

## Remembering David Montgomery (1926–2011) and His Impact on Working-Class History

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## PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

# Remembering David Montgomery (1926–2011) and His Impact on Working-Class History

**James R. Barrett**

[T]he study of history is a collective and cooperative endeavor, not a competition for personal academic eminence.

David Montgomery, 2004

DAVID MONTGOMERY WAS THE MOST INFLUENTIAL historian of the United States working class and one of the most influential labour historians internationally over the past generation. Given the role of the “new labour history” in the broader transformation of historical writing, this is saying a great deal. In developing his approach to the subject, Montgomery clearly drew on his own experiences as a trade unionist and a Communist Party militant in the 1950s. A skilled machinist; a brilliant researcher, teacher, and writer; a labour and civil rights activist, Montgomery died suddenly on 2 December 2011. With his death, the field lost not only one of its most creative practitioners but also its most prolific mentor. Montgomery produced scores of his own doctoral students at Yale and the University of Pittsburgh, but perhaps more importantly, he nurtured the work of hundreds of others throughout the United States, in Canada, and around the world. A dedicated internationalist, Montgomery worked closely with the British Marxist historian E.P. Thompson and social historians from numerous other societies. His Canadian connections were deep. He contributed to *Labour/Le Travail* and lectured many times to students and scholars at Simon Fraser, Memorial, Queen’s, Trent, and other universities.<sup>1</sup>

1. Jon Weiner, “David Montgomery, 1927–2011,” *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com/blog/164954-david-montgomery-1927-1911>); Eric Foner, “Obituary for David Montgomery,” *The Guardian* (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/11/david-montgomery>); Dana Frank, “David Montgomery, Grand Master Workman,” *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com>).

## Montgomery's Mystique

MONTGOMERY'S OWN RESEARCH was characterized by both a rigorous empirical approach and a relentless effort to demonstrate the pervasive influence of class on politics and society in the United States and elsewhere. Wherever possible, he got his historical subjects to speak for themselves and he urged his students to do likewise. The result was a richly textured picture of working class life in all of its realms – a finely-grained portrayal of not only the workplace but of working people living their lives in all of their complexity. Although Montgomery was known particularly for his research on the social relations of work and working-class protest behaviour, he ranged widely over other topics including radical political ideology and practice and race and ethnic relations in working-class populations. His collection of essays, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (1979), stimulated a generation of scholarship on workers' agency on the shop floor, while *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (1987) stands as the most important study of working-class life and struggle in the industrial era. In it, he evoked an oppositional working-class ethic based on mutualism and class solidarity and he transformed our understanding of the social and political implications of industrialization. Among other innovations, he was one of the first to consider masculinity as a meaningful category of analysis for labour historians.

While he emphasized the variety and complexity of working-class lives, he took special care in documenting the story of the politically engaged labour radicals, reminding his readers that, "Class consciousness was more than the unmediated product of daily experience. It was also a project."<sup>2</sup> At the time of his death at age 84, Montgomery was still working, now on a study of the role of workers in imperialism. He had already produced a series of papers which he presented as lectures in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the US. This work, which focused on sailors, dock workers, and others in the capitalist metropolises as well colonial ports, displayed his remarkable erudition and conceptual reach, and we hope that it will eventually reach a broader audience.

David Montgomery was particularly known for his lectures and his ability to achieve the impossible – to synthesize complex conference discussions full of ideas coming from all different angles. Somehow David brought it all together in ways that acknowledged the efforts of all and still made sense of the various debates and our occasionally feeble attempts at generalization. His

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com/article/165235/david-montgomery-grand-master-workman); Bruce Weber, "David Montgomery, 84, Dies: Chronicled Lives of Workers," *New York Times*, 8 December 2011; James R. Barrett, "David Montgomery, December 1, 1927–December 2, 2011," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 9 (Spring 2012), 173–174; "David Montgomery," *AHA Perspectives*, 50 (February 2012), 41–42.

2. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labour Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge and New York 1987), 2.

sometimes spontaneous conference summations were often a matter of his sum adding up to far more than our parts.

The speaking experience he had gained as a union militant often showed through in public lectures that were far more than shrewd or brilliant, but often gripping in their drama and compelling in their narrative. One that stands out was his Organization of American Historians (OAH) presidential address dealing with immigrants, race, and politics.<sup>3</sup> The OAH had decided to boycott the official conference hotel due to allegations that it had been unfair to both the labour movement and its own minority employees. The hotel threatened suit but with the help of OAH members and his executive committee, Montgomery steered the organization through these very troubled waters. Montgomery led a march of historians and activists from the conference headquarters to a cathedral that had opened its doors to us. Delivering his address from a St. Louis church pulpit, rather than the usual lectern, the Marxist labour historian was clearly in his element. When incoming OAH president, Darlene Clark Hine, the first African American woman to be elected to the position, called for delegates to pledge money on the spot in order to save the OAH from financial ruin, the meeting took on the appearance of something like a religious revival, but Montgomery seemed never to miss a beat.

For all of his recognition and accomplishments, however, the nature of Montgomery's influence, even in working-class history, has often been misunderstood, while his more general influence in US history remains largely unacknowledged. Some of Montgomery's most important contributions and those of his students, for example, have come in the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, particularly the transition of African Americans from slavery to wage labour. This is a whole realm of his work I will not be considering here, except to note that the David Montgomery who wrote and shaped this research is the same person who did the studies of work, organization, and conflict in the industrial period: this body of research and writing shares the same theoretical perspective and approach, even some of the same methods.<sup>4</sup>

3. David Montgomery, "Racism, Immigrants, and Political Reform," *Journal of American History* 87 (March 2001), 1253–1274.

4. David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York 1967; reprint, Urbana, 1981); *The American Civil War and the Meanings of Freedom: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford* (Oxford 1987); Grace Palladino, "The Poor Man's Fight: Draft Resistance and Labor Organization in Schuylkill, Pennsylvania, 1860–1865," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1983; Iver Bernstein, "The New York City Draft Riots of 1863 and Class Relations on the Eve of Industrial Capitalism," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1985; Julie Saville, "A Measure of Freedom: From Slave to Wage Labor in South Carolina, 1860–1868," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1986; Robert Hinton, "Cotton Culture on the Tar River: The Politics of Agricultural Labor in the Coastal Plain of North Carolina, 1862–1902," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1993; Eric T. Dean, Jr., "In Evident Mental Commotion: Post-Traumatic Stress and the Civil War," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1996. Most of the Yale and Pittsburgh dissertations cited in these notes resulted in major books.

Montgomery started with and nurtured an abiding interest in the situation of both wage and bound labour, white workers and workers of colour, and the significance of race and racism for working-class formation in the United States. These are themes that have re-surfaced continually in his work. Not surprisingly, his students working on other periods and situations well beyond Reconstruction have been drawn particularly to problems of race and class.

### **Master, journeymen, and apprentices**

MONTGOMERY'S INFLUENCE DERIVES as much from his role as a teacher and adviser as from his own writing.<sup>5</sup> A broader historiographical assessment of his work is overdue, but I will concentrate particularly on his impact on working-class history by considering his own approach in relation to two fairly distinct generations of his students. (The dissertations cited here are meant to provide examples of various themes and approaches and not intended to be a definitive list.) The first generation who are now, to be kind, middle-aged, encountered David in the late 1960s and during the 1970s amidst the slowly dissipating smoke of de-industrializing Pittsburgh, the rank-and-file upsurges of those years, and the last vestiges of a New Left politics focused primarily on industrial workers. This was a particularly compelling background for the study of labour history. It was still possible to climb a hill near the Pitt campus at night and watch the whole steel production process unfold before your eyes – coke and bituminous coal arriving on barges along the Monongahela River, flames and smoke rising from the mill stacks, and a welter of activity in the yards where finished steel departed the Jones and Laughlin Mill on the city's South Side. In Homestead, the site of Carnegie's mill and a long series of labour conflicts, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee memorial to workers and activists killed in the Homestead struggles was close by Chiodo's, a bar we frequented.<sup>6</sup>

A second group of students encountered Montgomery at Yale beginning in the early 1980s in the midst of a series of strikes by clerical workers and others in New Haven and a bitter organizing campaign and strike by graduate employees at the university. Montgomery's presence at Yale in these years undoubtedly shaped not only those young scholars who encountered him, but also the atmosphere of the place. He was not directly responsible for the movements that developed there (though many of his students helped to shape them), but his courage in supporting them, often in the face of bitter opposition from faculty colleagues, clearly helped to sustain them. On the scholarly

5. For another study of Montgomery's impact on the field, see Peter Rachleff, "Learning from David Montgomery: Worker, Historian, Activist," *New Politics* 14 (Summer 2012), <http://new-pol.org/node/647>.

6. These recollections are based in part on James R. Barrett, "Remembering David Montgomery: Pittsburgh," *LAWCHA Newsletter* (Fall 2011), 21–23.

side, this (slightly) younger generation has once again transformed the field. There are some important intellectual differences between and within these two generations of students; indeed, one of my points here is the diversity in subject matter, but there is also a good deal of continuity.<sup>7</sup> In both places, however, the intellectual work was deeply embedded in the political context, a phenomenon that characterized Montgomery's work throughout his life.

Alan Dawley christened the first generation of David's intellectual progeny "the Pittsburgh School," but numerous Yale-trained labour historians fit easily under this same rubric. The consistency and coherence registered by Dawley's label left me a bit skeptical when I first encountered it in early 1988. I had great respect for the historians with whom I worked at Pittsburgh and for the Yale PhDs who seemed to be in the same intellectual orbit, but I thought application of the term "school" to the welter of studies shooting out in all directions seemed to overstate the case. As the editors of *Labour Histories*, a collection published in Montgomery's honour, note, "Montgomery's pedagogy has involved a clear vision of egalitarian and politically informed engagement, yet his hallmark as a teacher has been his genuine openness and wide-ranging appreciation for the multitude of questions that labour history addresses. Over the years Montgomery's students have explored diverse historical problems and methodologies, producing essays and monographs that branched away from their mentor's focus in important ways."<sup>8</sup> This characteristic diversity is reflected in the thirteen contributions to *Labour Histories* and even more strikingly in the list of dissertations completed under David's direction. If we are going to consider Dawley's phrase, it must be with an understanding that it extends to many in the Yale group and also with an understanding of the diversity of the research represented in Montgomery's group of doctoral students in both places.

The *range* of these studies (dissertations completed at Pitt and Yale between the late sixties and about 2005) – from late 18<sup>th</sup>-century Whiskey Rebels through late 19<sup>th</sup>-century African American domestic workers and from 19<sup>th</sup>-century coal miners to white collar workers in the postwar era – belies any glib generalizations about Montgomery's interests and influence being confined to studies of skilled male workers within factory walls. The dissertation list suggests much broader concerns.

Estimating liberally, 15 works, written mostly in the late 1970s and 1980s, represented the kinds of industrial work studies usually associated with Montgomery (and, of course, most of these engaged issues of race, gender, and

7. On the Yale strikes, see Toni Gilpin, *On Strike for Respect: The Clerical & Technical Workers' Strike at Yale University (1984–85)*, Forward by David Montgomery (Chicago 1988). See also Julie Greene's reflections of Montgomery's Yale years in *LAWCHA Newsletter*, (Fall 2011), 24–25.

8. Alan Dawley, "The Worker's Brain Under the Historian's Cap," *Radical History Review*, 40 (January 1988), 101–114; Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, Bruce Laurie, eds., *Labour Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience* (Urbana 1998), xiii.

ethnicity as well as work, labour organization, and class conflict). By comparison to studies of work *per se*, an interest in issues of race looms larger (though a number of these certainly included analyses of work). Eighteen of roughly fifty dissertations focused specifically on workers of colour, most on African Americans but others on Chinese, Filipino, Puerto Rican, and Mexican Americans.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these (many of which analyze relations among workers from *diverse* ethnic backgrounds), eleven more focus particularly on European immigrant workers, often employing theories of ethnic identity to explain intra- as well as inter-class relations.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, they specifically highlight not class homogeneity, but rather difference and diversity within working-class populations and the implications of this diversity for working-class experience. Although the proportion would be higher if we considered those dealing with race and ethnicity as part of the broader context for working-class life, we have more than 60 per cent of the dissertations focusing *primarily* on race and ethnicity.

This concentration on racial and ethnic difference was the product of a number of influences, of course, and not simply a reflection of Montgomery's concerns. Some of the students had been active in the civil rights movement and most had been exposed to its influence. Left organizations of all descriptions during the seventies were apt to place considerable emphasis on Black and other workers of colour. Finally, the presence of younger scholars of colour

9. For examples of dissertations dealing primarily with workers of colour, see Peter Rachelff, "Black, White and Gray: Working-Class Activism in Richmond, Virginia, 1865–1890," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1981; Robert Lewis Ruck, "Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1983; Xinyang Wong, "Tradition, Assimilation, and Response to Homeland Politics: A Comparative Study of Italian and Chinese Immigrants in New York City, 1890–1965," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1988; Tera W. Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making: Afro-American Women in Atlanta and the New South, 1861–1920," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1991; Ruth Glasser, "*Que Vivio Tiene La Gente Aqui En Nueva York*": Music and Community in Puerto Rican New York, 1915–1940," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1991; Yvette Huginnie, "*Strikitos*": Race, Class, and Work in the Arizona Copper Industry, 1870–1920," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1991 (Co-directed with Howard Lamar.); Kimberley Louise Phillipps, "Heaven Bound: Black Migration, Community, and Activism in Cleveland, 1915–1945," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1992; Dorothy Fujita Roney, "You Got to Move Like Hell": Trans-Pacific Colonialism and Filipina/o Seattle, 1919–1941," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1996.

10. See, for example, Frank Huff Serene, "Immigrant Steelworkers in the Monongahela Valley: Their Communities and the Development of a Labor Class Consciousness," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1981; David Joseph Goldberg, "Immigrants, Intellectuals, and Industrial Unions: The 1919 Textile Strike and the Experience of the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America in Passaic and Patterson, New Jersey, and Lawrence, Massachusetts," Columbia University dissertation, 1984 (co-directed with James Shenton); Gunther William Peck, "Reinventing Free Labor: Immigrant Padrones and Contract Laborers in North America, 1880–1920," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1994 (co-directed with Howard Lamar); Carl Weinberg, "The Tug of War: Loyalty and Rebellion in the Southwestern Illinois Coal Fields, 1914–1920," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1995.





**New Haven, Connecticut, 2006, Yale University Celebration of David Montgomery and his work.**

**Top Row:** Bruce Laurie, Julie Greene, Kathy Oberdeck, Jim Barrett, Prudence Cumberbatch, Peter Rachleff. **Middle Row:** Cecelia Bucki, Marty Montgomery, David Montgomery.

**Bottom Row:** Shel Stromquist, Horace Huntley

Courtesy of Cecelia Bucki

in a period when History departments were overwhelmingly white undoubtedly also had an influence on the choice of topics.

At the center of Montgomery's own work from the outset, race also occupied a central place in his graduate seminars at least since the time I began my own studies at Pittsburgh more than 35 years ago in a seminar titled "Race and Class."<sup>11</sup> My recollection is that the graduate students themselves proposed the topic, but it was Montgomery who developed and taught the course. I worked on a collective paper on race and class in the Chicago Stockyards with Rob Ruck, Peter Rachleff, and Steve Wiener.<sup>12</sup> I grew increasingly interested

11. Syllabus, "Race and Class," University of Pittsburgh, Fall 1975, in the author's possession. My recollection is that Peter Rachleff and other graduate students proposed the topic. Thanks to Peter Rachleff for his input on this.

12. Steven Weiner, Rob Ruck, James R. Barrett, Peter Rachleff, "Race and Class in the Chicago



in the distinctive patterns of work in the city's packinghouses, but it was the racial conflict in 1919 that first drew my attention. It is a concentration on race and ethnicity, then, early and late, that is striking in this body of work. Curiously, Dawley did not observe this strong preoccupation with race in his efforts to define and analyze what he called the "Pittsburgh School." Given the early timing of this preoccupation, it provides an interesting slant on the whole debate over labour history's "race problem."<sup>13</sup>

Still, the more time passes and the more labour history heads off in new directions, the more I think that Dawley was onto something. "[T]his remarkable panorama on work and the labour movement," he wrote, "marks the ascendancy in labour history of an interpretation centered on relations of production... that supplants the Wisconsin School." If there *was* something like a "Pittsburgh School," what were its elements? Dawley notes three: an emphasis on class conflict at the workplace; a careful delineation of the full scope of working-class ideologies and practices "ranging from conservative Roman Catholics to anarcho-syndicalists"; and a persistent struggle for democracy at the workplace and in society at large.<sup>14</sup> In addition to the emphasis on race and ethnicity, then, I would stress as well this focus on the ideological diversity of workers and their experiences as a defining characteristic of the approach, but Dawley's emphasis on the workplace and class conflict captures a good deal of the research completed under David's direction throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Although they might be often thought of as a group, the Pittsburgh School's workplace studies were quite different from one another. The authors had divergent interests that were reflected in their topics and approaches. Mark McCulloch was particularly interested (way back in the early 1970s) in intra-class stratification and with making a place for white-collar workers in the developing narrative; Horace Huntley with the role of Black workers in the CIO's Southern organizing; Ron Schatz in corporate and labour ideologies and practices and the destruction of a radical labour opposition among electrical manufacturing workers; Shel Stromquist with patterns of industrial conflict in various types of 19th-century railroad communities. Clare Horner got interested in cooperatives while she and I were at Warwick University and her still unpublished dissertation on producers' cooperatives was another variant on the central theme of the social relations of production. All of us *were* interested

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Stockyards," seminar paper, Fall 1975, in the author's possession.

13. Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History," *Reviews in American History*, 24 (June 1996), 180–208; Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History*, 26 (March 1998), 146–74; David Roediger, "Labor in White Skin: Race and Working Class History," in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, Eds. *The Year Left 3: Reshaping the US Left* (London 1988). See also, Nell Irvin Painter, "The New Labor History and the Historical Moment," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 2 (Spring 1989), 367–370.

14. Dawley, "Worker's Brain," 102–03.

in work and its effects on people's lives and I don't think any one of us would apologize for that.<sup>15</sup>

A similar list of dissertations on work relations might be constructed for the early Yale group: Eric Arnesen's study of race and work organization on the New Orleans docks; Dan Letwin's dissertation on black and white miners in the Alabama mines; Toni Gilpin's study of the left militants who built the United Farm Equipment and Metal Workers' Union. Tera W. Hunter's dissertation on Black household workers in the South, often read for its treatment of Black women workers' cultural expressions, was based on an extensive analysis of the social relations of production among domestic workers and their employers. Work relations and the efforts of workers to reshape their job situations loom large in these and many other Yale dissertations.<sup>16</sup>

Precisely because this workplace-centered approach is dated, it is important to underscore its significance. Despite the fact that workers were defined as a social group in large part in relation to their work, work itself had little place in the historiography as late as the 1970s. The early emphasis in the research of John R. Commons and Selig Perlman was long past and found few takers in the postwar era.<sup>17</sup> At their best, these studies transformed our understanding of industrial work, analyzing capital formation, management theory and practice, and, above all, the social relations among workers and

15. Mark McColloch, "White Collar Electrical Machinery, Banking, and Public Welfare Workers, 1940–1970," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1975; Ronald Schatz, "American Electrical Workers: Work, Struggles, Aspirations," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1977; Horace Huntley, "Iron Ore Miners and Mine Mill in Alabama, 1933–1952," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1976; Shelton Stromquist, "A Generation of Boomers: Work, Community Structure, and the Pattern of Industrial Conflict on Late Nineteenth-Century Railroads," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1981; Clare Dahlberg Horner, "Producers' Cooperatives in the United States, 1865–1890," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1978. See also, Bruce Laurie, "The Working People of Philadelphia, 1827–1853," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1971; John Bennett, "Iron Workers of Woods Run and Johnstown, 1865–1895," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1977.

16. Toni Gilpin, "Left by Themselves: A History of the United Farm Equipment and Metal Workers Union, 1938–1955," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1992; Eric Arnesen, "Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863–1923," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1986; Daniel Lazar Letwin, "Race, Class, and Industrialization in the New South: Black and White Coal Miners in Birmingham, Alabama, 1878–1897," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1991; Hunter, "Household Workers in the Making." See also, Joan Margaret Cavanaugh, "You Can't Kill the Golden Goose: A History of General Dynamics' Electric Boat Shipyard in Twentieth Century New London, Connecticut," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1996.

17. Perlman's theory of the American labour movement was based on a notion of "job consciousness" and may be seen most clearly in Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York 1928). Commons's preoccupation with work processes is most visible in his essays. See, for example, *Trade Unionism and Labor Problems*, edited with an introduction by John R. Commons (Boston and New York 1905).

between them and management on the shop floor. They brought work back into the heart of labour history. We find the same “gritty” quality here that one finds in much of Montgomery’s own studies of work – the organization of work in various industries, the functioning of the labour market, the physical characteristics of the workplace, the persistent conflict between employers and workers over not only wages and conditions but also control of the work process. Such studies often fused the emphasis on work with cultural themes being developed by Herbert Gutman, his students, and other “new” social historians of immigration, women, and the family.<sup>18</sup> Whatever else one might say about them, these early Pittsburgh School studies told us what wage work looked like, how it was experienced, how it *changed* over time, and, often, how it related to other vital elements of workers’ lives at home and in their communities.

### The Pervasiveness of Class

YET THIS EMPHASIS ON WORK PER SE not only leaves a great deal out but, in fact, misses the real thrust of David’s influence – among his students at Pittsburgh, particularly among the Yale group, and beyond to historians who never set foot in either place. There was a project much broader than the history of work or race relations that we shared, one that helps to explain the striking range of topics in the list of dissertations. “The central concern of the Pittsburgh School,” Dawley noted in 1988, “is Class.”<sup>19</sup>

Any definitive statement on Montgomery’s conception of class is difficult; like Marx’s, it is inherent throughout his work, but he never provided a concise statement. We certainly have some indication of what he understood by the term and how it influenced his approach. This suggests first, a far broader, more inclusive, and more flexible understanding of the concept than many of his critics seem to observe. Other appraisals have followed David Brody’s favorable 1978 and 1987 characterizations of Montgomery’s approach as largely focused on work. When I interviewed some labour historians, this was the kind of research they linked most directly with Montgomery’s legacy. Brody, however, went further to argue for continuity between Selig Perlman’s interpretation and Montgomery’s, in effect between the Wisconsin and Pittsburgh Schools. Like Perlman’s notion of “job consciousness” as an organizing principle of the central labour narrative and an accurate reflection of US workers’ mentality,

18. Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays on Working-Class and Social History* (New York 1976); Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class* (New York 1992); Shelton Stromquist, “Perspectives on the New Labour History: The Wisconsin School and Beyond,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 39 (Spring 1991), 81–84. A combined focus on work, community, and elements of working-class culture may also be observed in the early work of Bryan Palmer, Gregory Kealey, and other Canadian “new labour historians”.

19. Dawley, “Workman’s Brain,” 103.

Brody argued, Montgomery's focus on work explains workers' motivations and consciousness largely in relation to the industrial sphere.<sup>20</sup> This formulation over-simplifies Montgomery's approach and, in fact, misreads his interpretation of labour history.

Certainly it is no coincidence that we have drawn this impression from Montgomery's work. He begins *The Fall of the House of Labor*, suggesting "The human relationships structured by commodity production in large collective enterprises devoted to private gain" as the basis for class conflict and the context for the rich narrative to follow. For Montgomery, then, the social relations of production are central; yet the class experience goes well beyond that. "Although the modern experience of class had its origin in the encounter with wage labour," he writes, "class consciousness permeated social discourse outside the workplace as well as within it. Married women caring for their children in bleak congested neighborhoods ... were reminded of their class as regularly as their husbands, daughters, and sons in the factories. Children learned early the differences between their parents' attire, bearing, and patterns of speech and those of the gentlemen and ladies who seemed to move with such grace and ease through the corridors of power and the emporiums of abundance."<sup>21</sup>

Montgomery's work seems often to be thought of in opposition to gendered interpretations, and certainly he and most of his students have emphasized class experience and identity over gender.<sup>22</sup> Yet his earliest explicit treatment of gender as a constitutive element in class identity came almost forty years ago with his discussion of masculine values and behaviour.<sup>23</sup> In his main work, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, gendered working-class identities emerge most clearly in the early chapters dealing with skilled metal trades workers, common labourers, and factory operatives, with discussions of women's experience

20. David Brody "The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of An American Working Class," *Labor History* 20 (Winter 1979), 111–126; David Brody, "Reconciling the Old Labor History and the New," *Pacific Historical Review*, 62 (February 1993), 14–15; Jim Barrett, interviews with Shelton Stromquist, 16 October 1998 and Leon Fink, 16 October 1998, Detroit, Michigan; Cecelia Bucki email correspondence, November 1998. See also the comments in "A Symposium on *The Fall of the House of Labor*," *Labor History*, 30 (Winter 1989), 93–125 and Montgomery's response, "On Class, Capitalism, and Contentment," 125–137.

21. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 1.

22. Eva Baron, "Gender and Labor History: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future" in Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Work* (Ithaca, New York 1991), 5; Elizabeth Faue, "Retooling the Class Factory: United States Labour History after Marx, Montgomery, and Postmodernism," *Labour History* 82 (May 2002), 109–119. For a Montgomery dissertation that employs a "classed" gender analysis to working women's organizations, see Priscilla Murolo, "Working Girls' Clubs, 1884–1928: Class and Gender on the "Common Ground of Womanhood," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1992.

23. David Montgomery, "Workers' Control of Machine Production in the Nineteenth Century," *Labor History* 17 (Fall 1976), 484–509.

figuring most prominently in the last of these.<sup>24</sup> Reading in women's history helped him to develop his more expansive notion of class. "The work of feminist scholars, indeed the whole *corpus* of recent work on women's history, has been of central importance in getting me to think about what else is involved in class beyond the relations of production," Montgomery told interviewers in 1981. "If all we see is what's going on in the workplace, we are going to miss a great deal."<sup>25</sup>

The framework for Montgomery's analysis, then, is far more inclusive than the factory. Shel Stromquist started his reminiscences of Montgomery's message with the usual emphasis on "the centrality of the workplace," but concluded by employing the same adjective that many other of his students have also applied to Montgomery's notion of class. For Montgomery, Stromquist explained, "class is pervasive."<sup>26</sup> As the editors of *Labor Histories* note, "Class pervades all aspects of social experience – family and gender relations, neighborhood politics, race relations, and associational life; it infuses the realms of production and consumption, the work experience, family and community life, politics, social life, ideology, and culture in all its forms. Class and class consciousness in turn bear the imprint of the social relations of the workplace, the character of state policy, and gender, race, ethnicity, and region."<sup>27</sup> As I will suggest in my closing remarks, it is *not* simply the study of work but rather this capacious understanding of class that most of Montgomery's students share and which may constitute his most important and durable legacy to the field as a whole.

There certainly were many other influences besides Montgomery on scholars who might be associated with the "Pittsburgh School." Let me take as an example the Pittsburgh dissertation with which I am most familiar. A number of political and historiographical influences were at work when I sat down to conceptualize *Work and Community in 'The Jungle'*, a study of workplace, family, and community in the lives of Chicago's packinghouse workers.<sup>28</sup> Montgomery's workplace studies, eventually collected in *Workers' Control*

24. See, for example, Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, esp. 112–170.

25. Montgomery interview with Mark Naison and Paul Buhle, 1981 in Henry Abelove, et al., eds., *Visions of History* (New York 1983), 167–184. While Eric Arnesen sees Montgomery's approach as a precursor to Zeitlin's and Kimmeldorf's calls for a new institutionalism, Montgomery himself found a concentration on work, unions, and activists too narrow. See Eric Arnesen, "Crusades Against Crisis," *International Review of Social History*, 35 (April 1990), 112–13; Montgomery, "The Limits of Union-Centered History: Response to Howard Kimmeldorf," *Labor History*, 32 (Winter 1991), 110–116.

26. Stromquist interview, 2–3. The phrase "pervasiveness of class" emerged several times in the early planning for the volume *Labor Histories*, as a group of Montgomery's students sought to identify what was unique in his approach.

27. *Labor Histories*, 4.

28. James R. Barrett, "Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1894–1922," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1981.

in America, provided much of the inspiration for the analysis of slaughtering and meat packing work. But I had also been intrigued with the syndicalist-inclined shop floor organization and strike activity in the Coventry car plants and other places around England when I lived there in the early 1970s. I read Carter Goodrich's book, *The Frontier of Control*, to conceptualize the shop floor politics that burgeoned in the packinghouses during the period of organization.<sup>29</sup> (Although it was clearly shaped by his own experiences on the shop floor, Montgomery also pointed to the British experience of workers' control, which he observed while teaching at Warwick University in the late sixties, as one impetus for his studies in that area.)<sup>30</sup>

David Brody's *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era* provided a model for how to carry one's analysis beyond the factory and into the community, to see the impact of what Montgomery, in a favourite phrase borrowed from Robert and Helen Lynd, called "the long arm of the job." Brody also suggested divergences and links between the psychology of the immigrant worker and that of the supervisor and plant manager.<sup>31</sup> I was particularly interested in the worldview of the unskilled immigrant workers, and Brody helped there. I took my orientation to work discipline and the whole notion of distinct generations of immigrant workers from Gutman's "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America," as well, of course, as from Thompson's "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism."<sup>32</sup> John Bodnar, Liz Pleck, Tamara Hareven, and other immigration, women's, and family historians offered ways to probe the links between the workplace and the family, that most intimate domain of working-class life.<sup>33</sup> Finally, having grown up in an ethnic blue-collar neighborhood in Chicago, I also wanted to square what I knew from

29. David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge 1979); Carter Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control: A Study of British Workshop Politics* (New York 1921; reprint London 1975). For an influential study of shop floor organization in British car plants, which was read extensively in Pittsburgh in the 1970s, see Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford* (London 1975).

30. James R. Barrett, "Class Act: An Interview with David Montgomery," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 1 (Spring 2004), 25–56.

31. David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era* (New York 1969); Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York 1956).

32. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America*, 3–78; E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, 38 (December 1967), 56–97.

33. John Bodnar, "Immigration, Kinship, and the Rise of Working-Class Realism," *Journal of Social History*, 14 (Autumn 1980), 45–65; Elizabeth Pleck, "Two Worlds in One: Work and Family," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (Winter 1976), 178–95; Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time: The Relationship between Family and Work in a New England Industrial Community* (Cambridge 1982).



experience with what scholars had to say about places like the Back-of-the-Yards, an immigrant working-class slum on the city's South Side.<sup>34</sup>

What provided a framework for all of this, though, was the notion that class penetrated all aspects of workers' lives. On Chicago's South Side, class seemed to have as much to do with who cared for the kids and where someone lived in relation to the nearest church steeple or factory stack as it did with one's wage or job classification. Class identity was not easily understood but rather intertwined in a complex amalgam of identities involving gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as shared workplace experience. Yet the realities of stockyards employment hung heavily over these neighborhoods and shaped many aspects of these families' lives. Following and understanding the "long arm of the job" has become far more complicated over the past 25 years thanks to the work of historians of gender and sexuality, popular culture, and various forms of ethnic history, but surely its pursuit is still relevant to understanding the lives of wage-earning people.

And what did Montgomery have to say about workers' own thinking? To what degree did they think and act in class terms? Neither mechanical nor over-determined, for Montgomery class consciousness was a "project" crafted at the hands of politically skilled activists. Brody finds a *shift* in Montgomery's thinking on this score. *Workers' Control in America* (1979), Brody argues, shows a Montgomery concerned with "the initiatives of workers themselves, rather than the way in which they were manipulated by those in authority over them."<sup>35</sup> Certainly this "rank and file" dimension is present throughout his work. In *The Fall of the House of Labor*, however, Brody notes that Montgomery stresses how much the making of class consciousness owed to interventions in labour struggles and everyday life by committed activists. The key figures in his story are the "militant minority," those socialists and syndicalists in the early 20th century and other politically conscious workers who followed them and whose "project" it was to "weld their work mates and neighbors into a self-aware and purposeful working class." The significance of these activists had been obscured, Montgomery believed, as much by "history from the bottom, up" as by any "fixation on great leaders." It would be strange indeed if Montgomery's thinking had not evolved between the *Workers' Control* essays written in the early and mid 1970s amidst the shop-floor upsurges and rank-and-file democracy movements of those years and the dramatic defeats of the 1980s when he was writing *The Fall*. Yet his emphasis on the "militant minority" on the shop floor and in the neighborhood had been characteristic of Montgomery's approach since at least the early 1970s. More likely and more

34. James R. Barrett, "The Blessed Virgin Made Me a Socialist Historian: An Experiment in Autobiography and Historiography of Race and Class," in Nick Salvatore, ed., *Faith and the Historian: Catholic Perspectives* (Urbana 2007), 117–147.

35. Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America*, 4, quoted in Brody, "Reconciling," 15.

logically, it is a product of his experiences as a Communist union militant back in the 1950s.<sup>36</sup>

Montgomery's notion of class consciousness as a "project" helps to explain his tendency to focus on politically conscious workers and on organization. Animated by the same sense of working-class agency as other pioneers of the new labour history, he was nevertheless a bit skeptical of "spontaneity" as either a political prescription or an adequate explanation of working-class history.<sup>37</sup> In analyzing the militant minority who pursued this project, however, Montgomery went to great pains to convey the *range* of ideas and loyalties. He was particularly drawn to those expansive movements that offered the best chance of bringing radicalism into the mainstream of working-class life – the early Socialist Party, the Farmer-Labour experiments, and the Popular Front.<sup>38</sup> He was indeed drawn to what I would term "blue-collar cosmopolitans" – thinkers and activists who envisioned a whole new world even as they shaped metal, loaded coal cars, or tended their power looms. I would have liked him to pay more attention to the traditional values associated with religion, and the more conservative elements of workers' mentalities, notably racism. But he *did* demonstrate an interest in both.<sup>39</sup>

History yielded no "typical" working-class experience for Montgomery or for those in the Pittsburgh School. On the contrary, it seemed vital to document the tremendous *diversity* of this experience in all aspects of life – and then to see how these diverse experiences related to broader narratives. Here a badly neglected *methodological* characteristic of Montgomery's own work and that of most of his students – a strong, empirical core – seems crucial. The Pittsburgh dissertations and some of those at Yale were packed with tables,

36. Montgomery interview, *Visions of History*, 178.

37. For a clear statement of this skepticism, see David Montgomery, "Spontaneity and Organization: Some Comments on Jeremy Brecher's *Strike!*" *Radical America*, 7 (November–December 1973), 70–80.

38. "The Farmer-Labor Party's Legacy to the Socialist Left," *In These Times*, 8–14 October 1980, 18–19; "Labor and the Political Leadership of New Deal America," *International Review of Social History* 39 (December 1994), 335–360; Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 327, 406, 431–437, 439.

39. David Montgomery, "Violence and the Struggle for Unions in the South," in Merle Black and John Shelton Reed, eds., *Perspectives on the American South*, 1 (New York 1981), 35–48; "Capitalism, Race, Democracy and Reconstruction," *Radical History Review*, 48 (Fall 1990), 153–160. In "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844," *Journal of Social History*, 5 (Summer 1972), 411–466 and in his discussions of Catholic social teachings in *Fall of the House of Labor*, Montgomery analyzes religious ideas primarily as obstacles to working-class solidarity. In a more recent, unpublished work on Father McGlynn and the Henry George Campaign in 1880s New York City, however, he takes a more subtle approach, considering religion and ethnic identity as they relate to class mobilization. For a Yale dissertation, firmly in the field of religious history, which shows marks of Montgomery's emphasis on social class, see Paula Marie Kane, "Boston Catholics and Modern American Culture, 1900–1920," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1987.

statistical appendices, collective biographies, and a particular kind of oral history. While some of us experimented with workers' personal narratives,<sup>40</sup> it was much more common to do dozens of interviews with a diverse sample of workers, employing a standard interview schedule. These were not simply stories; this was data! One early influence here was clearly what Sam Hays, another Pittsburgher, called "systematic social history,"<sup>41</sup> but something deeper was also at work, in David's research and in ours. The intense empirical scrutiny was peculiarly suited to documenting the vast diversity of working-class experience, while maintaining a hard-nosed materialist analysis.<sup>42</sup> The determination to document the complexity of workers' lives is displayed most dramatically perhaps in the first three chapters of *The Fall of the House of Labor* where he analyzes the work life and mentalities of skilled workers, common labourers, and machine tenders. This detailed examination of the workplace and community lent the Pittsburgh School the gritty quality that Dawley and others have celebrated – and the density that has irritated some of Montgomery's critics.

Finally, Montgomery's understanding of class emphasizes the impact of workers on broad historical change and particularly their roles in relation to the state. More common recently among labour historians (pushed perhaps by the new institutionalists among political scientists and historical sociologists), this theme of workers and state power has always been *central* to Montgomery's approach – from the failure of the Reconstruction project in *Beyond Equality*, through his series of articles on the New Deal to *The Fall*, and most strikingly in *Citizen Worker's* discussions of 19th-century law and government policy.<sup>43</sup>

40. Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh 1981).

41. Samuel P. Hays, "A Systematic Social History," in Samuel P. Hays, *American Political History as Social Analysis* (Knoxville, Tennessee 1980), 132–180.

42. Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, appendices; *Workers' Control in America*, 20, 97; "Strikes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Social Science History*, 4 (February 1980), 81–104. A wide range of Pittsburgh and Yale dissertations involved quantification, with my favorite examples being Kathryn Oberdeck's statistical analysis of the types of pet tricks and other acts in New Haven's vaudeville theatres and Ileen DeVault's analysis of social mobility and clerical work in Pittsburgh's working-class community. See Kathryn J. Oberdeck, "Labor's Vicar and the Variety Show: Popular Theatre, Popular Religion, and Cultural Class Conflict in Turn-of-the-Century America," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1991 and Ileen A. DeVault, "Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1985. Of course, this concern with empirical data is one of a number of areas where the Pittsburgh School's approach overlapped with other "new social historians" and particularly in method and aim with that of Herbert Gutman.

43. David Brody, "Reconciling the Old Labor History and The New," 14–15; Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*; "Liberty and Union: Government and Workers in America, 1900–1940" in Robert Weible, ed. *Essays From the Lowell Conference on Industrial History* (Lowell 1981), 145–57; "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860–1920," *Le Mouvement Social*, 111 (Avril–Juin 1980), 201–215; "American Workers and the New Deal Formula," in *Workers'*

The theme of working-class political activism may also be viewed in the work of many of his students.<sup>44</sup> What was different in Montgomery's approach to issues of state power, law, and electoral politics, however, was his insistence on putting the story of working-class politics back into the broader political narrative. Montgomery projected the lives of common people onto an enormous canvas of national politics, state building, and, most recently, global imperialism. As Nell Painter noted, Montgomery provided "a clear explanation of the relationship between capitalism and the state. Keeping his eye on the working lives of Americans from diverse backgrounds, Montgomery delineates the larger power relations that so profoundly influenced what workers experienced."<sup>45</sup> In this limited sense at least, Montgomery and his students have contributed to the development of a new synthesis of American history with the experience and agency of working people at its very core.

Montgomery's determination to reinsert his rich evocation of working-class life into this broader political context – the juxtaposition of common people's experiences with the sweeping social, economic, and political changes that remake societies and the struggle to define the causal relationship between these experiences and these changes – lends his work its compelling quality. No one who has read or, better, heard Montgomery construct such a narrative is likely to forget it soon. Without understanding "the ways that class has

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*Control in America*, 153–180; "Labor and the Political Leadership of New Deal America," 335–360; *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York 1993); "Wage Labor, Bondage, and Citizenship in Nineteenth-Century America," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 48 (Fall 1995), 6–27.

44. Fred Barkey, "The West Virginia Socialist Party, 1898–1920: A Study in Working-Class Radicalism," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1971; Neville Kirk, "The Emergence of Working-Class Reformism in Lancashire, 1850–1870," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1974; Donald S. McPherson, "The Fight Against Free Schools in Pennsylvania: Popular Opposition to the Common School System, 1834–1874," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1977; Dorothy Fennell, "From Rebelliousness to Insurrection: A Social History of the Whiskey Rebellion, 1765–1802," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1981; Rachelff, "Black, White and Gray"; Cecelia Bucki, "The Pursuit of Political Power: Class, Ethnicity, and Municipal Politics in Interwar Bridgeport, 1915–1936," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1991; Roney, "You Got to Move Like Hell"; Dana Lynn Frank, "At the Point of Consumption: Seattle Labor and the Politics of Consumption, 1919–1927," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1988; Julia Marie Greene, "The Strike at the Ballot Box: Politics and Partisanship in the American Federation of Labor, 1881–1916," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1990; Karen Lynn Sawislak, "Smoldering City: Class, Ethnicity, and Politics in Chicago at the Time of the Great Fire, 1867–1874," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1990; Karin Adrienne Shapiro, "The Tennessee Coal Miners' Revolts of 1891: Industrialization, Politics, and Convict Labor in the Late Nineteenth-Century South," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1991; Theodore Christos Liazos, "Big Labor: George Meany and the Making of the AFL-CIO," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1998.

45. Nell Painter, "One or Two More Things about *The Fall of the House of Labor*," *Labor History*, 30 (Winter 1989), 118.

shaped the actions of men and women in their making of history," Montgomery wrote, "the reproduction of everyday patterns of sustenance and interaction" may be trivialized and the explanation of broad social and political changes left "to those who write about the policy decisions made by elites."<sup>46</sup>

### The Complexity of Class

HAVING TRAVELED DOWN the labour history road with Montgomery and a group that might be called the Pittsburgh School, where do we find ourselves? Where are we headed? David's capacious notion of class and his determination to understand its ramifications throughout American society, summons up an unwanted ghost – the ghost of synthesis. Having celebrated David's influence, I'd like to close with what seems to me an irony that at once underscores his central place in the radical social history project of the past 40 years and also conveys its limits.

Although the term is generally associated with the new cultural history and with more recent theoretical influences, the social history project dating from the late 1960s was very much one of *deconstructing* the dominant political narrative of American History. No field was more central to this project than labour history and no historian's voice was more influential, *within* labour history, than David's. Yet the Pittsburgh School's very methods, the questions Montgomery asked, and the ones he inspired his students and others to investigate, have complicated our understanding of workers in the United States and elsewhere, making it impossible to write the history of the United States without considering the role of workers. This in itself is a great achievement. But the richness of this research has also made it increasingly difficult to think of workers' experiences in terms of any unified narrative. And the most recent theoretical and methodological innovations in History as a discipline only reinforce the tendencies toward disintegration to which most of us have contributed. As Dawley pointed out back in 1988, "The smart money is not on synthesis."<sup>47</sup>

Montgomery's own *Fall of the House of Labor*, probably the finest piece of working-class history produced over the past several decades, is a case in point. When conceptualized, perhaps unfairly, as a new synthesis, a counternarrative to both the liberal and the orthodox Marxist analyses of the old labour history,

46. Montgomery, "On Class, Capitalism, and Contentment," 131, 137; Nell Irvin Painter, "One or Two More Things about *The Fall of the House of Labor*," 118. For Montgomery's analysis of workers' experience of imperialism on a sweeping international scale, see "Immigrants, Racism, and Political Reform," 1253–1274 and Montgomery, "Empire, Race, and Working-Class Mobilizations," in Peter Alexander and Rick Halpern, eds., *Racializing Class, Classifying Race: Labor and Difference in Britain, the USA and Africa* (New York 2000), 1–31.

47. Dawley, "Worker's Brain," 112.

*The Fall* emerges as what Howell Harris calls “a flawed masterpiece.”<sup>48</sup> Criticism of the book was more extensive than one might have expected. Yet for all the critics’ verbal wheel spinning, the tires have never quite met the road. Overwhelmed by the empirical and narrative complexity of the story or satisfied to pursue in the book their own particular interests, critics have never grasped the whole, whatever its virtues or weaknesses. Strangest, perhaps, is Michael Kazin’s critique which seems to argue that Montgomery’s Marxism led him to simplify the story, condensing the complexities of a diverse labouring population into one big lump – “class.”<sup>49</sup> There may be problems with *The Fall*, but a tendency to *oversimplify* is not one of them. Indeed, the book would be much easier for students (not to mention practicing labour historians and book critics) to grasp if it did provide a more linear narrative, a unified story of “American Workers.” To his credit, Montgomery has not done this – here or in his other work. *The Fall* was an honest interpretation of some of the best research in our field, by Montgomery and others. It was also a reflection of where we were when it appeared in the late 1980s and, to some extent, where we still are, at least with regard to the quest for a synthesis, however misguided that quest might be.

Montgomery’s own thoughts on synthesis continued to stress the relationship of the workplace and community with politics and the state: “A synthesis of working-class history would require much more attention to home and family life, to the community. I tipped my hat by noting, especially in the 1910s and 1920s, the decisive importance of working-class neighborhoods in the outcomes of struggles. Again, it’s the way in which those neighborhoods influence workplace struggles that influenced me. Whereas for many people in day-to-day life it was actually the opposite – most of the time, community and family were uppermost in their minds. So I think to begin to talk about a synthesis would require one to deal with much more than just the workplace, the state, and working-class activism.”<sup>50</sup>

The most recent developments in working-class history, its new emphasis on the personal and the subjective, are not likely to tidy things up in the interests of straightforward generalizations. Approaching this new frontier of social history, bringing the personal aspects of poor and working people’s lives into a dialogue with the material conditions and power relations with which we are more familiar may lead us into bedrooms and churches and other less comfortable terrain.

To the extent that we have begun to do this sort of work on the “subjective,” it could be seen as a break from the earlier Marxist traditions that sparked the explosion of creative scholarship with which many of us identify. Yet there is a clear connection. E.P. Thompson, other prominent social historians, and many

48. Howell John Harris, “The Master Craftsman,” *Labor History*, 30 (Winter 1989), 105.

49. Michael Kazin, “Limits of the Workplace,” *Labor History*, 30 (Winter 1989), 111.

50. Barrett, “Class Act: An Interview with David Montgomery.”



of those they influenced, including a large number of the aging “New Labour Historians,” were Marxists, as was David Montgomery down to the time of his death. Many of us continuing our work today might consider ourselves too sophisticated (or cynical) for that label now. And yet this leap from the material world and what we call “politics” need not be seen as an abrupt departure from the socialist tradition represented by Montgomery and Thompson. Socialist Humanism itself led us away from strictly structural analyses and toward a new understanding of human needs and motivation. The efforts of labour historians to explore the more subjective dimensions of their subjects’ lives could be seen as another step on this continuum – if it continues to deal with issues of class and power.<sup>51</sup>

Montgomery had some interesting things to say about this issue of personal or small group as opposed to a collective identity as “working class.” Yet diverse “identities” remained, as it did for many socialists of his generation, something to be overcome in the interests of getting everyone together: “Anybody involved in trade union activity becomes immediately aware of the diverse characteristics of all the individuals around the group that you’re trying to pull together. They may be all workers, maybe even all workers on very similar sorts of work, maybe all of them are of the same gender and race. But you still get an enormous variety of personalities, aspirations, responses. There’s no way in the world to effectively organize workers without knowing this... who everybody is, in this world around you. What they’re likely to do or unlikely to do. But it’s also the case that a lot of forms of identity people see in themselves pit them against each other. The challenge is to overcome those differences, or often, as in the early CIO, to incorporate them into a common effort to improve society.”<sup>52</sup>

Asked toward the end of his life to help define a new agenda for radical history, E.P. Thompson spoke less of Marxism, which he saw continuing to assume “a capitalist definition of human need” (though he continued to embrace “historical materialism”), and more of other needs – in their various forms, “agency, initiatives, ideas, and even love” Yet Thompson also welcomed “a renewed emphasis on power and power relations ... Some studies of ‘culture,’” he said, “forget the controlling context of power.”<sup>53</sup>

51. On the relationship between the socialist humanism underlying the thought of E.P. Thompson, the early New Left, and the political background for the New Labour History, see Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London 1994), 69–86 and Kate Soper, “Socialist Humanism”, in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia, 1990), 204–221. For an interesting take by Montgomery on these relationships, see David Montgomery, “E. P. Thompson: History as Human Agency,” *Queen’s Quarterly*, 87 (Summer 1980), 267–272.

52. Barrett, “Class Act: An Interview with David Montgomery,” 44.

53. E.P. Thompson, “Agenda for Radical History” in Thompson, *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York 1994), 360–365.

Missing so far, then, in assessments of Montgomery's work is the extent to which the very complexity, diversity, nuance, and ambivalence that we tend to celebrate today make it difficult to craft a central narrative from the inconvenient historical material at hand. This is a situation we all share. But in the midst of this dilemma, Montgomery was always very consistent in focusing on Thompson's "controlling context of power." The genius of Montgomery's work was to face this complexity head on, indeed to document it in loving detail, and then still to consider the ways in which the story continues to have broader meanings. To consider these broader meanings of political and social power for common people's democratic aspirations is now a fine old tradition in labour historical writing, one that is brilliantly exemplified in David Montgomery's life and scholarship and in the work of his scores of students and the others he influenced. It is one we should maintain in his memory.

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The Labor and Working-Class History Association (LAWCHA) is sponsoring a new Organization of American Historians (OAH) book award in David Montgomery's name. The David Montgomery Book Award in Labor and Working-Class History needs to raise funds for the establishment of this prize. Please go to the following Organization of American Historians website for information on how you may donate.

[www.oah.org/donate/montgomeryaward.html](http://www.oah.org/donate/montgomeryaward.html)