

Proletarianization: Past and Present

Terry Radtke

Rutgers University

The significance of proletarianization—the effect of changing relationships of work on social relations and state policy, the very definition of the term—is a fundamental problem for social and labor historians. Despite (or because of) the wealth of empirical data generated in recent years on the experience of laboring men and women in different societies, we now find ourselves caught in several conceptual tangles. Attempts to resolve some of the disputes concerning the problematic relationship between class consciousness and proletarianization, the complications of gender, as well as the immediate and long-term effects of social change on culture and politics are leading to a set of debates that will undoubtedly mark the historical literature of this decade.

On May 6–7, 1983, more than sixty scholars from North America and Western Europe gathered at Rutgers University to discuss these problems at a conference entitled “Proletarianization: Past and Present.” Sponsored by the Rutgers University Graduate School and the History Department, the tone of the conference was both academic and speculative—dealing with topics that ranged from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. Each session was intended to build upon the other in a chronological and theoretical fashion. Hence, the conference’s first panel “The Formation of the European and American Proletariat” provoked questions that the final panel “Proletarianization in the Twentieth Century” was designed to answer. The pattern of discourse was thus geared around overlapping periods of social change: “proto-industrialization,” the development of industrial capitalism, and the “third industrial revolution.” It was a wide-ranging—if sometimes frustrating—discussion.

The inter-related questions of population growth, the family as a labor unit, and the emergence of a working class during the period of industrial capitalism and rural industrialization was tackled by Charles Tilly and David Levine in the opening two panels of the conference. Tilly’s presentation dealt with the demographics of early capitalist society, the phenomenon of rural industry, and the proletarianization of the peasant community. Levine’s “Production, Reproduction and the Proletarian Family in England, 1500–1850” took into consideration the link between cottage industry and the “strategy” of large proletarian households. Central to both discussions was the vital role proto-industrialization played in European class formation. Long before urbanization and large factories were dominant, capitalism had gripped the countryside and turned much of the peasantry into part- or full-time workers. By

1850, a largely rural proletariat had developed into a flexible work force and become a self-generating class. Criticism of both papers arose as to the significance of household production for women workers and a precise definition of proletariat in an agrarian society. The sheer amount of detail presented in these papers overwhelmed the audience and obscured the importance of proto-industrialization for later discussions in the conference.

Political culture and proletarianization were the topics of Friday evening's discussions. Peter Linebaugh's "The Picaresque Proletarian in Eighteenth Century London" and Bryan Palmer's "Social Formation and Class Formation in North America, 1800-1900" were ambitious attempts to trace patterns of individual and collective protest back to the workplace and community. For Linebaugh, the "deep-sea proletariat" of Britain was the vanguard of working-class cohesion and a potential source of rebellion. Often international in outlook as well as origins, sailors engaged in a running battle with authority in which public hangings and other forms of class terror combined elements of industrial discipline and political repression. Palmer's analysis cut across the national boundaries of North America to assess the political economy of merchant capitalism in the United States and Canada, its diverse effects on pre-industrial habits of work and sectional economies, and the development of a militantly anti-capitalist organization among workers in the Knights of Labor. Uniting skilled and unskilled workers regardless of ethnic background, the Knights are viewed by Palmer as the first North American labor organization to fuse economic demands with a systematic critique of monopoly capitalism. Linebaugh's and Palmer's papers highlighted the problems of examining proletarian consciousness in its relationship to the means of production. Indeed, the definition of a proper "proletarian" politics became mired in a discussion of the boundaries of merchant and industrial capitalism. This controversy clouded rather than clarified debate.

Saturday's sessions sustained previous questions and raised new ones. Striving to link proletarianization with the topic of political order and the "social question," Hugo Soley's and Catharina Lis' "Policing the Early Modern Proletariat, 1500-1850" concentrated on the state policy of Northwestern Europe towards the laboring poor. John Gill's "Peasant, Plebeian, and Proletarian Marriage in Britain, 1600-1900" shed light on the complex development of the "wedding" and its place within the politics of gender and reproduction in industrializing Britain. Alice Kessler-Harris and Stanley Aronowitz capped off the conference in their respective discussions of "Women and Work in Twentieth Century America" and "Proletarianization in a Post-Industrial World." These presentations revised the classic Marxian schema of proletarianization to fit the subject of female workers and the "new working class" of service personnel and professional occupations. The driving force behind the present as history was characterized by both Kessler-Harris and Aronowitz as a "third industrial revolution" that was engendering qualitative change in social and familial relations. In many ways, the increasing predominance of female workers, the "robotization" of the auto and steel industry, and the regional economic dislocation of the United States bring up a number of parallels with the

idea of primitive accumulation and the “deskilling” of a number of trades in the early stages of industrial capitalism.

Two major, unresolved issues emerged out of the conference. One concerns the inability of historians and social theorists to fashion a periodization of capitalist development in a way that is sensitive to the *uneven* rate of change in the demographic, political, and economic spheres; the other remains the failure to come up with an *historical* definition of productive labor and the working class, cognizant of the complexities of culture and gender, yet rooted in a systematic analysis of social change and political movements. By necessity, scholars must move beyond fragmented national histories and create a new “geography” based upon the dynamics of a capitalist world system. To this end, Linebaugh’s discussion of the maritime industry and the creation of an Atlantic proletariat should be extended to other periods of labor history. The changing forms of work and capitalist regimen—rural and urban, household and factory—could also be of use in examining contemporary society. If, as E.P. Thompson reminds us, “class is a relationship and not a thing,” then a necessary condition for the historical treatment of working people must be an awareness of the changing context of the labor process and those being proletarianized. Considering the relevance of proletarianization for the 1980s, it is to be hoped that future discussions of this sort can be integrated into a comparative examination of the politics of capitalist development and working-class response in the western and non-western world.