

THE FUTURE OF CLASS
IN HISTORY

The Future of Class in History

What's Left of the Social?

GEOFF ELEY & KEITH NIELD

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PREFACE

This book has a long prehistory. At the height of the great social history enthusiasm of the 1970s, on the eve of the first signs of what we now call the “cultural turn,” we published an article in *Social History* called “Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?”¹ In that essay we raised concerns about the ways in which the contextualizing ambitions of social historians were tending to leave diminishing space for the analysis of politics. Inside the general aggrandizement of social explanation associated with the Marxisms and other materialist sociologies of the time, we could also detect what Richard Johnson had recently called a new “culturalism.”² Inspired by the influence of Edward Thompson, by Raymond Williams and his linking of culture to “structures of feeling” and a society’s “whole way of life,” by the early forms of cultural studies, and by cultural anthropologies of the kind associated especially with Clifford Geertz, social historians were increasingly moving toward a kind of “cultural materialism.” Yet while vitally enriching our understanding of the bases of social solidarity and difference, the new attentiveness to culture had the effect of further reducing the space for analysis of politics per se. In writing our 1980 article we wanted to call attention to that problem. Without either disavowing the important gains of social history and its insistence that politics be socially contextualized or seeming to suggest that older forms of political history might be restored, we wanted to widen the space for thinking about politics creatively. Our preferred strategy for doing so involved working with the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, whose reception had become such a powerful motor of discussion among the Left in Britain at the time.

Although our intervention seemed to annoy many people and was occasionally cited in their footnotes, we drew disappointingly little

response in print.³ As it happened, our particular proposals for thinking the “social,” the “cultural,” and the “political” productively together became rapidly superseded by more extreme insistence on the autonomies of politics, which eventually severed the latter from social analysis altogether. During the mid-1980s, the authors of those further-going critiques turned increasingly to linguistic analysis and theories of discourse, whether taking avowedly Foucauldian directions, preferring literary-theoretical or formally “deconstructive” approaches, or searching for the construction of meaning in everyday life. Interestingly, the most fervent and influential advocates of these new directions saw them in serious conflict with the earlier goals of social history, demanding that those be set entirely and unsentimentally aside. The new “linguistic” or “discursive” approach to history was invariably approached in *contradistinction* to that earlier social historiography, for which “Marxist” also became an interchangeable term.

By the turn of the 1990s, the landscape of discussion among left-tending historians had decisively changed. Of course, all of this was also happening amid profound transformations in the contemporary social and political world—embracing deindustrialization and post-Fordist transition, capitalist restructuring and class recomposition, the crisis of social democracy and the collapse of Communism—and the new culturalist perspectives were no less in dialogue with these political changes than the earlier social histories had been in their own time. Many diverse political conclusions might be drawn, across a wide range of centrist or radical choices. But one especially salient consequence of these developments, politically and intellectually, both inside the discipline of history and across the human sciences more generally, seemed to be a new skepticism, uncertainty, or lack of confidence about the concept of *class*.

Whether in its political or its historiographical and broader intellectual dimensions, this was a momentous development. For roughly a century between the later nineteenth and later twentieth centuries, the centrality of class for social analysis and political understanding had been axiomatic for most of the Left. Likewise, for those of our own generations of historians inspired by the social history wave of the 1960s and 1970s, “class” had been hardly less than a master category. So when we were invited to a general stock-taking conference entitled “Historical Perspectives on Class and Culture” organized by Robbie Gray at the Uni-

versity of Portsmouth in September 1993, we decided to talk directly about this new crisis of class-based analysis and understanding.⁴ Moreover, while we had often mused about returning to our 1980 article, precisely because of the silence surrounding it, the intervening climate could scarcely have been more changed. Rather than versions of “the social” subtly overwhelming the space and efficacies of “the political,” as we had argued in 1980, the social was seen either as a complex *effect* of the political sphere, now reunderstood in Foucauldian terms of governmentality, or else as a separable domain that was appealed to, targeted, imagined, and variously constructed by political actors but that certainly no longer explained or determined their actions in the way social historians had wanted to suppose. In our Portsmouth paper, baldly titled “Classes as Historical Subjects,” we set out to recuperate some of the earlier social-historical ground of research and discussion. We wanted to do so not out of nostalgia or from a belief that past historiographies might be salvaged intact to serve as a source of straightforward illumination. Nor were we regretful about the cultural turn or opposed to the new forms of understanding it permitted. We were not trying to turn the clock back or to go “back to the future,” as one of our critics subsequently joked. The theoretical and political challenges of the 1980s and 1990s were entirely unavoidable, we thought, and so was the import of the contemporary changes in the actually existing worlds of capitalism.

Rather, we wanted to see whether the grounds for collaborative conversation across the polarized differences between social and cultural historians might be renewed. After a long period in which the class concept had been subject to largely destructive critique, we wanted to offer some sustained reflection on its sustainable uses today—historiographically, theoretically, politically. In choosing this particular ground, we are also seeking to intervene in the wider debates among social historians and cultural historians about how history should best be practiced. We hope that our book furthers not only the more immediate debates about class *per se* but also much larger discussions in the discipline. It goes back to the paper we presented at the 1993 conference, which itself reflected the much longer collaboration we have described, focused around our common involvement in the journal *Social History*. In the meantime, we have also produced, separately and together, a variety of writings further developing our ideas.⁵ In particular, this book should be considered a

companion volume to Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), which develops complementary arguments on a more general historiographical front.

We would like to thank the various audiences to whom we presented parts of our arguments over the years. The ideas in our 1993 paper for Robbie Gray's Portsmouth conference were anticipated in commentaries delivered in 1990 at two earlier conferences, one organized by James Retallack at the University of Toronto in April and titled "Elections, Mass Politics, and Social Change in Germany, 1890–1945" and the other organized by Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny at Michigan State University in November and titled "The Making of the Soviet Working Class." The arguments were then further developed in a panel at the Washington, D.C., meeting of the German Studies Association in November 1993; in a lecture at SUNY—Stony Brook in April 1994; in a plenary talk to the Sixteenth North American Labor History Conference at Wayne State University in October 1994; and then in a variety of settings ever since. Most memorably of all, at the very end of the process in February 2005, we presented the book's arguments to a wonderful seminar of faculty and graduate students at the University of Michigan's newly created Institute of Historical Studies. We are each hugely indebted to the extraordinary intellectual community that the University of Michigan provides, both in the history department itself and in the university's larger culture of interdisciplinary collaboration.

We owe far too much to the intellectual advice and inspiration of far too many friends to be able to record those debts comprehensively. But for critical readings and discussions over the years, and for the brilliance and acuity of their own thinking on the subject of class, we would like to thank especially the following: Talal Asad, Lauren Berlant, Janet Blackman, Mònica Burguera, Kathleen Canning, Jane Caplan, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Dennis Dworkin, Kali Israel, Robin Kelley, Alf Lüdtke, Gina Morantz-Sanchez, Sophie Nield, Sherry Ortner, Sonya Rose, Bill Rosenberg, Roger Rouse, John Seed, Bill Sewell, Lewis Siegelbaum, Peggy Somers, Carolyn Steedman, George Steinmetz, Ron Suny, and Dennis Sweeney. In its final stages the manuscript was read by Andrew August, Jessica Dubow, James Epstein, and Sonya Rose, to whom we record our enormous appreciation. Pete Soppelsa helped prepare the

final manuscript for production. Among editors Jim Reische showed once again that he provides the gold standard.

While these days the difficulties are mitigated by e-mail and fax, the conditions for writing together, particularly across continents, are rarely very easy to achieve. Usually we managed it at least once or sometimes twice a year, if only in a railway station or a hotel room. But the opportunities had to be improvised, snatched from the other parts of professional and personal life, often at short notice, requiring much support, forbearance, and understanding from the ones who share our lives. So to our respective partners, Gina Morantz-Sanchez and Ortrud Nield, go the final, most heartfelt, and foundational thanks.

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