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'Labour History and its political role – a new landscape'

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'Labour History and its political role – a new landscape'

Abstract

As I was thinking about what to say today I read an article on Manning Clark and found something that made me pause. It was a description of our venerable journal, Labour History, but characterizing it in terms that none of us would use, at least not in public. Instead of describing our field, our sources or our methods, our long list of illustrious contributors, it said that Labour History was the journal of Australia's left-wing historians.

Well, this was in Wikipedia – but nonetheless it struck me that, yes, this is a truth I am prepared to accept. I'm sure there others here today – editors, contributors, readers - who share my acceptance. While I was editor of the journal I assumed it was part of a cluster of left-wing journals, and of course its founding editors were quite clear about its left-wing purpose. And yet, in academic gatherings today labour historians rarely talk about themselves as left-wing.

To use a very tired metaphor, left-wing politics is our elephant in the room. If that is so, perhaps with a bit of imagination we might get our gear together and move into a new landscape.

Keywords

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The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History 'Labour History' and its Political Role – A New Landscape: by Terry Irving

12 April, 2013 · by labour history melbourne · in *Labour History, Radical History, Terry Irving* · [Leave a comment](#)

We re-post here a thoughtful discussion by Associate Professor Terry Irving. [Click here to view this post on the Radical Sydney blog.](#)



Terry Irving was co-author of *Class Structure in Australian History* (1980, 1992) and became a prominent labour historian. He edited the journal *Labour History*, 1990-1998, and was President of the **Australian Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH)**, 1999-2004. In 2003 he received the **Annual History Citation** awarded by the **History Council of New South Wales** for his contribution to the study of labour and political history in Australia.

Terry writes: “I delivered this address, ‘**Labour History and its political role – a new landscape**’, almost two years ago at a centenary issue forum for the journal **Labour History**. There were about 30 academics present, none of whom in the discussion that followed even alluded to the political role of labour history. Were they interested in my paper’s discussion of the political history of the journal? Nope. Were they interested in the fact that the paper referred to the way the leading international scholar of the field, a frequent visitor to labour history events in Australia, has redefined the field? Nope. Were they interested in the new concepts for labour history suggested in my paper? Nope. Were they interested in my suggestion that the journal’s subtitle should be changed to ‘a journal of global labour history’? Nope, although there was a counter suggestion: that it should be ‘a journal of business and labour history’!!! I should not have been surprised, because after all I did predict it in the address, but I had hoped that in this academic gathering, with a history to look back on and a future to ensure, we would embrace our distinctive radicalism. Alas, we acted like careerist intellectuals, more concerned about the journal’s ‘ranking’ than about its social purpose. Luckily, as I also said in the address, politics has not disappeared from the pages of **Labour History**, nor from the community formed by the branches of the **ASSLH**. That community is a valuable resource for radical historians. It’s a pity that more of them don’t make their existence known at forums like the one I attended. **Terry Irving, 25 March 2013.**“

Labour History and its political role – a new landscape

A contribution to the 100th issue round-table discussion

(29 April 2011)

Terry Irving

As I was thinking about what to say today I read an article on **Manning Clark** and found something that made me pause. It was a description of our venerable journal, **Labour History**, but characterizing it in terms that none of us would use, at least not in public. Instead of describing our field, our sources or our methods, our long list of illustrious contributors, it said that **Labour History** was the journal of Australia’s left-wing historians.

Well, this *was* in Wikipedia – but nonetheless it struck me that, yes, this is a truth I am prepared to accept. I’m sure there others here today – editors, contributors, readers – who share my acceptance. While I was

editor of the journal I assumed it was part of a cluster of left-wing journals, and of course its founding editors were quite clear about its left-wing purpose. And yet, in academic gatherings today labour historians rarely talk about themselves as left-wing. To use a very tired metaphor, left-wing politics is our elephant in the room. If that is so, perhaps with a bit of imagination we might get our gear together and move into a new landscape.

As a term, labour history is redolent of politics – of the sweat of unfree work, of unpaid housework, and of wage slavery; of the fear-drenched sweat staining the shirts and blouses of demonstrators facing guns and water cannon; of the smell of smoke-filled rooms and dusty convention halls; of the breath of the agitator and the after shave of the pin-striped politician. It recalls for us the mobilization of voters as well as politics outside the liberal democratic pale; it smells of the corruption, broken promises and electoral fetishism that have discredited liberal democracy. Sometimes it is the fresh breeze of the future; at others it is the musty past.

When academic labour history took off in the early 1960s, its proponents had far-reaching ambitions. They were going to reinvent social history ‘as a way of writing the history of movements and societies as integrated wholes’. This was a political ambition because it would require the naming of that integrated whole as capitalism. In the meantime they would insert labour history into the university curriculum as stand-alone courses, and this was political because it would bring the masses into the classroom. But by the time **Verity Burgmann** wrote ‘The strange death of labour history’ in 1991, these dreams had faded.^[i]

The retreat of labour history into a mere topic in courses on employment relations or social history, or into the specialized world of higher degree supervision – the retreat from politics in the teaching of labour history – was also a theme of Burgmann’s essay. In fact she placed it in a broader context, the strange death of politics in mainstream history teaching and research, especially in social history, which ironically our journal adopted as its sub-title just a decade before.

So let us remind ourselves that for a long time now there have been almost no dedicated courses in labour history for undergraduates in British, New Zealand, Canadian or Australian universities. Even in the United States they are getting scarcer. I noticed recently on H-Labor that there was great interest in the possibility of teaching the labor history of food. Just another example of labour history with the politics left out?

But there is some good news. Despite its retreat in teaching, politics has not disappeared from the pages of ***Labour History***, nor from the labour history community formed by the branches of the **Australian**

Society for the Study of Labour History (ASSLH). Of course, when I say ‘politics’ I don’t mean just the history of the Labor Party and its members, or even the broader understanding required to write the history of power relations in all aspects of workers’ lives, but as **Janis Bailey** and **Ross Gwyther** said in **Issue 99** of *Labour History*, I mean the *exposure* of ‘unequal power relations’ and the *promotion* of ‘new social orders’. I mean the writing of socially engaged history by political intellectuals of the left. Incidentally, as they point out, the same political definition may be applied to environmental history.^[ii]

Issue 99 is a beauty from this point of view, and it is a fitting tribute to **Greg Patmore**, whose last issue as editor this was. But let me take you back to issue number 1. It appeared at a time of apparent stasis in labour’s progress after the years of heady post-war advance, and of a conservative intellectual backlash against the radical-nationalist history that intellectuals of the labour movement had been developing over the previous fifty years. The first generation of academic labour historians were responding to both these challenges when they formed the ASSLH. The words ‘labour history’ were inscribed on their banner because they wanted, as **Bob Gollan** said in the first issue, to ‘be of immediate practical value to the labour movement’. There was a second reason, best expressed in **Eric Fry**’s words, to make Australian history ‘a popular pursuit, a study, and a part of ordinary people’s lives’. Labour history would be useful history, in both a narrow and a broad sense.^[iii]

If **Bob Gollan** and **Eric Fry** were alive today, wanting as socially engaged intellectuals to write a useful history, would they choose the words ‘labour history’ to express their intention? Should *we* use those words to express our intention? The answer depends on what it means today to be left-wing. To the extent that working people still manage to organize within the diminishing range of the social state I would like our history work to be of use to them. Being of ‘immediate practical value to the labour movement’ still seems a worthwhile project.

But the extent of the labour movement’s grip on the lives of ordinary people today is much less than it was in Fry and Gollan’s day. Trade unionism is in decline, the Labor Party has an aging and diminishing membership, and work itself has changed. So what would it mean to make labour history ‘a part of ordinary people’s lives’ again, to find (in Fry’s words) ‘new ways and new people’ to ‘change the world’.

The answer is not unrelated to the question of reformulating the subjects and conceptual underpinnings of labour history, a task that has been led by **Marcel van der Linden**. He has urged labour historians to break with Eurocentric and nationalist frameworks. At a time when *national* union movements and parties

of labour within the *nation* state are declining this is a logical move, and I think we in Australia should do more to follow his advice.[iv]

(Before leaving this point I notice that Marcel includes Australasian labour historians among those guilty of Eurocentric prejudice. If this is true we need a bit of self-criticism, but more importantly his characterization suggests we have failed to develop arguments to show how our labour institutions, our class structure and state, our form of settler capitalism have produced a version of labour history different from that of Europe.)

If labour history's empirical focus needs to change, so do its concepts, and Marcel's recent writings discuss the necessary foundations for a global history of labour. His discussion of the two-fold meaning of labour – as toil undertaken in consequence of the commodification of labour, and as creative work – brings out the problems of applying this Western concept to the global South. Then, and most interesting for the purposes of my argument today, he questions the use of the term 'working class'. It is its 19th century European connotations that he finds limiting. He insists that there have always been a range of forms of commodified labour – he points to slavery, indentured labour, and share-cropping, but we would of course want to include convictism – and that consequently we need the idea of 'the extended or subaltern working class'. He says: 'it is the historic dynamics of this multitude that we [labour historians] should try to understand.'

For producing a new direction for labour history, these ideas (the multitude, and the binary concept of labour) may prove as significant as was **E.P. Thompson's** idea of class as a relationship in the 'Preface' to *The Making of the English Working Class*.

It would take more time than I have at this session to answer those questions adequately. I would however like to refer to two recent studies. In *New Left Review*, November-December 2010, **Michael Denning's** article on wageless life shows how social democracy through a compact with state organizations in the twentieth century constituted a normal subject, the wage earner, and by so doing made '*much of capitalism's multitude ... unrecognizable to the labour movement*'. [my italics] He means the multitude of workers who lived and still live outside typical employment and unemployment – for example, women

working in their own households, people living in communities stigmatized by ethnic or racial prejudice, or devastated by de-industrialization, and in the US, agricultural labourers, and so on.[vii]

The 'atypical' work done by the multitude has always existed, and it is not disappearing but increasing as casualisation, sub-contracting and self-employment spreads. Today, its growth is an object of neo-liberal economic theory and state policy. The I.L.O, reports that at the beginning of the 21st century, 'non-standard, atypical work' comprised 30% of over-all employment in 15 European countries, and 25% of total employment in the United States.[viii] Labour historians already study these workers, but perhaps not with the understanding that their work is becoming typical. Writing a history of this kind of work, the social, cultural and political contexts in which it occurs, the managerial and government strategies that encourage it, and the forms of resistance it creates, would seem to me to be a fruitful task for labour historians today.

And there is resistance among these workers. It is part of the story of global labour history, as important as the struggles in the South told by Van der Linden. Here I would like to refer you to the journal *Antipode*. Self-described as 'a radical journal of geography' it regularly carries a section headed 'Interventions', and in the September 2010 issue this section dealt with autonomist politics and activism over the past decade. Autonomist political activity refers to both the anti-globalization 'movement of movements' that has been developing since the Seattle demonstrations against the WTO in 1990, and to the myriad self-managed experiments by unwaged communities in the capitalist North to meet actual rather than market-generated needs. Of course much of this activism involves people not connected to labour organizations, but many unionists share their concern for social and ecological justice. More central to our argument, the editor points out that all of this section's articles 'in different ways address the issue of labour and work'. They begin from an awareness of the way work has become more precarious and instrumental, and they rely on the binary concept of labour recommended to us by Van der Linden and Denning. In particular **John Holloway** grounds the theory of autonomism in the difference between 'labour' that is externally imposed and experienced, which autonomists reject, and 'doing' that is freely chosen and pushes towards self-determination.[ix]

To sum up: here's what I think we should do:

1. We should drop the present subtitle. 'Social history' no longer conveys anything radical or intellectually challenging. As a new subtitle, 'A journal of global labour history' would be both.

2. We should pay more attention to the theoretical debates about working class, multitude and subalternity that have the capacity to extend our range of historical topics, and of the ideas of ‘survival, self-management and the commons’ [Chatterton, 2] that together offer a new radical utopia for working people, and hence for our writing about them.[x]
3. We should be more politically engaged, encouraging the submission of articles that shine the light of history on contemporary struggles by working people, whether through the labour movement or not.

[i] Verity Burgmann, ‘The strange death of Labour history’ in *Bede Nairn and Labor History*, Sydney, Pluto Press and the NSW Branch of the Australian Labor Party, 1991, pp. 69-81.

[ii] Janis Bailey and Ross Gwyther, ‘Red and Green: Towards a Cross-Fertilisation of Labour and Environmental History’, *Labour History*, 99, November 2010, p. 1.

[iii] R.A. Gollan, ‘Labour History’, *Bulletin of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*, 1, January 1962, p. 3; Eric Fry’s words are from Peter Love, ‘An Interview with Eric Fry’, *Hummer*, 31/2, March-Aug 1991.

[iv] Marcel van der Linden, ‘Labour History Beyond Borders’ in Joan Allen, Alan Campbell and John McIlroy (eds) *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, London, Merlin Press, 2010, pp. 353- 383.

[v] Van der Linden, pp. 364-7.

[vi] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, Gollancz, 1963.

[vii] Michael Denning, ‘Wageless Life’, *New Left Review*, 66 Second Series, November-December 2010, pp. 84-6.

[viii] Denning, p. 89.

[ix] John Holloway, ‘Cracks and the Crisis of Abstract Labour’, *Antipode*, vol. 4, issue 4, September 2010, pp. 909-23; and Paul Chatterton, ‘ Introduction to: Autonomy: The Struggle for Survival, Self-management and the Common Organizer’, *Antipode*, vol. 4, issue 4, September 2010, pp. 897-908.

[x] The words are from Chatterton, above.