ten years. Labour history, like all of British historiography, has been profoundly affected by the shift in political discourse that followed the collapse of social democratic (and liberal) values and strategies in the late 1970s. The spectrum of politics moved to the right and the new intellectual currency that attached to “conservative” ideas reverberated powerfully throughout the academic world. Government policies which seemed to aim at devaluing history and attempting to bring its curriculum more into line with conservatively defined “national” values contributed to a wider crisis of confidence about the future of British history as a whole.<sup>3</sup> But the implications of this political sea change are particularly significant for a field like labour history which has always been politically charged and was, after all, originally established by labour politicians.

Indeed, it is impossible to divorce the historiography of labour history from the political agendas that constituted the world of its first practitioners. These historians saw their task as accounting for the rise of labour to political and industrial maturity – a process they conceived as a progressive and inevitable response to economic and social change. The focus of their concerns, the rise of trade-union and political organization, reflected two of the key socio-economic-political developments of the late nineteenth century. Writing the history of these formations dominated this first phase of labour history. By the 1950s, however, the framework of labour history had begun to change and it was during this decade that the recent explosion of creative work in the field was spawned. However much revisionist historians reject the assumptions that grew out of this second phase of the historiography of labour, they are the intellectual children of Marxist-oriented historians like Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Thompson, John Saville, who were responsible for broadening the field from the history of orga-

<sup>2</sup> For a critical survey of this literature see Neville Kirk, “In Defence of Class. A Critique of Recent Revisionist Writing Upon the Nineteenth Century English Working Class”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXII (1987), pp. 2–47. But it is interesting that discussion on this crisis is virtually non-existent. Nor is such a crisis limited to Britain; for a similar situation in the United States see Eric Arnesen, “Crusades Against Crisis. A View from the United States on the ‘Rank and file’ Critique and other Catalogues of Labour History’s Alleged Ills”, *International Review of Social History*, XXXV (1990), pp. 106–127.

<sup>3</sup> David Cannadine, “British History: Past, Present and Future?”, *Past and Present*, 116 (1987), pp. 169–191; and the replies by P. R. Cross, William Lamont, and Neil Evans in *Past and Present*, 119 (1988), pp. 171–203.

nizations to the socio-cultural conditions that underpinned the structures of labour in society.<sup>4</sup>

Most importantly, however, the conceptual approach was also modified. The rise of labour – and attention still largely focussed on that – was no longer seen as a story of unqualified triumphs, but rather as producing paradoxical tendencies within the working class. A strong sociological and cultural sense of class identity coexisted with a political practice that had failed to raise a serious ideological challenge to the capitalist organization of society. The central problem for labour history was to explain that contradiction and, thus, it was believed, contribute to an explanation of British society. This new agenda served to inspire the extensive research of the last thirty years. In a sense there was a reversal of perspective from the optimism of celebrating the emergence of mass organization to the pessimism of asking what had gone wrong with the politics of the movement. Whereas the first generation of labour historians had sought the answers to their questions in the dynamic of unity and organization, the second generation sought theirs in the way sociological structuring of the working class combined with powerful political traditions to block effective radical challenges.

But this new perspective remained moored largely within the original framework of the field. Main attention continued to be paid to economic and social structures, and, most significantly, explanations tended to be sought within the internalities of the labour experience. Thus, if the focus on “culture” in Edward Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* was expansive, its emphasis upon the autonomy of the working-class experience reinforced the tendency to encourage an isolation of the field from other areas.

In addition, the teleological assumptions of labour history remained unchanged. Whereas the earlier generation had taken the form and structure of labour’s rise as inevitable, this later generation was concerned to ask why it had taken the path that it had and why, in particular, its deviations from growing strength and political assertiveness seemed to be its main characteristic. There remained an assumption that the main problems demanding explanation in labour history were the divergences from its naturally driven path. Thus, it was no coincidence that Eric Hobsbawm, a leading figure in this phase of labour history, could write a major re-evaluation of the current state of labour in 1978 entitled “Labour’s Forward March Halted?”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians. An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge, 1984) for an intelligent survey of the key figures in this development.

<sup>5</sup> Reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Politics for a Rational Left* (London, 1989).

Hobsbawm's essay, of course, was written at the onset of the economic downturn of the late seventies. And, indeed, the politics of the late seventies played a critical role in forcing a questioning of the perspectives of labour history. The successful undermining of trade-union industrial power partly by unemployment, partly by political and legal means, and the displacement of the shared assumptions that had dominated the political scene since 1945 seemed to render anachronistic the focus of labour history on class, opposition and the exercise of economic and political power.

These political developments fueled a second element of crisis. As the history of the labour movement became the social history of the working class, the new lines of enquiry into the details of working-class culture and society tended to undermine the theoretical and conceptual assumptions of the field. Four areas in particular have felt the full force of this contradiction: first, the voids and absences that traditionally characterized labour history have been highlighted, second, the question of the labour aristocracy, third, the matter of class and class consciousness, and, finally, the relation of economics to politics.

The direction that research in labour history took in the 1970s fractured the existing boundaries of the field. Labour history has always privileged those who organized for and sought power in the public realm, be it industry or politics. The result was that those whose ideologies and programs lost the competition for power or the defining discourse of labour action were left out. The effort to write the social history of the working class, however, forced attention to the voids that existed in traditional labour history and to those groups who were, in consequence, absented from the process. This included the unorganized, the unskilled, those in small-scale industry, and most notably, women. Whilst the history of the first three can fairly easily be accommodated within the conceptual boundaries of the field, in a separation to be regretted, the history of women has developed apart with its own organizing assumptions, categories and highly sophisticated theoretical framework. Indeed, women's history now can claim to have replaced labour history as the most innovative and exciting field of scholarship in social history.

Explanations of the reformism of labour movement typically focused on the way a labour aristocracy emerged out of industrialization to possess a privileged relationship to the rest of the working class and an ambiguously cooperative relationship to the dominant classes. This structuring allowed and even encouraged the development of reformist, labourist politics. Deeper research into the labour aristocracy, however, revealed that its vulnerability and fragmentation were not that different from the rest of the working class and its sociological differentiation was far from distinct. Interestingly enough, the sociological presence of the labour aristocracy was not disproved by revisionists, although its variable and impermanent

character were demonstrated. But the necessity of positing a labour aristocracy to explain labour politics was decisively undermined. Indeed, in contrast to the assumptions that were traditionally made about growing strength and inherent opposition, the vulnerabilities of the working class to capitalist domination in industry and to bourgeois cultural hegemony began to be stressed as the main determinant of the nature of the working-class social and political presence.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, with the nature of class and class consciousness. Once it was established that class was a construction and not a predetermined consequence of structural forces, then the notion that it could be seen as the product of an autonomous culture reacting to certain political and economic circumstances ultimately needed to be rethought. Class and class action, it became apparent, could work in many different and contradictory ways. Thus, as Ross McKibbin has argued, sports, leisure and religion could serve as manifestations of class activity, competitive to politics pure and simple. Similarly, the idea that class consciousness was necessarily oppositional came under close scrutiny. Indeed it was suggested that the factory form of modern industrial capitalism was more likely to stimulate structures and consciousness that identified common interests with employers rather than the opposite. Thus, cooperation rather than oppositional consciousness and conflict was posited to characterize class consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

The most important implication of this shift was the need to reevaluate the supposed relationship between economics and politics. Labour history had always operated on the assumption that class politics were produced by modern economic structures. But the failure of labour politics to produce some recognizable version of the “forward march” suggested the inade-

<sup>6</sup> The literature on this is very extensive. Eric Hobsbawm’s original statement “The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century Britain”, in *Labouring Men* (London, 1964) has recently been restated and refined in his *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York, 1984), chs 12, 13. For a very good overview see Robert Grey, *The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth Century Britain c. 1850–1914* (London, 1981). Other important pieces include Royden Harrison and Jonathan Zeitlin, *Divisions of Labour. Skilled Workers and Technological Change in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Brighton, 1985); Takao Matsu-mura, *The Labour Aristocracy Revisited. The Victorian Flint Glass Makers 1850–1880* (Manchester, 1983); H. F. Moorhouse, “The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy”, *Social History*, 3 (January, 1978), pp. 61–82; Alastair Reid, “Politics and Economics in the formation of the British working class: A response to H. F. Moorhouse”, *Social History*, 3 (October, 1978), pp. 347–362; Marianna Valverde, “‘Giving the female a domestic turn’: the social, legal and moral regulation of women’s work in British cotton mills 1820–1850”, *Journal of Social History*, 21 (Summer, 1988), pp. 619–634.

<sup>7</sup> See the essays by Ross McKibbin, “Why was there no Marxism in Britain?”, “Working-class Gambling in Britain, 1880–1939”, and “Work and Hobbies in Britain, 1880–1950”, in *Ideologies of Class. Social Relations in Britain 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 1–41, 101–138; Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics. The Culture of the Factory in Late Victorian England* (Brighton, 1980).

quacy of understanding the source of labour politics in the social structuring of the working class. Conceptually, the link between politics and economics seemed to have failed and, thus, a turn was made towards the realm of politics itself as a determinant of social being.

At this point it is important to note that the assumption that there was an expected or natural trajectory to the development of working-class politics has not been confined to the earlier generation of marxist historians alone. Non-marxists historians have also tended to rely upon an explanation of labour politics that reduced it to the socio-economic base; indeed, quite often, their assumptions have been more vulgarly deterministic than their marxist colleagues.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, revisionist labour historiography of whatever stripe has been largely inspired by the perceived *failure* of the conjunction of economics and politics to work out the way it was predicted. This recognition coincided with and was partially fueled by the experience of a resurgent and intellectually self-confident conservatism which converged with and stimulated more abstruse scholarly debates and trends. Thus, the intellectual godfather of revisionism in labour history has been Gareth Stedman Jones whose intellectual odyssey reflects perfectly the shifting sands of scholarly emphasis. In 1971 Jones wrote a major book from the premise that “the use of language can often indicate important turning points in social history” (in this case the word was “unemployment” and the period was the late nineteenth century). But by 1983 Jones was applying a “non-referential conception of language to the study of Chartist speeches and writings” in order to understand the nature of early nineteenth-century radicalism.<sup>9</sup> This shift in the centre of explanation for labour history from “economics” to “language” (with a way-stop in the mid-seventies at “culture” as the key variable) flowed from a common assumption, however – or rather, from the failure of a common assumption. As Jones disarmingly explains, his rapid transformation was the product of the search for attempts to “explain the gulf between the predictions of the Marxist explanatory model and the actual assumptions which appear to have guided the activities of [. . .] workers”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the perceived failure of the socio-economic model to explain politics led not to a rethinking of the model, but to discarding it altogether and the emplacement of politics at the centre of explanation in labour

<sup>8</sup> Thus, McKibbin’s very interesting piece “Why was there no Marxism in Britain?” in *The Ideologies of Class*, rested on the premise that the *absence* of Marxism was the problem to be explained, and found a large part of the answer in the way the socio-economic base created a fractured working class.

<sup>9</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London. A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford, 1971), p.v, and *Languages of Labour, Studies in English Working class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Jones, *Languages of Labour*, p. 8.

history. A recent reevaluation of the origins of the Labour Party, for example, was premised on the assumption that it was a “vacant centre defined primarily from without” liable to be tenanted by a variety of interests and groups and owing very little in fact to the working classes or socialism.<sup>11</sup>

Although this may suffice as a neat description of the internal struggle for control of the party’s politics and its soul, it flies in the face of recent research into the local origins of the Party which shows quite precisely how the timing of its emergence was closely related to economic and social changes.<sup>12</sup> The main difficulty with this new tendency to privilege politics, however, lies in its conceptual implications. The virtue of the conception of politics as a reflection of economic and social forces was that it provided an integrative model for explaining change. Even if the procedure employed a reductionist explanatory framework, it never *excluded* politics. The dangers with the contemporary enthusiasm include a treatment of politics as an autonomous sphere dominated by its own codes and procedures, the substitution of what people thought was happening for what actually happened, and the elevation of politics (however broadly that is defined) as the sole nexus of explanation. Similarly, an alternative and convincing model for explaining change is often lacking, or at least unelaborated, because labour politics tend to get reduced simply to the contingencies of the political realm. Furthermore, the implied denial of the relevance of socio-economic factors and the absence of any sustained attempt to show how they can be integrated into explanation implies a much narrower conception of the historical process than the procedure that is being replaced.

There is little doubt that the causal link *from* economics *to* politics cannot be considered a dependent relationship. But the fact of a link can hardly be denied. Thus, the best and most recent work that seeks to theorize and explain labour history has emphasised the reciprocities between the political, economic and social spheres rather than substituting one for the other.<sup>13</sup>

The shift of focus from the economic and social sphere to politics as the locus of explanation in labour history, however, has created the need for inclusive categories of analysis around which the field as a whole can be organized. “Politics” itself is too constricting a notion because it is not at all

<sup>11</sup> Jones, *Languages of Labour*, p. 22 and see the essay “Why is the Labour Party in Mess?”

<sup>12</sup> Keith Laybourn and Jack Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour 1890–1918* (London, 1984); David Clark, *Colne Valley: Radicalism to Socialism. The Portrait of a Northern Constituency in the Formative years of the Labour Party 1890–1910* (London, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Michael Savage, *The Dynamics of Working-Class Politics. The Labour Movement in Preston 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1987), and James Cronin, “Politics, Class Structure and the Enduring Weakness of British Social Democracy”, *Journal of Social History*, 16 (1983), pp. 123–142.

clear how one fits action such as strikes or other “economic” activity entirely into that lockbox,<sup>14</sup> and because politics tends to be confined to institutions rather than action and behaviour. In any case, the consequence is that at the present there is a vacant centre at the analytical and conceptual heart of labour history (as, it might be added, there is at much of British history as a whole) which various candidates are vying to fill. Two, in particular, are worthy of brief note.

The first, already referred to, is the attention that is now beginning to be directed towards language as the place where social meaning and being are constructed. The difficulties and complexities of this epistemology – especially in its deconstructionist version – are many, but there is little doubt that linguistic analysis enables us to understand better the sources of class consciousness, of how people make sense of the world around them.<sup>15</sup> An analysis of the language of Chartist politics for example has demonstrated quite sharply how what Engels described as the first workers movement did not imply an understanding of their world that we would regard as modern. A focus on language can also illuminate the competition between different discourses for dominance in the political process.

But many problems remain with the joining of a discourse analysis with the empirical data, and this is particularly true when it comes to addressing the question of change and the necessity to integrate at some point economic and social forces into the analysis. If the shift towards language was part of the perceived failure of a broadly Marxist epistemology to adequately encompass the different areas of explanation, then the least we can ask of any new epistemology is that it do a better job in that respect. Much of the work published in this vein seems to avoid such matters, and in consequence yields disappointing results. The best work of this genre roots language analysis within a material world which not only includes politics as a struggle for power in the state, but also possesses inescapable dimensions of economic and social relationships. Thus, work on the language of factory reform in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s has shown how state intervention in factory conditions was the product of negotiation between various interest groups with different visions of the relationship of state to society.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Although William Reddy has tried for France, see *The Rise of Market Culture. The Textile Trade and French Society, 1750–1900* (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> For an introduction to this rapidly burgeoning area of scholarly discourse, see David Harlan, “Intellectual History and the Return of Literature”, *American Historical Review*, 94 (June, 1989), pp. 581–609, and Joyce Appleby, “One Good Turn Deserves Another: Moving Towards the Linguistic; A Response to David Harlan”, *American Historical Review*, 94 (December, 1989), pp. 1320–1332.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, “Rethinking Chartism”, in *Languages of Class*, though it must be said that much of the picture of Chartism so drawn is quite familiar from other analyses. For an effective critique of Jones’ use and conception of language see John Foster, “The Declassing of Language”, *New Left Review*, 150 (March/April, 1985), pp. 29–46. Robert

A second suggestion for an integrative organizing category for the field has been to return labour history to its traditional focus on the history of institutions with the conceptual argument that they play a determining role in shaping relationships between employers and workers. The virtue in this argument is that it could point to the need for a more critical and inquiring institutional history of labour which focusses, for example, on internal power struggles and the competing policies and perspectives that drive labour politics. But to date, its presentation and execution leave room for considerable reservations about its conceptual and empirical implications. The end result of this prescription, at least in its current formulation, would surely be to narrow the field away from the social history of the working class back to the kind of history that we have spent the last twenty years trying to escape from. The fact that such a proposal can be made, however, is merely a symptom of the epistemological and organizational crisis that labour history now faces. Such a focus, furthermore, would contain no room for the history of gender, for community studies, for popular culture or for workgroups that stood outside the official institutional channels. This model is avowedly conservative. The history of institutions is the history of winners, of local and national establishments whose procedures and ideologies tend to be treated as inherently rational and natural. If labour history were to be written around this model, it would implicitly exclude the poor handloom weaver or the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, and it would tend to discourage the notion that the way things actually turned out in labour history was the product of an historical process of change in which alternative strategies of equally rational action and organization competed for dominance and control. Thus, labourism came to be the institutional and political representation of labour politics in Britain not because it reflected properties and values inherent to British culture or its working class, but because it was the end result at a particular moment in time of a political process which contained in full measure elements of struggle, competition, compromise, venality and honour.<sup>17</sup>

The challenges discussed above pose the danger that labour history will become a marginalized field, returning to the kind of narrow status it possessed before 1960. To avoid this fate, labour history needs to reassert

Gray, "The languages of factory reform in Britain, 1830–1860", in Patrick Joyce (ed.), *The Historical Meanings of Work* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 143–179.

<sup>17</sup> For this see Jonathan Zeitlin, "From Labour History to the History of Industrial Relations", *Economic History Review*, second series, XL (1987), pp. 159–184. For a fuller critique see Richard Price, " 'What's in a Name?' Workplace History and 'Rank and Filism' ", *International Review of Social History*, XXXIV (1989), pp. 62–77; Richard Price, *Labour in British Society* (London, 1986), pp. 158–169 for the emergence of the hegemony of labourism. Rodney Lowe, *Adjusting to Democracy. The Ministry of Labour in British Politics 1916–1939* (Oxford, 1986).

the relevancy of the central question around which the field should revolve: which is to understand the role that labour has played in shaping the history of society – not only how labour has been shaped by society, but also how society has been shaped by labour's active agency. The problem with the revisionist tendencies discussed above is their tendency to focus primarily on the first part of that couplet in reaction to the inadequacies of earlier modes of analysis and their failure to give sufficient attention to the second part. Reasserting this question also involves recognizing that the traditional categories by themselves are insufficient and need to be both reconceived and refocussed. Five strategies strike me as particularly appropriate to this dilemma.

First, labour history's boundaries must be expanded to include most obviously gender relations, but also the history of other traditionally marginalized groups like casual labourers or black workers.<sup>18</sup> Gender and class have tended to be posed as competing categories of analysis, but the best work in both women's and labour history recognizes their interdependence. If the central importance of class is as a cultural construct, rather than an economic given, then gender has been one of the elements in that construction – in the gender based exclusionist policies of the trade unions, for example. Ethnicity would be another category where the same observations apply. Neither gender, ethnic, nor class relations, can be discussed aside from the issue of power, and power – how it is constructed, exercised, restrained, represented and modified – must be a central concern for labour history whether it concerns the workplace, family or the state.<sup>19</sup>

In this regard, a second proposal would be to rethink the institutional history of labour. I do not advocate a return to the kind of institutional hagiography that tended to characterize labour history in the past. What I mean is to look at the internal history of labour institutions as power contested and driven centres and at the way those institutions link and represent labour organizationally with other sectors of society such as the state. The history of state-labour institutional relations is only just beginning to be written; but it is very important because these relations have helped define the legitimacy of labour's role in society. Indeed, labour institutions have typically derived a great deal of their strength and legitimacy from these reciprocal relationships and their policies have often been defined by the interaction.

Third, not enough attention has been paid to the way labour's history has

<sup>18</sup> Gordon Phillips and Noel Whiteside, *Casual Labour, the Unemployment Questioning the Port Transport Industry 1880–1970* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Two representative examples of what seem to me to be the best kind of women's history in this respect are Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities. Women's Employment in England 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1986); Jane Lewis (ed.), *Labour and Love. Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850–1940* (Oxford, 1986).

also been shaped by an interaction with the institutions of civil society. In contrast to elsewhere in Europe, institutions such as the Churches have not been particularly significant for labour in Britain and, indeed, most associational life has been voluntarist and individual rather than forging corporate links with the state. Perhaps the most important institution that historically has defined the relationship between the individual, the group and the state, has been the law, and it is time for a new legal history of labour.

Labour has been implicated in the law from at least the fourteenth century when it first was used to establish the conditions of free and unfree service. Most legal history of labour has been written as the struggle for freedom and organizational protection. But, as recent work in legal history has begun to emphasize, the law is not simply an institution to be looked at solely from the perspective of the bench or the statute book.<sup>20</sup> Historians need to pay a greater attention to the law as a social, economic and intellectual construct. In this regard, they need to see the law not simply as a restraining agent, nor as something that was just received, but also as a site where labour met and negotiated with the state and society. This is true not only at the level of legislation and statutes, but at the more important local level where the common law was actually determined through contests that emerged from the fabric of social relations. A history of the law on picketing, for example, from this perspective would surely look very different than it does through the usual approach via the statutes and would, also, in the process, reveal much about the texture of local industrial relations.

A fourth strategy for labour history would be to use local studies to approach the major questions in the field. Local studies are a well-established component of the historiography, but they have tended to focus on purely local matters such as the growth of party or trade-union organization in a given region. Again, what is needed is an expansion of vision and conception into the texture of the local community in all its aspects in order to understand the dynamics of class and social relations and the roots of local politics. Where this has been done (as in a study of Preston by Michael Savage) it has illuminated the processes of class consciousness, gender relations and politics in ways that have a relevance beyond the particular locality.

Fifth, a comparative dimension needs to be added. Labour history in Britain has been very insular; but there is nothing peculiar to Britain in that respect. Comparative work to date has tended to operate within the context of judging institutional development against certain models, of which Britain is either exceptional or the exemplar depending on one's perspective. My own view is that comparative work is at the same stage of development that national labour history was twenty years ago, too focussed around

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, David Sugarman, *Legality, Ideology and The State* (London, 1983).

institutions and accepting of a received teleology of labour history. John Breuilly has pointed out that large scale comparisons, long term analyses, and a focus on differences have not yielded very meaningful results because they run into the problems of contextualisation. He suggests that what is needed now are specific comparisons within narrow bands that build up complex and thick descriptions. I would add the virtue of a thematic approach, focussing on a specific phenomenon such as that exemplified in Gary Cross's study of the issue of hours reduction in Britain and France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>21</sup>

And, finally, to return to a question I touched on earlier. Labour history cannot be only about labour, it must also be about society. In particular, its central purpose should be to assess the way in which the history of political and civil society has been shaped by the active presence of labour. The current state of labour history in Britain at least suggests that it is moving away from this mission. Yet recent British history itself is testimony to this historical presence of labour. Thatcherite conservatism's effort to install a new political economy of power relations was a direct response to a process of labour's history that created a balance of power whereby labour was able to impose severe restraints upon the effective operation of the capitalist economy.<sup>22</sup> This may not have been a reflection of the historical mission of the working class to replace capitalism; but it was a reflection of the way the process of labour history is integral to the history of British society.

<sup>21</sup> John Breuilly, "Comparative Labour History", *Labour History Review*, 55 (1990), pp. 6–9; also by Breuilly, "Artisan Economy, Artisan Politics, Artisan Ideology: The Artisan Contribution to the Early Nineteenth Century Labour Movement", in Clive Emsley and James Walvin (eds), *Artisans, Peasants and Proletarians 1760–1860* (London, 1985), pp. 187–225; Gary Cross, *A Quest for Time. The Reduction of Work in Britain and France, 1840–1940* (Berkeley, 1989). See also, Friedrich Lenger, "Beyond Exceptionalism: Notes on the artisanal phase of the labour movement in France, England, Germany and the United States", *International Review of Social History*, XXXVI (1990), pp. 1–23; Christiane Eisenberg, "The Comparative View in Labour History: Old and New Interpretations of the English and German Labour Movements Before 1914", *International Review of Social History*, 34 (1989), pp. 403–432; Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg (eds), *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> See Price, *Labour in British Society*, pp. 208–247.