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**FROM WARREN SUSMAN TO RAYMOND WILLIAMS  
AND ALLEN GINSBURG MOVING TOWARDS  
A FUTURE WITH ILLUSIONS\***

**Alice Kessler-Harris, Rutgers University**

I trace my lineage in American Studies back to no traditional training. I did not sit at the feet of one of the inspiring practitioners in one of the great programs at Yale or Minnesota. And though I am, somewhat inadvertently, the grandchild of one of the masters, my intellectual roots and passion for our discipline came initially from outside the mainstream of American Studies—from exploring the history of labor and of women and gender. Both have been contested arenas within American history partly because of their propensity towards interdisciplinarity and partly because each is bound to a political trajectory, or movement. And both have found comfortable homes in American Studies, participating in the successful efforts of a generation of scholars to alter the meaning of “American culture” or “culture studies” to reflect subjective and vernacular experience as well as artistic and literary commentary on it. The lineage I trace draws on the politics and the insights of 3 decades of flux in American Studies. But it also reflects the intersection of politics with the life of the mind that has simultaneously tormented and inspired a generation of Americanists who work within the U.S.

My story, then, is perhaps as useful for what it reveals about a changing and contested field as for what it says about one idiosyncratic journey. Still, I focus here on that journey. It starts when I was a graduate student in the 1960s. I sought out Rutgers as a place to do graduate work for reasons not unfamiliar to women of my generation. Already married I needed an institution within commuting radius of New York. In the early 1960s Rutgers already had a reputation for exciting social history and it was not tainted by the just-emerging hints of involvement in the cold-war that colored the images of other institutions.

Within a semester I had encountered one of the transformative minds of his generation, Warren Susman. Warren, himself a student of Merle Curti and a participant in Curti's efforts to use numbers to assess the reciprocal impact of social change on the lives of ordinary people, persuaded his students that particular kinds of historical consciousness could and did participate in constructing culture. In a field still resolutely anti-theoretical, he used to torment and bully his students into efforts to comprehend what we would now call our subjective positions as narrators. “Every history” he

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\* Early, and different versions of this paper were presented at the North American Labor History Conference, Wayne State University, Fall, 1997; and the Warren Susman Graduate History Conference, Rutgers University, April, 1998. My thanks to the participants there, and at the Amerika Instituut conference on “Predecessors: Intellectual Lineages in American Studies” for their helpful reactions.

insisted, "is an autobiography." He put it somewhat more fulsomely in the 1984 preface to his excruciatingly compiled volume of essays, *Culture and History*. "The writing of history is as personal an act as the writing of fiction" he said there. "As the historian attempts to understand the past, he is at the same time, knowingly or not, seeking to understand his own cultural situation and himself."<sup>1</sup>

Susman believed that such an understanding transcended the search for individual identity. "Attitudes towards the past," he argued, "frequently become facts of profound consequence for the culture itself."<sup>2</sup> In a path-breaking 1964 *American Quarterly* essay he laid out his theory about the relationship of myth to history. For him, myth proposed "fundamental goals" of society, while history "defines and illuminates basic processes involved in achieving those goals." The tension between using history to affirm myth and evoking it in a more traditional ideological way produced culture. Historical interpretation thus formed the underpinnings of any generation's understanding of its own culture. It was, thought Susman, most readily identified by intellectuals and artists who, in turn, helped to perpetuate particular interpretive stances. Eighteenth century ministers, early nineteenth century writers, late nineteenth century artists were among those who believed they could offer "a vision of ... history that would be more meaningful for culture." And Warren had great hopes that by the early 1960s, intellectuals who had emerged from the cold war, would be among those whose re-writing of history would produce a fuller and more profound understanding of cultural development and thus help to change the world around them.

This was 1962: Kennedy's election and the optimistic rhetoric that surrounded it had opened promises around civil liberties and expanding democracy that no-one was prepared to fulfill. An increasingly militant civil rights movement began to provoke confrontation around voting rights and public accommodations. Within a few short years, branches of the labor movement rallied in active support of Martin Luther King's anti-poverty crusade. Other branches carefully shepherded medical care for the aged through Congress. Vietnam was in the air, challenging cold war platitudes about dominoes and begging questions about the authority of governments. A generation bred in comfort discovered huge pockets of poverty that defied illusions of affluence.

It was beyond imagination that my generation of graduate students would continue to read the past through the rosy lenses of a shared consensus, or that we could stand by while change happened around us. Events seemed to challenge us to develop an "engaged" history, one that would alter the shape of American culture to come. The standard explanatory frameworks lacked resonance for the challenges of the moment. Discontented with the brilliant expositions of sociologists like William Allen White and David Riesman, whose descriptive analysis offered little hope for change, we turned to the new sociology of knowledge. We sought the roots of what Peter Berger later called

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<sup>1</sup> Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), xii.

<sup>2</sup> "History and the American Intellectual: The Uses of a Usable Past," reprinted in Susman, *Culture as History*, 7

"the social construction of reality" in investigations of psyche and personality, looking to the likes of Norman O. Brown to find the connecting links between identity and social action and joining a stream of young scholars (John Higham, Daniel Bell, Leo Marx and Richard Hofstadter) who already believed with Susman that culture was rooted in visions of the past. We discovered Karl Mannheim's argument that no human was immune to the ideological influence of social context. As "ideology" (which Mannheim euphemistically transformed into "wish dreams") crept back into the historical vocabulary, it reaffirmed the possibility that ideas could be engines of change.

We dipped into a deeply-tainted (all but forbidden?) Marxism, cherishing our rediscoveries of a dialectical historical process and the explanatory power of theories of labor value. Yet we resisted the idea that materialism was all, or, as the British historian E.P. Thompson (of whom no-one in America had yet heard) put it later, that human relationships could be entirely defined by the economic.<sup>3</sup> Instead, we found in the early Marx the electrifying notion of false consciousness. The historical Marx put teeth into our new history, enabling us to believe that our work could unearth the roots of consciousness in order, to paraphrase only a little, to enable people to shake off the chains of illusion and "cull the living flowers."<sup>4</sup> We learned that if the historian's task was "to establish the truth of this world," the student of American culture had a wider obligation: to discover the meaning of that truth and to disseminate it. The "New Left" for us was not simply a utopian dream; it had roots in the history we were creating.

For help in that quest we looked beyond American borders. The British theorist, Richard Hoggart, had already published *The Uses of Literacy*, which linked the worlds of economic and media culture to the construction of expectation and aspirations and jolted us out of the benign assumption that individuals could control their own wishes. Then came Herbert Marcuse, bringing even the laggards back to Marx. Antonio Gramsci swam into view, affirming the political force of ideology. By the mid sixties, we had the beginning of a new vocabulary and a way of understanding the world. It was a world where questions emerged from political and social circumstance and where "culture" had become the source of interpretative authority as well as the object of study. It was a world where culture and politics were reciprocally empowered; where history was the engine of change in both arenas.

Warren Susman's brand of cultural history provided a crucial set of hooks, resisting without rejecting fundamental notions of the dialectical process of history, and offering culture as an access route to comprehending whole social systems. His notion of "ideologies as systems that account for everything" demanded that we place ourselves within, not outside the process of collecting and evaluating data, and take responsibility for our use of words. In retrospect, his effort to re-think notions of culture resonate with those of other historians. Natalie Davis for example, had already discovered that she

<sup>3</sup> MARHO, "E.P. Thompson" in *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 22; Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* appeared in 1964.

<sup>4</sup> "The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," (1844) Louis Feuer, ed, *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p 263.

could use anthropology to look for "whole relationships." Herbert Gutman was busily evolving a conception of culture as "lived experience."

For his students, what was special was Warren's excitement about defining culture with us in it. Our sources expanded to incorporate the "naive." We read fiction convinced that it promised access to the world-views or historical frames of the authors who had touched American lives. E.P. Thompson was later to claim that much of his work had come from teaching literature. We added up numbers for the same reason: they seemed such unproblematic signals to behaviors that reflected belief systems. We hunted for ethnography everywhere, inventing the term oral history to legitimize our complete absence of method. Though Warren himself focused on the visible and the iconic, his willingness to think about "culture" as a synonym for experience nurtured alternative possibilities. As he used the term, it embraced a politics of human behaviour that interrogated the dualisms of self and object within every artifact of analysis: strikes and mentalities; consumption and production; photography and the photographer. It freed us to think about how ordinary actors—African-Americans, workers, immigrants—created culture as they engaged with their worlds both high and low. No, there was as yet no thought of women, but in retrospect, I believe the groundwork had been laid.

In this context, the dissertation topic I chose—on Jewish immigrant workers in New York City in the 1890s—seems to have been overdetermined. Labor history at the time existed largely as a subset of economic history. Generally located in economics departments, it was infused by little conception of culture. It drew its theoretical parameters from an institutional economics that respected institutional boundaries of enterprises, trade unions and government policy without exploring anything of the lives, experiences or voices of workers, male or female, black or white. Notions of individual agency tended to disappear into conflated categories like class or business or regions. Immigrants occupied a marginal place in the consciousness of students of American culture. Lumped together in groups like "Southern European" or "Nordic," their history was characterized by words like assimilation and adaptation. This world smacked little of culture, a word for which Mathew Arnold provided the boundaries, and whose narrow and explicit meaning encompassed nothing of ordinary life.

And yet exploring the relationship of poor people, and especially of working-class Jews on New York's lower East Side to the reformers who tried to ease the path to Americanization, would allow both a continuing rebellion against established notions of culture and the freedom to locate the conflicts that fuelled illusions about the future. I intended to explore the American dream enacted in the life of the mind of immigrant workers. This seemed pretty brave to me. At a moment when the distinguished colonialist Carl Bridenbaugh publicly bewailed the admission to the profession of children of immigrants who threatened its destruction, I, a child of refugees, not once but twice an immigrant, firmly believed that I had crept into graduate school by the back door. I neither intended nor wanted to battle the establishment. But I did want to write a history that reflected something of my own lost culture. Who, then, was writing about workers, or Jews, or poor people and their connection to politics? John Hope Franklin was hardly a name to be reckoned with. Herbert Gutman was tucked away at Fairleigh Dickinson

College—an unknown assistant professor, fearful that his own radical past would be uncovered. Joe Huthmacher had just published a piece that connected labor and politics. But the Rutgers department offered the kind of atmosphere available perhaps nowhere else on the East coast. My dissertation would test the radical potential of the field. A double redemption, and a double subversion. Every history, Warren had said, is an autobiography. In the end, I lacked the courage to reify experience, and the dissertation, completed in 1968, fell far short of its unspoken goals. Not only did I skirt the “real” experience of immigrants, but I left women completely out.

Perhaps this was inevitable for while I had opened up one piece of a culture, I had neglected the relationship of history to politics and experience that was a key piece of Susman’s maxim. In the late sixties, my work began to draw new inspiration from an active engagement with the labor movement and with feminism. As I began to understand that my own notion of culture participated in how I conceived working class history, and that I would need to engage with trade unionism to fully interpret its history, I sought to infuse my work with a more active commitment. Once again my timing was off, for by the late sixties, the American labor movement had largely rejected the idea of intellectuals as partners; left-intellectuals, in turn, had become disillusioned with the possibilities of labor’s transformative influence. They shared a view of labor history that reified myths of its institutional isolation.

To be sure intellectuals, many of them factory workers, and other university-trained idealists, had involved themselves in every phase of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century American labor movement. But by the 1960s, the purges of the McCarthy period had turned whatever relationships continued into largely passive alliances. Conflicts over the war in Vietnam produced active hostility. For many years the trade union had embodied intellectuals’ hopes for a transformed society. Generations of socialist and communist thinkers had dreamed of using the trade union movement as the vehicle of economic and social change. Radicals of all kinds had chronicled their successes along with the lessons of their failures. Brookwood, a pioneer school for union leaders and workers, and other labor education centers had employed intellectuals to construct socially-conscious agendas. Yet the record revealed an enormous disparity between what most American unions members and leaders believed and the agendas of their putative instructors. For the most part American unionists mistrusted left-wing ideas that did not advance the immediate economic self-interest of union members. They rejected actions that threatened their ability to negotiate with the capitalists who wielded power.

Labor historians had for decades affirmed the vision of contest that permeated the history of unions. Their history functioned as both a description of the labor movement’s continuing resistance to broadening its agendas and a warning notice to aspiring academics like me. Beginning with Selig Perlman’s conviction that “scarcity of opportunity” must guide trade union actions: his urgent calls for a limited trade union program responsive to the psyche of workers; his fear that a utopian intellectual agenda would undermine dynamic job consciousness and therefore had no place in the world of unions. Perlman’s eloquent appeals offer a prescription that could justify the CIO

leadership's exclusion of communists who had contributed to its strength, their willingness to turn the idea of the intellectual into a code for communist.

A different kind of labor history threatened to undermine the union movement. At a moment when the trade union movement was still sore from its battles with intellectuals, the American Labor Historian, Philip Taft, penned an impassioned plea against the idea that labor had gained anything at all from the intellectuals in its midst. Union members, he argued, had not objected to Communists, as long as they had salted their ideas with hard-edged gains. In Taft's view, visionary unions of the past, including miners, machinists, brewers, garment workers and many more, "were not superior in most respects, to others...." Pointing to the Labor Movement's "practical idealism" he extolled its leaders' ability to "protect their members' interests."<sup>5</sup> By that standard would the Labor movement judge itself. I recall Douglas Fraser, UAW president in the late 1970s and 1980s, commenting in 1990 that trade union leaders could never move too far beyond rank and file members. And by that standard the labor movement was, in Taft's mind, an unmitigated success.

At the time Taft wrote, many intellectuals would have preferred labor to take a different route—not the socialist extreme, but one that more closely resembled the social unionism of some European trade unions. C. Wright Mills, who entered the post-war period optimistically predicting the movement's turn to social unionism, thought that no longer possible by the mid 50s. And in that "golden age of capitalism" social democrats like Daniel Bell questioned union willingness to trade off increased productivity for higher wages, arguing that unions, eager to provide economic security, were already beginning to lose their force for social change. Such economic goals, he thought, would limit the latent potential of the unions to lead a social movement. Bell at one point hoped leaders like Walter Reuther (to whose visions of social justice Taft gave such short shrift) might constitute a repository of that movement—for his championship of issues like better housing, more schools, adequate medical care, and the creation of a more humanistic work atmosphere in the factory—<sup>6</sup> But, rightly as it turned out, Bell predicted that the labor movement as a whole would never fully trust that direction.

Still, I had to try. In the early seventies, I abandoned traditional academic teaching to help create a school for workers that started classes in 1976. District 65 was a small, maverick kind of catch-all union, formed by left intellectuals during the depression. For a while it floated in and out of the CIO finally ending its years as a United Auto Workers local. District 65 was a very good union by almost every imaginable standard, and one that tried to translate transformative notions into day-to-day practice. This was a union whose slogan was "organize the unorganizable" before that was popular; that sponsored hootnannies before anyone knew what the word meant; that refused the check-off on the

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Taft, "Theories of the Labor Movement," in George W. Brooks, et al., eds., *Interpreting the Labor Movement* (Madison WI: Industrial Relations Research Association, 1952), 31, 35, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Bell, "The Capitalism of the Proletariat: A Theory of American Trade Unionism," *The End of Ideology* (NY: Free Press, 1960), 226.

grounds that members ought to re-affirm their support frequently. It was a union that, in the fifties, traded off seniority rights for racial equality. Its president, the late David Livingston, who marched at Martin Luther King Jr's right hand in 1963, was an outspoken opponent of the war in Vietnam. But District 65 was something of an outcast in the labor movement, bouncing from the CIO to independence and back again. And Livingston so feared the loss of his power and influence that he had never allowed a second generation of leadership to develop. When our program began to develop those leaders we ran into trouble.

What I did not then understand was that in the memory of even the most progressive and open-minded labor movement leaders, the history of practical accomplishment overwhelms and underlines any campaign for larger goals. The culture they sought, and perhaps still seek, to resurrect is a culture of accomplishment. John Sweeney captured pride in that history when he reminded a 1997 audience of labor and academics of the continuing validity of Gompers' request for "more." For him, the fifties was a golden age, precisely because labor leaders avoided larger agendas. Working people in that decade knew that "if we got up every morning and did our jobs, then we could earn a better life for ourselves and a better chance for our children."<sup>7</sup>

With some significant exceptions, most elements of the American Labor movement have neither wished nor intended to transform society, even as they have participated in doing so. On the whole, American trade unions have built themselves on an interpretation of the past that agrees that workers have struggled to achieve such things as an "American standard of living"; justice in the workplace; and dignity in poor jobs. They have sought to develop and use the power generated by numbers to bargain with employers, to speak for their members and their needs, and sometimes to curtail corporate greed and irresponsibility. To the extent that these noble goals have been achieved, they helped many workers to reach Gompers' goal of "... more." More comfortable family lives, more leisure, more education for kids.

The women's movement in those years, though less suspicious of larger goals was equally locked into a past that continued to shape women's expectations. It aimed to open economic opportunity, political access and reproductive freedom to more and wider groups of women. But to do this required a new way of seeing how gender functioned as an ideological system in all its class and racially rooted complexity. For historians like me, questions of ideology and consciousness were inevitably rooted in issues of evidence and interpretation. If ideologies were "systems that accounted for everything" then gender was a piece of the whole. If every history was an autobiography, the multiple sources of one's own identity surely deserved exploration. What piece of my collective self (our collective selves) was I omitting when I ignored gender? What understandings of class and race were restricted by omissions of women and of the relationships of men to women within racialized class contexts. Trained by Warren and schooled by the sixties to reconcile experience with illusion, was I to be an accomplice in perpetuating the idea that gender did not matter? Yet when I turned

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<sup>7</sup>John J Sweeney, "Time for a New Contract" *Dissent* (Winter, 1997), 35.



towards the histories of wage-earning women that became my life's work, Warren shook his head in despair. "When are you going to do something serious?" he would ask, in a voice that implied that I had yet to learn what it meant to be a historian.

But I had been well-trained. Once immersed in the women's movement, I could see that Warren was wrong. Herbert Gutman helped to confirm my intellectual direction. I met him shortly after I defended the dissertation in the spring of 1968. In a long afternoon of conversation, he offered me his own take on how to historicize issues of class and race, leading me finally to position myself as a labor historian, new style. In American history, it was Gutman who brought the anthropological conception of culture as lived experience into active use. And it was Gutman who released a generation of young people to write histories of workers and their communities in and outside trade unions. For many of us, the approach illuminated ways of melding women—working women and the families of working men into analyses of social change. It opened to question the difference between a culturally-based labor history and a celebratory history of women and begged a notion of class that could successfully accommodate women. This would be my contribution to lifting the veil of illusion: surely a project serious enough even for Warren. I set to work.

Like many of my generation, I turned first to Marxist-Feminism. My study-group saw this as both a theoretical tool for understanding how women participated in processes of production and reproduction, and a practical instrument for furthering the socialism that we remained convinced was just over the horizon. But the tensions between them remained palpable. We used to joke about them: "What does it mean to be a Marxist-Feminist?" we asked. The answer: "Twice as many meetings." A curious intersection of cultures helped to resolve the problem.

I discovered Raymond Williams in the effort to find a definition of culture and ideology that could encompass working class experience at about the same time that I discovered Allen Ginsberg. This might appear a rather improbable combination. Williams was by then already a distinguished socialist theorist and Cambridge don. His deep respect for the power of historical interpretation contrasted sharply with the irreverent and a-historical stance of Ginsburg, the beat poet. Yet the two had something in common that I cherished: a tiny piece of Wales called the Wye Valley where Raymond Williams grew up, Allen Ginsburg drew inspiration, and I found some of my most precious escapes as a child. This valley, as I remember it, and as Ginsburg describes it, is one of the most beautiful places on earth. In his eyes, its gentle, grassy hills are without menace. They contain neither craggy peaks nor dangerous precipices. All year round, they remain a comforting cheerful green, dotted only with clumps of ash and birch and spotted with wandering sheep. When Ginsburg discovered it, he fell to his knees, seeing before him "a solid mass of Heaven, mist-infused." There was, he thought "no imperfection in the budded mountain." There, "valleys breathe, heaven and earth move together...." Only erotic metaphors adequately describe Ginsburg's ecstasy. He lay down, he tells us, "mixing my beard with the wet hair of the mountainside...."<sup>8</sup> I

<sup>8</sup> "Wales Visitation," *Planet News* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1968), 140-141.

could go on to quote more of the sheep, the flowers, the dancing horses that persuaded him that in these hills he was seeing "the myriad-formed soul" of Buddha. But I stop here to remark only that the poem is twice-dated. One date-line reads August 3, 1967, London. The second, July 27, 1967, LSD.

Raymond Williams (born and raised in those valleys) and I (who grew up just south of them) knew, as Allen Ginsburg could not have (in or outside of his acid-laden trance) that the country he perceived was an illusion, hiding under its gentle hills and green valleys the seams of the coal mines, sources of the contradictions that have long made the Welsh a desperately poor, and fiercely proud people. By the mid-nineteenth century, at a time when the majority of the English still lived off the land, more than half the Welsh earned their livings in and around the mines. Fully a third of the men and boys worked underground. But the real contradiction (which Ginsburg could easily have seen had he peered just over the next mountain) was what the mines had done to the shape of the land. A century and a half's worth of coal leavings had thrown up literally thousands of ugly slag heaps whose grey shapes competed with the green of the hills and often dwarfed them.

From where I had lived in Gabalfa, the mining villages were "up the valley," each of them a row of terraced miner's houses, headed by a church and a school house. They lay just south and west of the site of Raymond Williams' childhood. To be honest, I have to say that I discovered Williams before I knew he was Welsh. It was 1973. The "New Left" had already disintegrated into its ignominious end. What remained was focused on ending the Vietnam war finally and at last. I was still in a Marxist-Feminist Study Group. We had read all three volumes of *Capital* with increasing skepticism and a diffuse anger towards a marxian theory that could not accommodate our growing conviction of the power of social and biological reproduction. Then I came upon "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory."<sup>9</sup>

"Base and superstructure" refused the old dichotomy between the material and the ideological, suggesting the ultimate futility of conversations around economic determinism and invoking both the power of culture and the necessity of exploring it as an analytic entity. It awakened me to the central importance and complicated mechanisms of deeply rooted cultural identity in human consciousness and behavior, opening new ways to see gender (ethnicity and race) within the framework of a dialectical process. The piece led me in search of Williams' other work, but it was only later that I came to believe that without my experience—our shared experience of Welsh history and culture—he could not have written as he did.

That insight came when, in my efforts to follow Williams' efforts to locate culture as the central trope of human experience, I encountered his essay on the Welsh industrial novel. For the Welsh miner, wrote Williams, the pastoral remained a visible presence, not, he wrote, as an ideal contrast, but as the slope, the skyline, seen immediately from the streets and from the pit-tops, tangible in the "sheep on the hills" that often strayed down into the streets of the settlements. The shape of the mines and the hills, wrote

<sup>9</sup> *New Left Review* (November-December, 1973).

Williams, trying to explain the tenor of the Welsh imagination, accounted “not only for a consciousness of history, but for a consciousness of alternatives that shaped the miner’s persona and framed his aspirations and possibilities. That consciousness came as he put it, from the contrast between “darkness and light, of being trapped and of getting clear ... here on the ground in the most specific ways....”<sup>10</sup>

Turning from efforts to describe how past and present (pastoral and industrial) continuously confront each other, Williams proposed instead that we engage the contrasts—live with them and feel them. Exploring the meaning of contrast became for me a new way to view the historical process. Williams’ autobiographical novel, *Border Country*, articulates the play between elusive dissimilarities and underlines their central importance to those who lived with them. In his fictional persona as a historian returned from his university post to the Welsh village of his childhood, Williams stumbles over his failure to complete a book on Welsh population movements during the industrial revolution. “I’ve lost heart, I suppose,” the protagonist tells his father’s friend. For I saw suddenly that it wasn’t a piece of research, but an emotional pattern. Emotional patterns are all very well, but they’re our own business. History is public or nothing.”<sup>11</sup>

In our lifetimes as historians and students of American culture, we have come to understand, as Williams eventually did, that “emotional patterns” are not our own making, but are part of the world in which history is made—of the things that ordinary people make decisions. Williams’ theoretical work contributed as much to that as anyone’s, providing for me a conception of culture deeply embedded in class *and* place, in work *and* community. Yet much as those emotional patterns (cultures, if you will) have been integrated into our research, we resist them in our politics—they remain unspoken sources of the tensions we face as we grapple with the real world, always there and always mocking our efforts at reconciliation.

Not long after my encounter with the Welsh industrial novel, I went to visit my friend Nora who still lives where the coal mines once were. Nora’s father-in-law is a retired collier (pit man) who arranged for a friend to take us down into one of the now-closed pits. Our guide had followed his father into the colliery as a 14 year old in 1936. Now he was old, ill, and somewhat bitter. As we shared the dank, cold, and dark, miners’ lamps strapped to our heads, he walked us, bent-headed, through to the low seams where he tried to evoke the feeling of being eternally trapped. He described how the new seams were extended by miners who lay flat on their backs in 18” high openings, chipping above them. Often rats ran over a man’s body and tiny rivulets of water dripped down, soaking the miner to his skin by the time the shift ended. I listened to his voice, feeling the gnawing sharp teeth and shivering with the wet in my bones. Commiseration overwhelmed analysis as I bumbled sympathy about this surely being one of the hardest jobs of work. “You’ll never understand it,” he said, a bit of contempt creeping in: “you’ll never understand it till you understand about the smell. That was

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Williams, “The Welsh Industrial Novel,” *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (Verso, 1980), 213.

<sup>11</sup> *Border Country* (New York: Horizon Press, 1962), 284.

the worst." Then he elaborated. Until electrification began in the early 50s, the coal was pulled out by pit ponies. Because they balked at going from sun to dark, the ponies were kept underground, usually for a year at a time. They were fed there, and there they eliminated their waste. The residue not only accounted for the rats, but for what was by his account a stench so unbearable that many miners could literally not stomach it. I leave the rest to your imaginations.

Is it only an illusion to imagine that as historians we can capture a culture that will reflect the heart-beat of working people and speak to the heart of the contemporary labor movement? Is it hubris to believe that as intellectuals our work can produce patterns and pictures that honor labor for what it did rather than for what we wish it had done? Raymond Williams and Allen Ginsberg give me comfort.

When I think of the seams of coal running under the poet's heavenly mountains; of the miners' life shaped by light as well as dark; of the sheep that ran in the streets where the pit heads spewed their grit; of the miner in his prideful masculinity daily meeting the humiliating stench—I think as well of how the historical process moves forward because these experiences cannot be reconciled but must be lived in all their oppositional intensity. The contrasts persist everywhere we look: the skilled trades unionist lives in a world in which the job is his only turf and seniority protects it. Yet "fairness" demands that he give up his claims and share his rights to work with others. The working mothers' days contain the desire to be with her children and to abandon them in order to earn the money that will give them a better future. The idea of social justice (translated into issues like set-aside programs, job-related affirmative action and welfare stipends without work) appears as blatant injustice to working people on the margins. Preferential admission of alumnae children to the best universities draws no comparable protest.

My explorations of culture, like those of many of my generation who have come to understand the relationship of history to culture, continuously confronts the complicated tensions exposed by simultaneously existing, yet potentially conflicting goals. The generation of scholars that grew up rejecting the idea that the histories of workers and unions were co-terminous, sees workers in multiple ways. They are producers, consumers, and citizens; they are family members and wage earners; white and "raced"; producers and reproducers. We begin to understand that skill at work can be the source of self-esteem, the glue that cements families, and the foundation of discrimination; that gender both creates and inhibits activism; that an immigrant mentality affirms and negates racism; that radicals can be sexist even while espousing the woman question.

On one level American cultural historians have accepted the effort to more fully understand the multiple consciousnesses of most people. At another we want to write histories in which social movements embody only our best and most precious aspirations. The U.S. labor movement, with all its flaws, serves as a metaphor even as it provided a touchstone for me for so many years. Many intellectuals (and perhaps most of those who, like me, came of age in the sixties) wanted from the labor movement more than it could provide. Persuaded of the need for a trade union movement that would serve as a vehicle for social justice, if not for some future transformation, we have

wanted to write histories in which it carried the banners of equality, justice, and freedom. We have wanted it to stand for racial and, more recently, gendered, fairness; to speak for and on behalf of a community of interests of all workers. As the distinguished economist Albert Hirschman might put it, we have wanted an institution that could function as a voice for them; that could pave the way for a non-racialized, gender-encompassing workplace. In short, there are those among us who have wanted it to represent a spiritual and moral vision, even at the cost of the gritty realities that surround most people's lives and lead them to seek narrower social and economic goals. Like Ginsburg's view of the Welsh mountains, our own fog of metaphorical LSD obscures some critical illusions. And yet, it has served me well as a lesson in comprehending the meaning of cultures.

Warren Susman's sense that social order is justified and sustained by theories of history mediated by cultural interpretation has remained a permanent legacy, exemplified by our own experience. The broader goals of social justice and equality, and the more specific ones of economic security have both receded in our time. Myths of the free market abide. The rising tide of the fifties, along with its skilled craftsmen, mass production workers, and seemingly endless productivity gains is a thing of the past. As the tide turns, it carries with it not only any immediate possibility of social democratic consensus or socialist dreams, but it tosses aside more limited goals like good jobs, public housing, health-care and education as well. The social unionism of the American past that once appeared a modest goal to intellectuals, has become, in John Sweeney's energetic hands, the agent for new coalition. Yet it seems inadequate even to defend past gains, much less to achieve new ones. The global market (with its unregulated financial movements, international competition for capital, and fluid supplies of labor), stifles the most generous visions of the old social unionism, preventing even the best intentioned governments with strong union movements from sustaining the most benign welfare system. I am thinking here of Sweden (a place with a long and distinguished history of union/intellectual collaboration) where unions that represent 85% of all workers have been unable to maintain cherished goals of full employment and equality. It also releases corporations from responsibility for polluting and destroying the environment, for job training, and for the quality of community life. The upshot is a world of contrast: great wealth and great opportunity for some along with stark and growing poverty and enhanced racial/ethnic division.

The global market exacerbates contrasts. On the one hand it produces a work/family dynamic that calls for greater attention to the world outside of work and greater recognition of the centrality of women in the new labor movement. On the other, the family and work become oppositional categories forcing a re-evaluation of the meaning of women in the workforce and in the labor movement, and of the nature of families. Class re-emerges as a pivotal force in understanding the ideology of workers' lives, and women become a key dimension in its definitions. Suddenly my own efforts to understand the complicated culture of work are center stage, and I want to say thanks to Warren Susman for introducing me to the notion of an engaged history. At the same

time I can't resist the temptation to declare victory: women's history is more "serious" than you or I ever imagined.

These lessons were brought home to me sharply a few years ago. I had agreed to introduce my husband (who had never been to my part of Wales) to some of the memories of my childhood. We drove from the Cotswolds, through Hereford and the Wye Valley, stopping at some of the scenes of Ginsburg's raptures, to smell the grass and to watch the sheep. He was as taken with my captivating valleys as Ginsburg had been. I urged him impatiently forward. Come on, I said, it's not like this, wait till you see the slag heaps. It's all grey where I come from. Five more miles, then ten, and still green, a country I did not recognize. Through Abergavenny and down from Merthyr into Pontypridd. I was in my valley, and still it was green. Then the dawning recognition came: the slag heaps were covered with grass: the last of what had once been upwards of 3000 coal mines had been closed, and the European Economic Community had paid to turn what had been grey into green. The new hills marked the end of one set of contrasts forever obscuring the world that had fostered in Williams such clear vision. But they reminded this student of American culture that the search for historically specific cultural explanations is not always easy; that truth can be hidden by beauty as well as slag.