

# **POLITICS** **and the** **CLASS** **DIVIDE**

**Working People and  
the Middle-Class Left**

**DAVID CROTEAU**

# the Class Divide

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*Working People  
and the  
Middle-Class Left*

DAVID CROTEAU

*To my parents, Laurette and Oliva.  
They have taught me more than they know.*

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# Preface

**B**ernice is a fifty-five-year-old factory worker. It was almost suppertime when we sat in the living room of her modest home, which she shares with her husband and elderly mother. She looked at me over her half-glasses, which were perched precariously on the tip of her nose, and as she spoke, her words hinted more of sadness than anger.

She said that working people are discouraged about politics. "I was raised to vote. Voting was your duty. You were proud to vote because it meant something about the way your country was run. Now, nobody bothers. 'Who cares?' 'What difference does it make?' 'They're all the same.' You hear all these things, so why bother? And *that* says a lot about how this country is run. People don't believe they have a say anymore, so they've given up."

Bernice is not alone. Growing numbers of Americans have come to feel that they have little or no voice in the world of politics; that they are powerless in the face of economic and political changes that threaten any stability they may have carved out for themselves and their children. While other parts of the world are struggling with the introduction of newly established democratic rights, U.S. academics and journalists have been writing works about the growing loss of faith in democracy at home. With titles such as *Why Americans Hate Politics* (Dionne 1991), *The Cynical Society* (Goldfarb 1991), and *Who Will Tell The People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (Greider 1992), these works have explored the growing alienation and cynicism many U.S. citizens feel toward the political world.

Had Bernice been speaking a half-century earlier, she might have felt that her white working-class family was being represented in the politics of the Democratic Party and that perhaps their interests as workers were being promoted by the labor unions that were a central element of progressive politics. Now, like many other working people, she just feels discouraged.

In the electoral realm, today's workers often perceive a Democratic Party made up of an alliance between middle-class "limousine liberals" and the traditionally disenfranchised—the poor, racial minorities, gays and lesbians. Where, these workers ask themselves, do *they* fit in? In searching for a political home, these working people sometimes turn to the Republicans, who at least talk of values, responsibility for one's actions, hard work, patriotism, and the importance of family. But it's never a comfortable fit because the Republicans also represent the rich, the corporations, and the powerful elites. In the 1992 presidential election, some working people turned to Ross Perot, an apparently

independent, plain-talking maverick who recognized the gridlock and corruption, who emphasized the importance of the “little guy,” and who essentially ran on the politics of antipolitics. More often, though, these workers turn away from electoral politics altogether.

Workers find no comfort in other forms of politics either. The unions that once championed their cause are now often perceived as either ineffective or as having become greedy and—ironically—out of touch with regular working people. And those other groups that march and protest about a whole range of issues too often seem to be largely made up of middle-class throwbacks to the 1960s pursuing a politics of privilege. For the politically alienated members of America’s white working class, there often seems no place to turn.

## The Class Divide

This book examines the impact of class status on political participation and its implication for the future of democracy. More specifically, it is about the relative absence of white working-class participation in many liberal and left social movements.

Much of left politics in the United States was once primarily the domain of the working class. While always receiving crucial support from intellectuals, the labor movement—once a core element of left political life—was based in the lives and daily experiences of working people. But the situation has changed dramatically over the last half century. Now, the labor movement is beleaguered by dwindling membership and a hostile economic and political climate. Taking its place at the center of left politics has been an assortment of social movements—such as the environmental, peace, antinuclear, lesbian/gay, and women’s movements—that sometimes are called “new social movements” (NSM).

One important defining characteristic of these “new” movements is that unlike the labor movement, NSMs supposedly do not work for class-specific goals. But the theoretical claim that such movements have “supraclass” agendas is contradicted by the empirical reality that these movements generally do not have substantial working-class participation and are, instead, distinctly *middle-class* movements.

This book explores the apparent contradiction: why are movements that are supposedly working for “universal” goals actually based in a particular class—the middle class?<sup>1</sup> “New” movements do exhibit characteristics that differentiate them from the “old” labor movement. However, I argue that the “new social movement” label is misleading insofar as it distracts from the continuing role of class in these movements. Thus, although I use *new social movements* in discussing the literature on the subject, elsewhere I generally refer to these movements as *middle class*, not *new*.

Many left movements are now middle class, and the working class in this country is usually no longer seen as a key source of left support. Instead, it is

viewed as apparently conservative and largely quiescent. These images are primarily of a conservative *white* working class since workers of color are usually seen as allies of liberal and left civil-rights movements.

The situation leaves the left in a highly vulnerable position because its limited base of support often makes it politically ineffective. The emergence of working-class “Reagan Democrats”<sup>2</sup> has even been a threat to the viability of mildly liberal Democratic Party politics, influencing the party’s 1992 presidential candidate to distance himself from the bogeymen special interests of racial minorities (embodied by the persona of Jesse Jackson) and unions (which most voters feel do not help and may actually hurt them).<sup>3</sup>

There are complex historical processes that have contributed to the middle-class nature of the contemporary Left. I briefly examine some of these processes in Part One of this work. My main focus, however, is on how activists and workers have come to understand this situation. I examine the political cultures of small numbers of white working people and of white, middle-class political activists who are part of liberal and left social movements. These are two groups that, in recent years, have been at odds on a whole range of issues. Yet they are groups that are linked by history. The democratic philosophy of left social movements envisions a politically active citizenry assuming responsibility for the future of their community. The Left, in other words, professes to struggle for the empowerment of people just like these white workers. For their part, working people often speak of distrusting government and politicians and of the need for fundamental political change in this country. In other words, they profess to want at least some of the political change being advocated by left social movements.

To someone totally unaware of recent political history, these two groups of citizens might seem destined to join forces. Yet there is a vast distance that separates political activists from most working people. I will argue that whereas each group sometimes recognizes similar problems, each has come to decidedly different conclusions about what is to be done and about what *can* be done to remedy those problems. I will also argue that a central reason this gap exists is that middle-class activists and disaffected workers are from opposite sides of a class divide. Each group speaks a different political language based in different experiences and reflecting different worldviews.

## Political Culture and Social Class

One of the fundamental insights of sociology is that social structures can influence human behavior. Taking this idea seriously means looking beyond individual consciousness to explain social phenomena. But recognizing the potentially constraining nature of social structures is not to deny the role of human agency. Structures, which exist external to individuals, influence—but do not linearly determine—human behavior. The dynamic interaction between structural constraint and human agency forms a central line of inquiry within sociology.<sup>4</sup>

The relation between social structure and human behavior is at the heart of this work. The behaviors I am examining are political ones. The structural influences I am highlighting are those associated with class. As I explore in the first chapter, U.S. culture is often hostile to the discussion of class, in part because of its equivocal nature. Where do class boundaries start and stop? Who belongs to what class? How many classes are there? Such questions can turn discussions of the real-world impact of class into arcane debates filled with obscure jargon. I try to walk a fine line in this work by being clear about what I mean by "working class" and "middle class" without succumbing to overly pedantic definitions.

The basis for my distinguishing between working and middle class is loosely a manual/mental division. I explain this distinction in more detail in the first chapter (and review class theory in the appendix on class), but broadly speaking, for those who work outside the home, "working class" refers to those who rely largely on manual labor for their livelihood and usually work for an hourly wage. References to working class have traditionally conjured up images of blue-collared male factory workers, but working-class jobs are now more likely to be in the service sector than in manufacturing, and these service-sector employees are disproportionately female.

The label of "middle class" is used for those who earn their livelihood as a result of having particular credentials and knowledge-based expertise, and who are usually paid a salary, not an hourly wage. The "mental" work engaged in by the middle class usually requires a college education and often leads to the planning, supervision, or direction of other people's work.

The crucial division between working and middle class in the economic sphere also has an impact in the political realm. A common class position provides people with common material and cultural resources that facilitate a loosely shared perspective on the political world. Differing class cultures are crucial to the issue of political participation because the cultural "tools" that are part of different class cultures lend themselves to certain tasks, while making other tasks more difficult. You can pound a nail with a wrench, but success is more likely if you are equipped with a hammer. Similarly, the tools with which particular class cultures equip their members are more helpful for some tasks than for others. When it comes to political participation, the cultural divide between classes can be a significant one.

My emphasis here is on cultural aspects of the class divide. However, the structural sources of these differing cultures should not be overlooked. I am arguing that cultures most immediately influence political behavior, but it must be remembered that the differing cultures described in this work are, in part, the product of particular structural and historical conditions. In other words, the white working-class and social-movement cultures I describe here must be understood in their temporal and structural context. These cultures are neither universal nor eternal phenomena. In the last chapter I speculate about the possibility of change in current conditions.

## The Role of Class: Some Cautions

While my emphasis here is on the class variable, it might appear at first glance that I am comparing apples and oranges—middle-class *activists* and working-class *nonparticipants*. The issue arises because of the presence of two variables: class and activism. One might well ask, shouldn't we control for the activism variable and compare activists from the middle class with activists from the working class?<sup>5</sup> Or shouldn't the comparison be of activists and nonactivists who are both from the middle class, thereby controlling for the class variable?

A more general study might well make such comparisons. But I am not exploring why a higher percentage of the middle class is not involved in such movements (which would suggest comparing activists and nonactivists from the middle class). Nor am I examining how middle-class and working-class activists compare. Both these issues are fair and interesting ones that deserve more research attention.

My question, though, is different, and it is delimited by my initial focus on "new" social movements that do not identify themselves as class-based and that do not pursue explicitly class-specific goals. My concern is with why such "new" social movements have little or no working-class participation. There is no self-evident reason that suggests working people are not concerned with peace, the environment, safe energy, or equality for women. A belief that such issues are "naturally" middle class warrants closer scrutiny and explanation.

Also, there is a unique relationship between left social-movement activists and working-class nonparticipants that must be taken into account. Often activists, either explicitly or implicitly, claim to speak on behalf of working people, and the two groups are therefore singularly linked. The Left, in fact, has tried to speak for democratic participation, and on behalf of those it sees as being excluded from the political process. More often than not, one central group of "excluded" players has been the working class.

Another point worth highlighting is that the dichotomy implied in this book between working- and middle-class cultures should not be overdrawn. Recognizing the inevitable variability within class cultures means that although I use "working class" and "middle class" throughout this work to describe differing orientations, it must be remembered that I am writing here of characteristics that tend to be more or less prevalent in particular classes.

That does not mean, for example, that political participation is a phenomenon found *exclusively* in the middle class or that *all* of the middle class is politically active. Clearly this is not the case. In fact, the type of left political activism that is the focus of this work is pursued by only a small segment of the middle class. And while those who *are* politically active *do* come disproportionately from the middle class, there are working-class activists who share in the efficacy and empowerment that I describe as characteristic of middle-class activists.

Similarly, some of the observations made about working-class disengage-



ment can be applied to disaffected portions of the middle class.<sup>6</sup> Many in the middle class are alienated from political life. They do not follow current events in the media, nor do they take part in local civic life. Political disengagement, though, is *not* uniformly distributed throughout society. It has long been known that political nonparticipation is more prevalent amongst those with lower socioeconomic status; it is more prevalent among the working class than the middle class. The very nature of working-class life—with its connotations of limited resources, instability and insecurity, limited education, and relative powerlessness in the workplace—has exacerbated for workers the kind of political disengagement that sometimes reverberates well beyond the boundaries of the working class. As a result, working people are disproportionately represented among the nonvoters who have constituted nearly half of the electorate in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, pointing to cases of working-class activism or middle-class quiescence does not contradict the general thesis I am presenting here. As with all sociological analyses, the arguments in this book are presented in terms of aggregate tendencies, not universal laws.

Further, although this study focuses on class, the class division I describe is only one of several important cleavages in American society that affect political participation and orientation. In many cases, other factors such as race and gender surely play at least as important a role as class in conditioning political proclivities.

Is class the *only* influence on potential political participation? No. Do the cultural distinctions I describe adhere perfectly to clearly identified class boundaries? No. Does the examination of class tap a real and significant issue for social movements? Absolutely. We should be skeptical of analyses that neatly explain complex social phenomena with a single variable. This study highlights but one aspect of the intricate landscape that constitutes political life.

## Overview

The story I tell in this work is divided into two parts. Part One provides some theoretical and historical context for the discussions that follow. In Chapter One, I introduce the idea of political participation and evolving democratic theory in brief historical context and discuss the unique relationship between the Left and democratic thought. In Chapter Two, I examine how left social movements have evolved as they seek to act on their democratic principles; again, I provide some brief historical context for the rise of “new social movements.” In Chapter Three, I describe the concepts of class and culture as I use them in this work and explore their implications for participation in political life. (A more detailed theoretical discussion of class is presented in Appendix One, with an expanded discussion of culture in Appendix Two.)

Part Two, which forms the bulk of this work, is my retelling of experiences shared with me by a small number of people. As I describe more fully below, I

spent several months listening to some working-class people while sharing in their daily work routines. I then conducted a series of interviews with both workers (coworkers and others) and with social-movement activists. Chapters Four through Ten are analyses largely based on what I saw and heard. The emphasis is on workers, but there are loosely comparative descriptions of key themes in the political cultures of the working people and middle-class activists interviewed for this study. These themes include mistrust and cynicism; efficacy; interest and motivation; material resources and constraint; cultural resources; the role of knowledge, information, and expertise in political life; and the notion of the private citizen.

Finally, Chapter Eleven explores the implications of this study's findings for future social-movement efforts, including an assessment of the potential for Left-worker alliances. I review the issue of diversity among social movements, as described to me by the activists I interviewed, and suggest some of the implications for the lack of class diversity found there.

## Methods

A more detailed discussion of the methods used in this project is contained in Appendix Three. However, a few select comments are warranted here.

I have drawn from a variety of sources in writing this book. First, my own experiences traveling from a working-class background to middle-class, left social movements form a basis for my inquiry. This experience influenced the issues I chose to explore and gave me some "common ground" from which to discuss ideas with the people interviewed for this work. I explore my biographical positioning in more detail in the introduction.

Second, my analysis was partially developed during a five-month period of participant observation carried out at a nonunion printing plant and mailing house in a small New England city of eighty thousand people.<sup>8</sup> I will refer to this plant as Mail and Printing Services (MAPS), a fictitious name. I obtained employment at MAPS through a temporary employment agency, and I worked in the plant on a regular, full-time basis. I received no special treatment from management because my self-presentation had simply (and honestly) been that I was a graduate student looking for employment to pay bills while I finished work on my degree. I did not hide my status or my research interests from anyone. Permanent workers were accustomed to seeing temporary workers—including occasional college students—come and go because the company frequently used such short-term help. Since I gained access through the employment agency that the company regularly used, my arrival and departure five months later were not unusual. In fact, several other temporary workers came and left during the period that I was employed.<sup>9</sup>

The nature of much of the work I did at MAPS encouraged conversation as a diversion from the repetitious tasks being performed. As a result, I was able to spend literally hundreds of hours listening to workers converse on a wide array

of subjects. These discussions would often go on nonstop for the entire two- to three-hour period between designated breaks. I would take part in the discussions as appropriate, but I tried never to initiate new topics of conversation. After work, I tape-recorded field notes, later transcribed these notes, and developed memoranda on my field experiences. Quotations from my notes are occasionally used in the text with appropriate citation. More information regarding the nature of this MAPS employment/participant observation is shared in the text and is discussed more fully in Appendix Three.

A third source of data, and one which is most visible in the text, is the forty-four individual interviews I conducted for this study. (A summary of interviewees' characteristics is provided in Appendix Three.) Half of the interviews were with working people (11 women, 11 men), half were with social-movement activists (10 women, 12 men). The interviewees were all white. Workers ranged in age from 23 to 62 (average 41.8, median 40) and included, among others, a mechanic, a salesperson, a data entry clerk, a janitor, a postal worker, a public works employee, a secretary, an electrician, a phone company employee, a cafeteria worker, and several factory workers. In nearly all cases, interviews were conducted in the homes of workers. Eleven of the worker interviews were done with coworkers from various parts of the MAPS plant after I had worked with them for over four months. The other workers were selected from a snowball sample initiated by the MAPS interviews.

Activists interviewed ranged in age from 24 to 74 (average 41.9, median 42) and included staffpeople and volunteers from, among others, environmental, peace, women's/feminist, anti-intervention, housing/homeless, anti-nuclear, and labor organizations. A couple of these activists are not from "new" movements but instead represented organizations that work in coalition efforts with "new" social-movement groups. About half of these interviews were conducted in the homes of activists; half were in or near the offices of movement organizations. Interviews with social-movement activists were developed from a snowball sample that began with personal contacts in such movements.

All the interviews were recorded and conducted with the understanding that anonymity would be maintained. Thus, all the names used here are pseudonyms, and some biographical details have been altered to protect the anonymity of the speakers. Interviews were loosely structured, lasting approximately two hours each. I transcribed the interview recordings and used Hyper-Research, a qualitative content-analysis software package, to code the transcripts for easier retrieval of relevant material. No attempt was made to quantify results. Excerpts from interviews are used extensively to highlight points in the text.

Finally, a couple of recent projects have aided in my understanding of some of the issues examined here. In 1990 I worked with Charlie Derber and Mary Murphy on a small exploratory project that included interviewing working- and middle-class residents in the Boston area about the role of government and

about taxation policy. I also had the benefit of reading transcripts from forty small-group interviews with working-class people developed by William Gamson (1992) and his colleagues for a study published as *Talking Politics*.

I should remind the reader of the historical context in which this research was carried out. The participant observation and interviews for this work took place during 1990 and 1991 during the Bush administration. The economy, especially in New England, was under considerable strain, leaving workers concerned about their immediate economic future. For most, unions were an unlikely source of hope since they had just experienced their most devastating decade in over a half century. Internationally, Soviet influence over Eastern Europe was crumbling while U.S. involvement in the Persian Gulf was building, the latter leading to war in January of 1991. It was a rather bleak time in American political history; a bleakness that perhaps has been tempered a bit at this writing by the new Clinton administration and a stabilization in the economy. But the political and economic difficulties that face the nation have not been overcome by a changing of the presidential guard. There is little reason to believe that the views expressed during my interviews would be substantially different today.

## The Consequences of Design

There are advantages and disadvantages to any method of social research. The type of fieldwork and interviewing conducted for this work provides, I believe, high validity. That is, the descriptions contained herein are likely to be a relatively accurate reflection of the small group of people under consideration. We must be more cautious, however, about the generalizability of the findings reported here. There is no reason to believe that the people interviewed for this project are anything but "typical" of their *particular subculture*. It is important to recognize, however, that the workers here are white, New England workers and that the activists here are similarly white and New England-based. In reporting findings, I do not discuss the percentage of workers or activists who responded a certain way to a particular question. To do so would imply the precise generalizability of such numbers, which clearly does not exist. However, I do use loosely descriptive terms such as "most" or "few" to discuss the prevalence of particular beliefs amongst my interviewees.

Is there any value in doing this sort of fieldwork and interviews with such a small group of people? I believe there is. One advantage of this research is its partially inductive approach. Although I clearly had an area of interest before embarking on my fieldwork, the five months I spent working at MAPS was largely devoted to listening and learning before I ever asked a single question. This experience helped to relocate me within a working-class culture and swept away some of the academic cobwebs that accumulate when relying too heavily on what workers derisively call "book learning." The questions I pursued in the interviews were different because of the experiences I had during my fieldwork.

My fieldwork with working people, though, was conducted primarily in the workplace. A word of caution is in order. Some research (Halle 1984) has shown that working people's sense of identity differs depending upon context. Working people have been found to have a stronger class identity in the context of the workplace than in their lives outside of work, where they may see themselves as part of an amorphous "middle class." Thus, I may have been privy to a context where class issues were more highlighted than they would have been outside of the workplace.

The relationships I developed during my fieldwork, I believe, made it easier for the coworkers I later interviewed to talk more freely than they otherwise would have. Similarly, my personal contacts with left-movement activists gave me a certain amount of credibility that academics rarely have in such circles. My contacts also served as references that at least one activist checked out before agreeing to my request for an interview. The process of identifying areas of potential inquiry and the relationship between researcher and interviewee are thus very different in this kind of work than those found in large-scale, quantitative survey research.

Arthur Sanders (1990: 167) notes that "close-ended, forced-choice questions do not lend themselves to an analysis of how people make sense of politics. We may be able to know what their opinion is on a particular issue or whether they like a particular candidate, but why that might be so is much harder to decipher." Thus, the use of open interviews is important in allowing for more textured and nuanced responses and for the pursuit of clarifying questions, both significant considerations when dealing with the complex issues addressed in this work. So although the results of such interviews cannot be precisely generalized, they are useful for filling in gaps left by more quantitative efforts, for allowing more complete and robust responses, for flagging issues that might be missed by closed-ended questionnaires, and for the exploration of apparently contradictory or idiosyncratic responses.

I have tried, in this work, to analyze some key issues in the political cultures of two distinct groups. One danger is that I have imposed on a complex world a coherence that may not exist. It is a hazard that haunts all of social science, since as Clifford (1986: 2) notes of ethnography, "it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures." But I believe there is some significant truth in my tale; truth that may make some small contribution toward understanding the gulf that now exists between working people and the middle-class Left.

In telling this story, I make extensive use of quotations to share what I heard people saying. But it is important to remember that these quotes were extracted from hundreds of pages of transcripts. The people interviewed for this project are not "telling their own story," as is often claimed in this kind of work. I picked interviewees, asked questions, and chose quotations. In the end, I am the storyteller here, and it is the limited vision of a white male academic from a working-class background that is communicated in these pages.

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# Acknowledgments

Susan Griffin once observed that writing may be solitary but thinking is collective. I owe a great deal to the collective thinking that lies behind this effort. I would like to thank some of those who have contributed toward the completion of this book.

My debt to Cecelia Kirkman extends well beyond the confines of this work, but her insights, support, and good humor were especially appreciated in relation to this project. (And she didn't type a single word!) Her "front-line" efforts with working people are a continual reminder of some of the reasons for my own work, and of the luxuries involved in my intellectual endeavors.

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My sincere appreciation to all the folks who took the time to talk with me for this project. Obviously this work would have been impossible without their help. I hope I have done justice to at least some of their ideas, and I hope the "book learning" hasn't gotten in the way of their insights.

Finally, I am indebted to the Boston College Graduate School of Arts and Sciences for its financial support of this project during the 1992-93 academic year.

# Different Worlds

*No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey.*

C. WRIGHT MILLS, *The Sociological Imagination*

**T**his work is closely related to my own biography. I grew up in a working-class family and have spent all of my adult life in and around middle-class social movements. My social, civic, and academic lives have all been organized around such political movements. My experiences in traveling from the world of my working-class origins to that of middle-class movements has been a central catalyst for this work. I begin, then, by telling some of this story.

## Authors and Biographies

Although at first it may seem to be an act of confident presumptuousness, telling one's own story actually puts an author in an enormously vulnerable position. It is the kind of vulnerability that academics usually try very hard to avoid. There is something ironic about this, especially in sociology. The intersections of biography and history on a collective level, as Mills suggested, are the substance of the discipline. Yet usually, the individual biography of the sociologist is dismissed with a simple statement of institutional affiliation. As recently as 1971, Lewis Coser was able to write of even the "classic" sociologists, "There has been no sustained attempt to show how social origins, social position, social network, or audience found a reflection in the problems that a theorist addressed himself to or in the overall orientation of his life's work" (Coser 1971: xiv). It is only with the recent work of, for example, Gouldner (1970, 1985), Lepenies (1988) and Therborn (1976) that the insights of a sociology of knowledge have been applied, within the mainstream of the discipline, to the history of sociology itself.

Still, all too often, it seems that sociologists acknowledge the importance of social origins and social positions for everyone but themselves. Shulamit

Reinharz (1984: 24) makes the point well: "Sociologists claim that behavior is class bound, gender related, historically rooted, and situationally determined by expectations of others. To be consistent with this belief, sociologists' perceptions and behavior in their research activities must be considered bound to their social position. Their responsibility as sociologists, then, is to understand how their work is shaped by these factors." But in the real world of sociological research, this rarely happens.

Instead, while it is customary for authors to disclose the intellectual journeys that have led them to address the topic at hand, it is far less common to discuss the relationship between the researcher's personal biography and his or her subject matter. Perhaps some magnanimous sense of modesty pervades the discipline—but I doubt it. Instead, silence on the issue of biography is more likely a legacy of a particular approach to "science." "Science," in some circles, is seen as being predicated upon reduction and objectification. Knowledge and "truth" are supposedly the result of distancing the subjective observer from the object of investigation in order to reveal the transparent truth, unsoiled by the touch of the researcher. Of course, in its pure form, this is fantasy. But in most instances, an author's personal involvement with his or her topic is seen as a probable shortcoming, suggesting that the arguments contained in the work should be taken with a precautionary grain of salt.

Even those who have long ago dismissed the strictures of purely positivist science often continue to labor under the presumption that "distancing oneself" from the work provides for a sort of cover of objectivity. Perhaps that is why quantification is such a comfort. "Data" in quantified form appear to take on a life of their own, independent of the researcher, regardless of how central he or she was in choosing the topic, designing the study, gathering the data, and influencing the findings. At its worst, the apparently objective nature of "scientific" data has contributed to a form of domination based on the power and authority of scientific expertise (Aronowitz 1988).

It has always seemed peculiar to me to prize the attempt to sever researchers from their work. Sociologists understand the socially constructed nature of reality, and they, most of all, should accept and explore the relationship between authors and the stories they tell. Ideas are promoted by agents who occupy certain social positions, and we can better understand the origins of particular ideas if we better understand the social position of those who would advance them.

It would be disingenuous of me to examine the issues contained in this work without discussing my biographical relation to them. The questions raised and the issues explored in this work have concerned me for over fifteen years, and they continue to do so. To write of such things with a posture of pure intellectual distance would be tantamount to fraud. I leave it up to the reader to determine whether this personal involvement warrants the administering of a precautionary grain of salt.



## The Story of the Author

I was born into a type of family that became a cultural stereotype shortly before it became an endangered species; the “traditional,” white, “ethnic,” blue-collar family. After brief periods as a logger and as a shipworker, my father worked in a paper mill for forty-four years, first as a towel-machine operator, then as a millwright. My mother, after stints as a domestic and a factory worker, toiled at home raising four children. Such arrangements were possible amongst significant sections of the working class during the post–World War II boom years. My father was a union member (United Paperworkers International Union) but inactive in union affairs. He earned what was considered to be good pay. My mother and he were able to build a modest home, raise a family, and live comfortably. They never had a credit card or a checking account. The family car was a used one, health care was dependent on union benefits (childhood photos show me with visibly decaying teeth—we had no dental insurance until I was a teen), and vacations were always within a half-day’s drive; but there was always plenty of food and clothing, and the bills were paid on time.

The town in which I grew up was predominantly blue collar, heavily French Canadian and Irish, almost all white, and mostly Catholic. The local paper mill—whose towering smokestacks dominated the local landscape—was the primary source of employment. A now-abandoned shoe factory was a distant second. That paper mill played a central role in my life, not only because my father and other family members worked there, but because it served as a source of motivation for me. As long as I can remember, I was determined *not* to work in the mill. I cannot recall how I developed this determination, I just know it was a primary factor in motivating me to become the first member of my family to attend college. Education, in some vague fashion, was going to be my ticket out. If it did not work, it would at least provide a temporary reprieve from the mill.

What I wanted to get “out” of was a lifestyle centered on serving time in the mill; a lifestyle highlighted, as Studs Terkel (1972: xiii) once put it, by violence “to the spirit as well as to the body.” Growing up in my town meant learning about the trade-offs that were involved in working at the mill. The good wages and benefits came at a high cost. Workers surrendered themselves for at least eight hours a day to become a cog in the always-churning paper machines. Many of the jobs were deathly boring and repetitious. Many were dangerous, loud, dirty, and hot. Rotating shifts were the norm—one week, “days” (8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M.), one week, “4 to 12,” one week, “12 to 8.” Days off were only occasionally contiguous and hardly ever on weekends. Most workers considered themselves lucky to have the opportunity for overtime pay and to “work a 16”—a sixteen-hour double shift. People did this regularly and counted on overtime pay for a substantial portion of their paychecks. Work weeks of forty-eight or fifty-six hours were not only common, they were the