

ELEY, GEOFF AND KEITH NIELD. *The Future of Class in History. What's Left of the Social?* University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2007. 280 pp. \$65.00. (Paper: \$24.95); DOI: 10.1017/S0020859008023365

The principle objective of *The Future of Class in History* is to propose a truce between social and cultural historians. Building on arguments developed in several joint articles written during the 1990s, the authors want “to offer means, if not of synthesis, then of productive and continuing conversation”.¹ In fact, their goal seems to be “a hybrid history, capable of retaining a version of a materialist perspective, while recognizing in its practice the necessity of the discursive moment”.

The book is largely organized around discussions of works by British historians, along with some from the United States. Many of the references are quite compressed and may make the argument somewhat hard to follow for those who have not already read the works in question. The authors describe a triumphant social history, which emerged and prospered during the 1960s and 1970s, but was subsequently laid low by the three key figures of the book: Gareth Stedman Jones, Joan Scott, and Patrick Joyce. Interestingly enough, Eley and Nield choose to exemplify some of the strengths of the social history they now consider to be out of fashion by examining at length the first books of these three historians, all written in an exemplary materialist style long since abandoned by their authors.

Eley and Nield recognize, as postmodern critics often do not, that characterizing this earlier social history as Marxist *tout court* is neither accurate nor helpful and that nobody really works with simple base/superstructure models. Class has always been a bitterly contested terrain, even during what the authors describe as the heyday of social history. Nevertheless, while avoiding the wilder shores of postmodernism, they do argue that “class discursively understood *has* come to provide a better starting point for studying class formation than the classical ones of economics and social structure”.

Moreover, they conclude that as a result of the postmodern critique the “former ground of the social history of the 1970s has ceased to be available” and that “the damage inflicted by the last two decades of poststructuralist critique needs to be honestly admitted”. A key operation then becomes the need to reject, as Eley and Nield do, the epistemological basis of E.P. Thompson’s version of social history, even while accepting the substance of much of his work. In particular, Eley and Nield fully agree with Joan Scott’s attack, described as brilliant and lucid, which “disposes of Thompson on experience”, now said to be “comprehensively demolished”. It is not easy to understand why they think this. Scott claims that Thompson essentializes class and accords foundational status to experience, based on her deployment of some Foucaultian dicta and, ultimately, on Heidegger’s critique of modernity. One could just as easily argue that Scott has replaced a supposed economism with her own politicism.²

Eley and Nield contend that “the manner in which the past is recuperated can have effects on perceptions of the present”, and they include rather unexpected references to contemporary politics at several points in their book. There are criticisms of New Labour

1. It is probably significant that Dennis Dworkin, *Class Struggles* (Harlow, 2007), written in much the same spirit as *The Future of Class*, also appeared in 2007. It analyzes many of the same works and arrives at similar conclusions.

2. Joan Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, in Terrence J. McDonald (ed.), *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996), pp. 388–390.

and Blairism, of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization. They cite Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on the “potentially immobilizing effects” that a “discursive approach” can have on political intervention. However, their proposed solution, to join Gramsci with Foucault, may not strike all their readers as particularly promising. The authors are certainly aware that what they term “a post-Foucauldian stress on power’s dispersal can back us unnecessarily away from power in the state-centralized form, so that when power in that more conventional sense speaks – through armies, emergency decrees, policing, and repression – we are left protesting ineffectually from the sidelines”. On the other hand, how they think historians should intervene politically remains somewhat obscure, though we may be sure that this is not to take place through the Gramscian prescription, a Leninist party.

Some of Eley and Nield’s other proposals also seem problematic. They recommend a “pragmatics of good faith” to encourage dialogue and collaboration between social and cultural historians. This would involve mutual forbearance in which historians committed to a class-analytic approach would acknowledge (“even if only strategically, and for a while”) the “intractable difficulties” that postmodern criticism poses for their practice. For the advocates of postmodernism and discursive history the authors prescribe a recognition of “the fruitfulness of the continuing practice of social history, if only for generating the carefully constructed and archivally grounded studies that they still require in order to ‘read’”. If Eley and Nield actually mean what this seems to say, that social historians should continue their work so as to serve as the research assistants of postmodernists, it is hard to believe that their proposed “conversation” will go very far.

Eley and Nield are very attentive to academic good manners and emphasize the need to emerge from “delegitimizing polemic”. They can be quite sniffy, for example, about the tone E.P. Thompson used in his criticisms of Althusser, Perry Anderson, and Richard Johnson. Critics of postmodernism, such as Bryan Palmer and Ellen Wood, are summarily dismissed without a hearing and accused of having raised “polemical hackles and intellectual barricades” that have “disfigured” the field of social history. This would seem to promise an earnest if somewhat bland book. In fact, the text is livelier than that, and some of the strictures against critics of postmodernism are quite colorful. The arguments of Richard Evans in his *In Defence of History* (London, 1997) are said to be “radically disingenuous”, and his “tendentious misdescriptions speak volumes about its author’s own no-nonsense innocence of the issues concerned”. Lawrence Stone is described as “incorrigibly self-confident in his misunderstandings”, and his article criticizing postmodernists held to be “of breathtaking naïveté”. Henry Pelling’s work “remained utterly innocent of anything resembling gender analysis, and that alone [...] decisively compromises Pelling’s corpus as a model”. I noticed only a single hit against a postmodernist, but it is a memorable one, directed at Gareth Stedman Jones, who stands accused of “linguistic maximalism”. In general, however, it must be said that the spirit of *The Future of Class* is far more generous than these quotations might suggest.

It is hard to predict what effect Eley and Nield’s plea will have for greater collaboration or, at least, better relations between social and cultural historians. One of the many strengths of the book is its attention to the actual practice of historians, which is where these disputes will eventually be worked out. As they note, there are currently very few postmodern monographs by historians. (Eley and Nield, rather diffidently, manage to identify three.) Moreover, their principal criticism of Joan Scott is that her poststructuralism does not really make her study of French feminism, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*

(Cambridge, MA, 1996), much more illuminating than a conventional history of ideas. On the other side, many, probably most, social historians are already giving ample consideration to identities not reducible to class and are far more sensitive to language, to representation, and to discourse than they were a few years ago. This is probably less than Eley and Nield would like but, as Foucault is supposed to have said when it was pointed out that he was not a historian: “nobody’s perfect”.

Michael M. Hall

STROMQUIST, SHELTON. Reinventing “The People”. The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism. [The Working Class in American History.] University of Illinois Press, Urbana [etc.] 2006. x, 289 pp. £50.00; £22.00; DOI: 10.1017/S0020859008033361

Shelton Stromquist’s stimulating synthesis of the US Progressive Movement, a volume in the outstanding series, “The Working Class in American History”, appears at a most opportune moment. At a time when corporate scandals and wrongdoing, the sub-prime mortgage crisis, the run on the Northern Rock bank, and fears of worldwide recession and escalating socio-political conflict are forcing politicians and financiers to question the continued efficacy and health of neoliberal globalization, Stromquist forcefully reminds us that capitalist crisis, escalating socio-political conflict and turns to reform, regulation, and even revolution are by no means confined to the current era.

Stromquist’s context is that of the “social crisis” of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America. During that period of time individualistic, competitive capitalism in the US increasingly and painfully gave way to a more collectivist, oligopolistic, monopolistic, Taylorite, and aggressively imperialistic form of capitalist social organization. This triggered a massive escalation in socio-political conflict, “most clearly revealed in the battles between labor and capital”, and extensive concern with the ills and victims of rapid industrialization, urbanization, population growth, and migration. In response to this “mounting social crisis”, argues Stromquist, an array of predominantly white and middle-class male and female reformers, but also including representatives from the native-born working class, adopted the language of “the people” and sought to “save” the social system.

This goal was to be achieved by the promotion of a more democratic political system (for example, personal registration, direct primaries, initiative, and referenda) and corporate social responsibility towards employee welfare and the wider public good, by the elimination of corporate, political, and civic corruption and waste, and in improvements in the living standards, health, working conditions, education, and the general “customs and habits” of the citizenry. The latter applied with special force to those mainly immigrant children, women and others of the “submerged tenth” mired in poverty, low pay, ill-health, lack of education, and employment. By means of a mixture of voluntary and limited legislative and state-regulatory efforts, these Progressive business leaders and professional experts in the ranks of government and the professions sought to bring about a more “open”, harmonious, efficient, “humanized”, democratic, collectivist, and bureaucratic form of capitalism in America. They would both restore “order” out of “chaos” and renew the liberal promise of “equal rights” to the country’s citizenry.

In considering the work of these reformers Stromquist sets himself two main tasks. The first is to demonstrate that despite “the diversity of perspectives and interests from which it