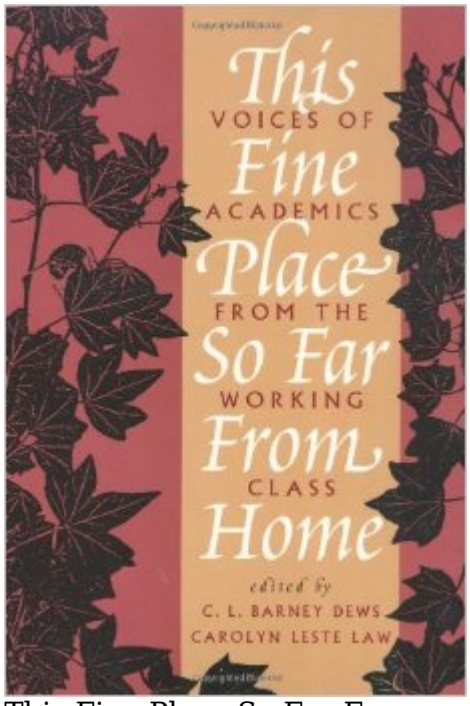
Working-Class Academics and Working-Class Studies: Still Far from Home?

Posted on June 3, 2016 by Sherry Linkon

Academe is a privileged place. It was designed to serve and continues to be dominated by people from educated, well-off backgrounds. Its hierarchical rituals and values define the university as separate from and more "refined" than the so-called "real world." In higher education, people either have or are assumed to desire both the cultural capital and the professional style of the elite. Because of this, higher education is not generally welcoming to scholars from the working class, much less to those who view class inequities critically. Yet as the writers of a series of essays and books published over the past 30 years remind us, working-class academics are not only part of higher education, they also have important contributions to make. Their critiques of higher education helped inspire Working-Class Studies as a field, expanded scholarly understanding of social structures and identities across the disciplines, and shaped pedagogical and support strategies to help working-class students succeed.

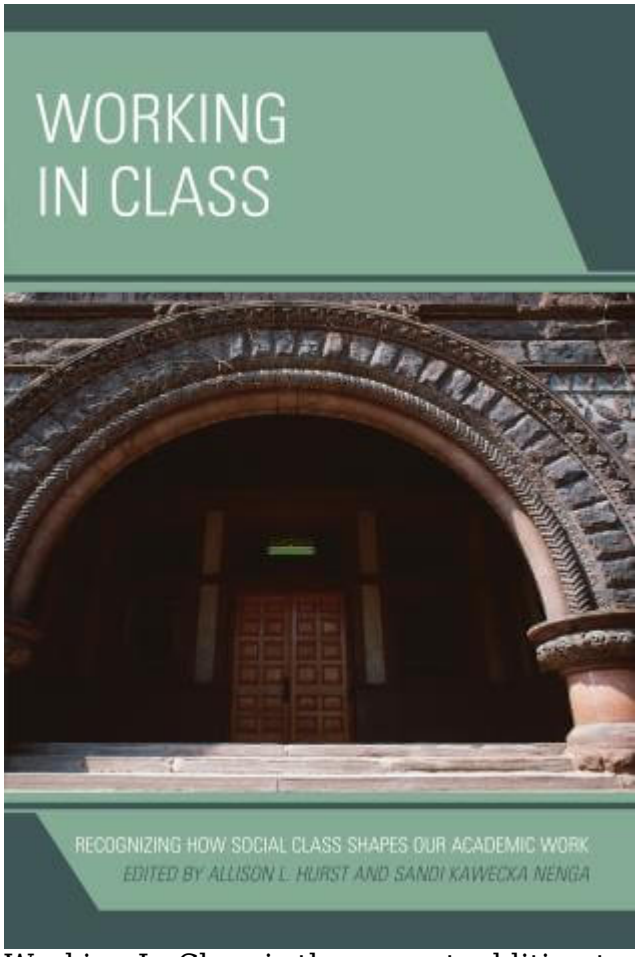


This Fine Place So Far From Home was one of the first of a genre of books that sought to understand class in the professoriat.

My education in working-class life and culture started with conversations with colleagues from working-class backgrounds, and they pointed me to *This Fine Place So Far From Home*, the 1995 anthology edited by C.L. Barney Dews and Carolyn Leste Law. The essays in the book, together with teaching mostly working-class students, helped me see how academic theories of class played out in very human and personal terms for my friends and colleagues from working-class backgrounds. They also made me more conscious – at times uncomfortable and at times just aware – of how my upper middle-class family had shaped me. I knew that my life experience was not as "normal" as American culture pretended it was, but to move from knowing that one is privileged to understanding the perspective of those who are not requires education. I have always been grateful for these books, as I am for the colleagues who shared their stories, for the windows they opened for me.

When I first read this and other early books about working-class academics, including *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class*, by Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey, and *Working-Class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*, by Michelle Tokarczyk and Elizabeth A. Fay, I assumed that they reflected conditions that were already changing. Foolishly, I thought that things would get better as more working-class

people entered the academy. Worse, I believed that the work many of us were doing in writing, teaching, and advocating about class inequities and cultures would, over time, alleviate if not resolve the tensions many working-class people find in academic life. I've always had Pollyanna tendencies, but my expectation that my profession would become more attentive to and accepting of class differences reflects not only optimism but the limits of my own thinking. Years later, I understand the persistence and embeddedness of both class and classism.



Working In Class is the newest addition to a genre of studies that sees professions and universities in class dimensions.

Still, I have to admit that I was surprised, and initially dismayed, to encounter two recent collections of essays by working-class academics – Allison L. Hurst and Sandi Kawecka Nenga's *Working in Class: Recognizing How Social Class Shapes Our Academic Work* and "Working-Class Academics: Theories, Mythologies, Realities," an issue of the online journal *Rhizomes*, edited by Carol Siegel. I knew that the problems articulated in earlier collections

had not been resolved, and I recognized – in fact, I have made the argument myself many times – that the class in which we grow up shapes people's perspectives even when material and social positions change. Nonetheless, my first response when I heard about the latest projects was some impatience. Haven't we had this conversation, I thought?

I was especially troubled that few of the contributors to these collections seemed to know or acknowledge that Working-Class Studies existed. Like the working-class academics and scholars of working-class culture who came to some of the first Working-Class Studies conferences more than 20 years ago, some of the contributors to these volumes seem to feel like orphans, laboring alone on a topic no one else has studied. One wrote that she knew of no body of research on the lived experience of social class. Reading that breaks my heart a bit, both because I had hoped that younger scholars would no longer feel so isolated and because it suggests that the work many of us have produced over the past couple of decades is either invisible or not valued.

While these new volumes raise questions about the impact of Working-Class Studies, they also suggest three important insights for the field. First, sadly, even after decades of discussion, higher education remains divided along class lines, and academics from the working class still feel alienated and frustrated. Indeed, changes in higher education have made the problems worse, as too many working-class academics find themselves caught in part-time or short-term teaching jobs, unable to break through the class barriers that seem to preserve most tenure-line jobs for people from professional class backgrounds. We also see the class hierarchies of higher education in the struggle of state universities to survive continuing budget cuts and attacks on tenure, even as elite private schools compete to see who can raise tuition the most while keeping acceptance rates the lowest. Far from being resolved, class divisions in higher education have gotten worse, despite the more visible presence of academics from the working class and efforts to increase and deepen attention to class in both the curriculum and research.

Second, while the new volumes largely ignore the research that has emerged out of Working-Class Studies, their work at once fits well within the ethos and practices of the field and, even more important, they make a significant contribution to it. As in earlier projects, the essays in both *Working in Class* and the *Rhizomes* volume often begin with or center on personal narratives, a move that, as I have written before, seems to be a signature intellectual approach for this field. But like much of the best writing in Working-Class Studies these days, these pieces use experience not as an end in itself but to frame analyses of the social structures, psychological tensions, and discursive complexities of class in higher education. In their deftness in linking theories of class and representation with the lived experience of working-class people, these scholars model a rich and complex approach

to the study of class. A number of the contributors to Hurst and Nenga's book will be part of a roundtable discussing the book at next week's How Class Works conference, and I look forward to the dialogue. I also hope they will feel at home in the field (as a few already do, I think), because we will all benefit.

Finally, these projects remind us of the key challenge that Working-Class Studies faces as a field: our continuing invisibility. Despite more than 20 years of organizing and publishing, we have never gained the institutional presence of Ethnic Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Queer Studies, or Critical Race Studies (fields that, it must be said, also struggle for attention, resources, and stability). Working-Class Studies may have faced bigger hurdles than these other efforts, because we do not have an active social movement to help spur institutions to support our work. But we have also not done enough organizing ourselves. To my knowledge, only one new program has been created in the past five years, the Texas Center for Working-Class Studies at Collin College. If we want the next generation of working-class academics to feel less vulnerable and isolated, if we want them to recognize ongoing critical discussions about class and to connect with a larger movement of people who share their interests, we need to do better. I don't have a strategy for doing that, to be honest, but perhaps we can begin by talking seriously with newcomers, like many of the contributors to these new volumes, about how we can all make more significant connections across disciplines and generations.

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