



Andrew August. *The British Working Class, 1832-1940.* Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007. ix + 286 pp. \$33.40 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-38130-8.

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Published on H-Albion (April, 2008)

In the 1960s and 1970s, the working class—and particularly the British working class—had a special place in historical writing. It was at the center of the new social history and history from below, in large part because of E. P. Thompson’s enormously influential *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Yet, Thompson’s book built on a tradition of radical historiography in which the British working class was important to the historical process broadly conceived. It was the world’s first industrial proletariat and central to Karl Marx’s understanding of the historical dynamic of capitalism and the transition to socialism. The British working class’s experience had universal implications.

Certainly, much has changed since the heyday of the new social and labor history. The end of communism, the rise of identity politics, the decline of the labor movement, the advent of post-Fordism, and a host of other changes have contributed to a declining interest in the working class within historiography. As a result of the impact of the linguistic turn, the new cultural history, postmodernism, and postcolonial studies, the fields of labor and social history are less central than they once were. Yet, at the same time, there has been an outpouring of theoretical discussion that has revised our understanding of class, and historians have produced a more complex and nuanced picture of British working-class life.

The theoretical transformations have been analyzed at length, including by me in *Class Struggles* (2007). Andrew August’s *The British Working Class: 1832-1940* is a highly readable overview of British working-class history that builds on the achievement of numerous social, cultural, and feminist historians, while deploying numerous primary sources to make its principal points.

Theoretically, the book reflects the debates of the 1980s and 1990s, which pit advocates of cultural and linguistic approaches against those who supported social and materialist interpretations. August’s book offers a middle ground, building on both positions. It opposes the automatic assumption, typical of the new social history, which causally links social being and consciousness, and it draws on cultural approaches that privilege language and discourse. Yet, August insists that working people embraced the language of class, because it resonated with their experience: the environment of home, work, and neighborhood. Such a perspective is firmly rooted in the materialist tradition of social and labor history. For August, the primary affiliation of British workers was in terms of class, but they had multiple identities—most important, those connected to gender, ethnicity, and region. Where writers often evoke “British” yet mean “English,” August includes in his narrative not only English but Scottish and Welsh workers as well. Irish workers are

given less space and Jewish immigrant workers virtually none at all. Their relationship to his narrative raises interesting questions about the ethnic composition of the British working class and the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. These questions are by no means easy to answer.

One of the radical moves made by Thompson was to begin his account of the early working class by establishing the libertarian and radical tradition of the free-born Englishman, which shaped the working class's understanding and response to the early Industrial Revolution. It demonstrated his rejection of the base/superstructure model and stressed his belief that ideology and culture played a constitutive role in the working-class formation. While August might differentiate himself from traditional Marxists, his account is structured along base/superstructure lines. The book is divided chronologically into three parts, each introduced by shifts in material relationships that shaped and reshaped working-class culture. Yet, August fully realizes that such changes can be overemphasized, and he stresses the continuities that exist in working-class life from one phase to the next. The first part of August's book covers the early Industrial Revolution and the years of the long Victorian boom. Here, he stresses the importance of population movements and growth, which produced intensive urban expansion. Workers faced overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, and high mortality. In this context, family was the dominant relationship, and people often lived at home for extended periods. Although a minority of workers was unionized, and unions had to struggle to be tolerated, there was a continual struggle over wages and workplace control. Workers fought within the capitalist system rather than against it. They spent their limited leisure time at feasts and wakes, and they played street football. These forms of entertainment offended middle-class notions of respectability, and middle-class and some working-class reformers wanted to put a stop to them. Working-class people created their own institutions—cooperatives and friendly societies—and political movements, notably Chartism, but they were also hostile to the Poor Laws and the increasing presence of the police. The book's second part covers the period between the Depression of the 1870s and World War I. Following the Victorian boom, British capitalists experienced intensified competition and shrinking profits. They responded by using more productive technologies, stricter work discipline, greater reliance on piece rates, and higher levels of the labor of women and youth. The working class accordingly joined unions at an unprecedented rate, and the

“new unions” of unskilled workers engaged in increasing levels of strike action. The period following the 1870s solidified the traditional working-class way of life, founded on dense and crowded conditions, the doctrine of separate spheres in the household, and mutuality and solidarity. In contrast to the privatized world of the middle class, the leisure of working people was public, involving street life, fairs, gambling, pubs (although reduced amount of time were spent there), music halls, and football matches. Workers were becoming more “respectable,” increasingly drawn to self-help organizations emphasizing education and religion. Perhaps the most important aspect of the first two parts of the book is the way in which August integrates recent feminist historiography on the working class into his account. He captures the tension in working-class life between its embrace of the middle-class ideology of separate spheres and the fact that many working-class families depended on the wages of husband and wife to make ends meet. Industrial capitalists, who increasingly found women's labor appealing because it led to a reduction of wages, were confronted by skilled male workers who insisted that they alone were responsible for producing the family wage. As August points out, unions, which privileged gender conflict over class solidarity, often shunned women. However, he might have also have given some space to instances of cooperation between male and female workers. The third part of the book is largely concerned with the period of World War I and the interwar years that followed. Following the war, old patterns of working-class life persisted in the midst of important changes. Despite high levels of unemployment, many workers had smaller families and more disposable income, developed better nutritional habits, and lived in better housing on new housing estates. With the shift in economic life from textiles and coal to cars and electrical engineering, population movements took place as well. Workers confronted the intensified exploitation of labor and acceleration in deskilling. The shift from the old industries of the Industrial Revolution to such industries as automobiles was detrimental to unions, and high levels of unemployment contributed to a reduction in wages. While union membership ebbed and flowed in the interwar years, the British government supported the process of collective bargaining but was often hostile to working-class militancy. August's book includes a thought-provoking discussion of working-class political affiliations. Working-class people could be militant, but their class affiliations did not lend themselves to embracing radical political ideologies. Indeed, as August points out, a segment of working-class people were not only steadfastly Tories, but they

also could be deeply patriotic, turning out in large numbers for Empire Day and the Coronation of 1937. Ultimately, for August, “the informal, everyday politics of households, neighbourhoods and workplaces pervaded working-class life far more than party politics or militant activism. Hierarchies of reputation and respect distinguished households and whole streets in working-class districts from one another” (p. 236). Such a perspective provides justification for giving short shrift to workers’ involvement in socialist politics, which, as August rightly points out, was a minority trend. But, if traditional accounts of the British working class have exaggerated its connection to socialism, he has perhaps bent the stick

too far in the other direction. Socialism might be a minority current in working-class life, but its relationship to the majority culture was by no means insignificant. In short, August’s *The British Working Class, 1832-1940* is a readable synthesis of recent scholarship that skillfully deploys the voices of working-class people to make its principle points. While scholars in the field will be mostly familiar with his primary and secondary sources, the book is an excellent introduction for those less knowledgeable and is ideally suited for the classroom. In provincializing the British working class, August has performed an important scholarly task.

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Citation: Dennis Dworkin. Review of August, Andrew, *The British Working Class, 1832-1940*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

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