FALSE PROMISES

STANLEY ARONOWITZ

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The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness

STANLEY ARONOWITZ

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Introduction

In August 1966 I was sent to Puerto Rico as a representative of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers. I had been director of organization for the union's region in the Northeastern states until columnist Victor Reisel wrote, in February 1966, that I was among those in the unions most active in pressing for political action against the Vietnam War. His article created a minor ripple within the OCAW and gave the conservatives an occasion for demanding my dismissal and a clear-cut union stand in support of the war. OCAW President Al Grospiron resisted the pressure for a prowar position and for my dismissal as well. But even though I was also supported by my district council, it was hard to keep me at my job. Instead of firing me, Grospiron sent me to help launch an organizing drive in Puerto Rico.

My exile forced me to reexamine my position as a full-time union official, and, eventually, led to a fresh look not only at the union movement but at the working class as a potential force for social and political change. For most of the early 1960s I had walked a fairly thin line between radical activism and trade unionism. I spent a good deal of the period doing two things: helping to create a new left that was both organizationally and

ideologically independent of the old Socialist and Communist movements, and working with the more progressive groups in the trade unions that were trying to revive the energy of the CIO. In 1965, I played a minor part in helping to elect Grospiron to succeed O. A. Knight, an old CIO leader who had become increasingly entangled with State-Department- and CIA-sponsored labor activities in Africa and Latin America during the Cold War days, and was steering a fairly conservative course within the union as well. Grospiron was among the younger, more aggressive union leaders who were making successful bids to oust the old-line industrial union leaders at that time. I felt that the atmosphere for more militant, democratic unionism would be improved if he were elected. The circumstances leading to my temporary exile to Puerto Rico were only a last straw in a mounting set of doubts about what I was doing in the labor movement. In March 1967 I decided to take a leave of absence and go back to the United States. My departure in May proved to be permanent. I left not only the OCAW, but the union movement itself.

When I returned to the mainland, the idea of writing a book began to take shape in my mind. It was to be a contemporary analysis of the unions, showing the convergence of liberal and conservative trade union leaders. I believed they both played the same role in giving general support to the policies of the U.S. government, cooperating with the companies against the initiatives of the rank and file, and providing part of the constituency of the Democratic Party. The book was to be written from the point of view of a socialist-minded trade union reformer. I could not write the book: there were too many questions left unanswered and I had not yet attained the distance from my work to deal with them. Instead, I got a job working for a New York City antipoverty agency and went back to school to get a bachelor's degree.

The events of 1968 in France had a profound impact on my thinking. I began to understand that neither the trade unions nor the many left-wing political parties in France were compatible with the incipient revolutionary aspirations of the students or the workers who were straining toward taking control of society. When the 1969–70 wildcat strikes in transportation and among postal workers and auto workers encountered both trade union and government resistance in almost equal measure in this coun-

try, a substantial change in my perspective began to congeal for me.

I grew up politically with the orthodox socialist view of radical change. According to this position, workers by themselves could never achieve revolutionary consciousness, since socialism was a science usually brought to the working class by intellectuals from the outside. It was the role of intellectuals to organize a revolutionary political party that would systematically agitate and organize among the industrial working class and other exploited sections of the people. Even though the trade unions could not lead the fight for socialism, they were important as training grounds for the workers. In the trade union struggles, workers learned the value and the techniques of collective action. They became conscious of themselves as a distinct interest group in society that had little in common with the interests of the employers or the capitalist state. To be sure, revolutionary class consciousness—that is, the recognition by workers that their particular interest was identical with the general project of world historical changes and that they alone could propel a transformation in social relations—must await the capitalist crisis that would prove the inability of the economic system to meet the workers' needs. Prior to the crisis, however, political and trade union activity prepared the workers organizationally and ideologically for the conflict that would result in great social changes. Radicals were to enter the trade unions in order to win over workers to the ideas of socialism where possible, but also to encourage militant struggles for immediate demands, to undertake independent political action outside the two major capitalist parties, and to work for the transformation of reactionary trade unions into better instruments for serving workers' interests. The duty of the radicals was to fight for democratic, politically conscious trade unionism as the best first step toward the development of class consciousness.

I came from a working class family and spent nearly fifteen years in the shops and in full-time union work. Even though I never identified with the existing union leadership, and always regarded myself as an oppositionist, I was a firm advocate of building unions—even if conservative—among the unorganized. Implicit in my years as a rank-and-file union member, an activist in caucuses aimed at replacing the existing union leadership in the Steelworkers, and as an organizer, was the idea that the

unions played a generally progressive role in U.S. social struggles and that workers could never achieve socialist consciousness until they had learned how to struggle for their immediate demands and take control of their own unions.

This book represents a departure from these views and, indeed, from the way I have spent most of my adult life. During the writing of this book, I have attempted to reexamine all of the ideas that have guided my political and trade union activities. I have also been led to undertake a critique of the methods that are implied by these ideas.

After leaving the trade unions, I began to look at the working class, its institutions and its history, in ways that were radically different from those of most professional social scientists of both left-wing and liberal persuasions. In considering the history and role of the working class in U.S. society, historians and social theorists have characteristically circumscribed the history of the working class by the experience of trade unions and socialist movements. The ideological conflicts among leaders, the relative strength of factions within the unions and political sects, and the events that symbolized the intensity of workers' struggles against capital in the plants or in the political sphere, have become the preoccupation of labor history and theory.

There is a logic to this perspective, if one accepts the view that all history is defined by the conscious, institutionally defined struggles between people. In the United States trade union struggles have been the most overt expressions of worker discontent. But in defining the working class by the evolution of institutions or by episodic struggles, dimensions that can shed light on the configuration of working class consciousness and organizations are ignored. The result of such analysis is, therefore, one-sided and ultimately distorts reality. Implied in this view of working class history is the idea that the origins and development of the institutions themselves can be explained in terms of their internal political struggles and the intelligence or perfidy of the leaders. It refuses to examine the forces that prevented workers from affiliating with these institutions or the alternatives they found to them.

Recently, a number of writers dissatisfied with the limitations of institutional labor history have tried to reconstruct the story of the working class from the fabric of actual mass struggles or, alternatively, the consciousness of rank-and-file workers themselves. The works of Irving Bernstein, Studs Terkel, Jeremy

Brecher, and David Brody have provided welcome antidotes to the prevailing orientation of labor historians.

Bernstein's two massive studies[1] try to connect the circumstances of everyday working class life and trade union development with the political and economic changes of the 1920s and 1930s. His work constitutes a mandatory source for anyone interested in workers' history. But the mass of detail and the many insights provided by him barely touch what should be the starting point of labor studies—the workplace. His history is still written from the outside.

Terkel tries to understand working class life from inside the consciousness of those who live it. As subjective description, his oral history has no parallel in the literature of the American working class. *Hard Times*[2] provides an important corrective to the general tendency of those who look at the working class to ignore how they think. He shows that the anger of workers is not the same as self-recognition of their power and right to control society.

Brecher[3] steps out of institutional controversies to record the important labor struggles of the last one hundred years. He shows that the American working class has acted independently of both the trade unions and the political parties to oppose companies and defend its class interest. His semidocumentary account of some of the epochal struggles of industrial workers reveals their courage, their capacity for self-organization, and their incipient revolutionary awareness despite the vacillations and frequent opposition of organized trade union bureaucracies. It is impossible to come away from a reading of Brecher's book with the consensus view of American workers' history intact.

American workers in all generations have demonstrated that they will fight, with force of arms if necessary, to protect their wages and working conditions. At times, they have been driven to organize the production and distribution of goods on their own, and have taken over cities and whole regions and become the recognized authority regulating both commerce and public services within the community. Brecher concludes that the absence of revolutionary consciousness among workers is less important than the objective conditions that force them to struggle in new ways. In his view, it is the struggles of the workers themselves rather than the agitational activities of organized labor unions or radical groups that compel the development of new forms of consciousness. His book demonstrates that American

workers have, upon occasion, taken new political steps out of the imperatives of their own combat. Yet he has fallen short of explaining the failure of the working class to emerge from its odyssey of strike movements and insurrectionary actions with a social tradition and political culture of its own.

Embedded in Brecher's approach is the assumption that since workers constitute the overwhelming force of production in modern capitalism, the question of whether they will take control over production and society as a whole is always a practical issue because all the social conditions are present for historical change. In his view, the subjective conditions, that is, the development of class consciousness, can only be resolved within the experience of working class struggle. It is in the course of the mass strike that revolutionary conditions are created, that workers discover their own power, which remains latent in everyday life. According to Brecher, it is only workers themselves who can bring their struggle forward to new political levels. Neither the trade unions nor radical political parties can lead; the role of conscious radicals is to speak clearly to the workers' needs, to point the lessons of their own efforts, and to participate in their struggles.

The fundamental question to be explored in this book is why the working class in America remains a dependent force in society and what the conditions are that may reverse this situation. In the course of my research I was compelled to abandon explanations that relied exclusively on ideological factors that were not connected to the main forces of the economic and social history of American capitalism. Nor was it possible to accept the romantic view that workers themselves have been able to transcend the institutions of capitalism, including the trade unions and political parties, out of the conditions of their own alienated labor. To be sure, among the sources of their alienation are elements that make protest and contestation a permanent feature of working class life. The struggle between labor and capital is incessant and unresolvable as long as workers are separated from the ownership of the means of production, control over what they produce, and the methods of production. But alienation has other implications that prevent workers from bringing to consciousness their right to control society, to recapture their own labor and to control their own daily lives. The very conditions that produce an acute sense of injustice among workers also obscure the sources of that injustice. The barriers to the ability of

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the working class to grasp the fact that its own exploitation at the point of production results from systemic causes are not chiefly ideological: they are rooted in the labor process.

Georg Lukacs[4] has shown that explanations for the failure of the working class to develop revolutionary consciousness must be sought within the production and circulation of commodities, not outside of this process. His attempt to locate the production of consciousness within the labor process, and to account for the apparent inability of workers to connect their own individual experience with their social position within capitalist society in the same terms, constitutes a necessary clue to the mystery of working class history.

Lukacs's reading of Marx and Kant provided him with the critical categories for undertaking the study of working class consciousness. A close student of the ideological development of the socialist movement, he rejected the so-called orthodox tendency of Marxism that relied on the strength of the socialist agitation and trade union struggles, on the one hand, and the inevitability of capitalist economic crises, on the other, to reveal to workers the truth of their position within capitalist society. Instead, following Marx's concept of the "fetishism of commodities," Lukacs discovered that in ordinary life the exploitation of labor by capital is hidden from the consciousness of the worker by the fact that the terms on which goods are exchanged in the market appear to be determined by factors independent of the workers' own labor. Commodities appear to assume value in exchange rather than in production and the relations between men are perceived as relations between things. The worker values himself as one values all commodities—by his selling price. Thus all relations appear as object relations. The very existence of the worker is bound up with the sale of his labor power. Individual worth is measured by how much labor can bring in the marketplace. People become identical with their occupations, consumption styles, and social prestige and the self has no autonomy apart from its exchange value. The subordination of the self to the labor process itself takes on the appearance of blind economic law, so that the domination of man by man no longer appears an injustice but a biological or legal necessity. The power of the employer over the worker has the force of economic necessity and its human substance is entirely suppressed. Within the framework of this analysis the crucial ideologies among American workers can be understood.

The "respect for law," "love of country" and the flag, and moral systems that constitute the rules of ordinary behavior assume the status of natural law: they become reified as commands for individual conduct. The institutions of family, school, church, and factory appear in a continuum of experience whose structure and demands on the person are essentially consistent with each other.

Daily life appears as the confrontation between the individual and institutions that exist independently of human intervention. In the contest, the person attempts to individuate himself so that subjectivity can be achieved. But the interventions of human domination masked as objective institutional rules constitute barriers to selfhood. The need to prove one's value for others within the institutions of daily life is always an activity that involves transactional relations. For example, the child agrees to be "good"—that is, to obey parental authority—in return for specific rewards. The high school student agrees to perform in the sports arena in return for partial exemption from the rules of ordinary student conduct imposed by the administration and teachers of the school. The woman agrees to "give love" in return for economic security or the pledge of the man to support her. Even the forms of revolt against the conditions that produce exploitation and oppression are often directed against the appearance of things rather than their essence.

Thus, the early labor struggles were directed against the machine. Workers, recently migrated from the land or artisanship, believed that mechanization itself was the enemy, just as many social theorists today rail against technology as such. The specific conditions under which the individual worker sells his labor power seem to place him in direct opposition to the machine on the one hand, and the employer on the other. The product of his labor is appropriated by the employer and sold in the market according to measures that seem to bear no relation to the fact that it was produced by him.

The circulation of commodities appears to take on a life of its own, independent of social relations. Lukacs's second critical finding was that the commodity form penetrates all corners of the social world. Everything becomes an object of sale in capitalist society, including those activities once considered separate from commercial debasement. The once autonomous elements of working class culture, indeed of all culture, only find their value in the

market place and subordinate aesthetic sensibilities to the norms of exchange.

As Herbert Marcuse has shown,[5] the pervasive character of capitalist commodity relations and of the technological rationality upon which they are based tends to reduce social relations and social consciousness to a single dimension: their instrumental value in terms of maintaining the structure of social domination. Not only does the worker lose touch with his congealed labor as the commodity he has produced assumes the form of a material thing, hiding from his view the fact that he produced it, but the particular form of labor constitutes a further alienation. The kind of work performed, e.g., assembly, seems to be related to the wages paid and the position of the worker in the social structure. The divisions in production between skilled and unskilled labor, mental and physical work, men and women, Blacks and whites, and various ethnic groups are significant in the formation of social consciousness. These differences hide the fact that all who work for wages, and the majority of those who are salaried employees of corporations and government, are powerless to determine the basic decisions that affect both their working lives and their private lives.

Labor is divided in society socially as well as technically. The technical division of labor represents the assignment of different tasks to different individuals in an increasingly variegated society. In complex societies it is virtually impossible to reconstruct the Renaissance person, if indeed such a person ever existed. Not everyone can become a welder or a teacher. Even in the best of situations, we are forced to make choices about the kind of labor we shall undertake. But the technical divisions based on social needs are shaped by the social division of labor—a division based on class position and infused with criteria of power and ownership over the productive forces of society. For example, neither technology nor biological necessity determines the effective exclusion of women from the production of raw materials and heavy machinery in our country. This exclusion is the product not only of efforts by trade unions, employers, and social reformers to enact legislation to protect women and the jobs of men, but of the historical tendencies in the sexual division of labor as well. Thus, sexist ideologies, political and economic interests, and historical tradition must be understood in the convergence of their mutual determination. The effect on consciousness of female ex-

clusion from key production areas becomes a major determinant of future social divisions in the labor process, and the institutions that function within it.

Beginning from an examination of the formation of the working class in terms of the relationship between the industrialization process and the social division of labor that gave it shape, the roles of institutions, ideologies, and cultural influences must be explored as both products of this development and, in turn, determinants of the underlying social relations. The main institutions within and against which the individual confronts society prior to entering the work-world are family, schools, religion, and more recently, mass culture. These institutions mediate between the social relations of production and individual consciousness by communicating to the individual his place in the social division of labor while providing contrary symbols that hold out the possibility of transcending the fate of previous generations. In turn, the ideologies of mobility transmitted by these institutions are in conflict with other ideologies that operate to persuade the person that his failure to transcend his class origins is a product of genetic incapacity or lack of perseverance. The hierarchy of occupations that results from a specific way of organizing social labor tends to give credence to individual mobility aspirations even when mobility between classes is foreclosed. The confusion in America about what constitutes the concept of class arises precisely from the hierarchical organization of labor and of all social institutions. Hierarchy tends to obscure the fundamental relations between members of the same class because of differences within them. At each step of any occupational hierarchy, there are differential economic rewards, degrees of social powerlessness, and variations of consciousness. Although the real subject of this book is the attempt to delineate both objectively and subjectively the divisions within the working class, it is with the purpose of recovering the essential unity of its social position.

The two-class model of orthodox Marxism, according to which capitalist society is divided into an essentially propertyless working class deprived of the ownership of the means of production and a capitalist class holding a monopoly of ownership of productive property, is more apparent today than ever before. The share of large corporations in the total social wealth is larger in the United States than in any other capitalist country. Even though the old middle class of independent shopkeepers, small manufacturers, and farmers has not disappeared, *and* has recently in-

creased in number, its economic and social power continues to diminish. On the other hand, the proportion of wage and salary workers to the total population is now about 80 percent.

But the old model, while correct in its broad outlines, does not constitute an adequate theory of class. At the level of classification this apparent anomaly occurs for two reasons: first, a substantial number of those who work for salaries are not truly part of the working class because of their dependence on the corporate form of economic organization for their existence. These are the managers at various levels of the corporation who neither own nor genuinely control the means of production, but possess power in limited spheres of production and administration. Their interests are those of the corporations and as a social stratum they have no sources of independent power. Second, there has developed a substantial underclass that is not only deprived of property but of participation in the production process. The underclass does not correspond to Marx's notion of a reserve army of labor since it is characteristically not employed in the expansion of capital, but enters the labor market only in the most marginal service occupations or as seasonal agricultural laborers. Nor is the underclass a lumpenproletariat in the classical sense, that is a group without character and potentially "dangerous" to working class interests. The permanently unemployed or marginally employed sectors of the population are formed out of the unevenness of late capitalist development and its chronic inability to absorb ever-larger proportions of the displaced agricultural labor force, older workers, and young school-leavers. The formation of the underclass is a direct result of the disparity between the historical tendency of capitalist production to require less labor for the production of commodities and the urbanization of the whole population, that is, the shrinking of the countryside, owing to the same processes of mechanization.

The underclass is not defined by its income, but by its exclusion from the mainstream of economic life. It is a dependent class in a different way than the managerial class. Essentially, its economic position, although derived from the same processes that determine the formation of other classes, is more closely tied to the expanded role of the state, especially the provision of welfare. Its immediate political thrust is toward the maintenance and nourishment of the state bureaucracy rather than its diminution.

The working class, as here defined, is composed of those engaged in the production and distribution of material goods and

services who do not own or control the object of their labor or its uses. The persons grouped within the working class are neither exclusively workers in the production sphere who manipulate things, nor those in the distributive sphere who manipulate symbols and people. The social weight of the former is greater than that of the latter, but their interests are the same.

Beyond problems of classification another critical difficulty concerning the problem of delineating classes must be faced. Contrary to the tendency of both American sociology and some varieties of Marxism to deal with class solely in terms of its definition and mechanical categories, Marx insisted that the working class was not only defined by its objective position within capitalist production as the most exploited class in society, but must be comprehended in terms of its social and political activity. The one-sided analysis that limits an understanding of the worker to his objective position within the prevailing social system and as an object of exploitation may help explain the failure of the working class to transcend its subordinate situation but it cannot explain the conditions necessary for the working class to become a force for social change. The history of the working class is the unfolding of its collective subjectivity as much as of its objectivity. If theory has been forced to consider these aspects separately, it is only a reflection of the splits within the working class movement and in working class consciousness itself. Lukacs has only explained the difficulty of making total the conception of the relationship between personal experience and the social world that includes it: the task of theory is to locate the economic, political, and cultural conditions for transcendence.

This task is made urgent by the condition of humankind itself. The human condition today is marked by a loss of the idea of progress. The capacity of nations to reduce one another to wastelands by technological means is matched by the capacity of capitalist society to reduce its members to objects. One cannot understand the logic of the merciless bombing of Vietnam without understanding the equally relentless exploitation of the miner or of the officeworker, each of whom faces no less serious problems recovering his humanity after the workday than the Vietnamese peasant after the air raids, even if the latter faces a more visible enemy and swifter destruction.

Trade unions and radical political movements reflect aspects of the working class and are only relatively autonomous influences

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