

FOREWORD · DAVID R. ROEDIGER

My first vivid memories of Jim Barrett, and of his wife Jenny, go back to the early 1970s and to a sadly underpopulated picket line in the parking lot of a small liquor store in the farm and university town of DeKalb, Illinois. The United Farm Workers had called for a boycott of Gallo wines and we gave what support we could—in this case a picket line of four people. There was plenty of time for our small group to talk, and a lot for me to like about Jim and Jenny. They were graduate students in history at Northern Illinois University, a department whose excellence resulted largely from a record of being willing to hire left scholars when other colleges hewed to Cold War exclusion based on politics. I was an undergraduate trying to balance sports with making the New Left last a little longer. Jim and Jenny, just slightly older, seemed to have access to the combination of ideas and action I sought. We were all lapsed, or lapsing, Catholics and, coming from working-class communities, we all gravitated toward labor causes, especially if racial justice were also involved.

Not too long after that picket line, the Barretts moved on to Warwick University in Coventry, England, where E. P. Thompson was a professor, and to the University of Pittsburgh, where Jim studied with David Montgomery. His recollections of those formative experiences, leavened by research on Thompson's enduring impact in working-class history, help to close this book. My decision to go to graduate school surely owed much to knowing radicals like the Barretts, who seemed in some general way to be like me.

The idea of doing history from the bottom up, so brilliantly actualized in Al Young's seminars at Northern Illinois, continued to animate large parts of what we endeavored to study. I set out to write about "slavery from the slave's point of view" under Sterling Stuckey's mentorship at Northwestern. Jim shared Montgomery's emphasis on the daily realities of the shopfloor,

and added textured analyses of immigrants' daily lives from his wonderful early studies (scarcely represented in this collection) of black and immigrant packinghouse workers.

However, as a Marxist, Barrett, like Montgomery, avoided any naïve supposition that history is ever made only from below. Class, according to Thompson, is above all “a relationship,” inconceivable without a study of how both labor and capital interact. Thus immigrant workers in Chicago’s Back of the Yards neighborhood and meatpacking plants Barrett studied resisted, but often within rhythms set by the relentless “disassembly line” whose demands he so well described. Similarly, “Americanization from the Bottom Up,” reprinted here and arguably the most influential and salutary article produced by his generation of labor historians, begins by describing the most dramatic of capital’s efforts to enforce Americanization from above. Barrett raises vital questions—“But what did it mean to be ‘Americanized,’ and who was fittest and best placed to do the Americanizing?”—and provides dialectical answers.

The rigor of his training at Pitt and Warwick committed Barrett to taking no shortcuts by presuming to know what working people must have thought or felt. Instead, history from below involved a diligent search for sources, including official sources read against the grain and illuminated not only by historical materialism but also through social science methods. His introductory call here for histories of the personal and the emotional characteristically begins with the problem of sources. Strikingly, even his highly personal recollections of his childhood neighborhood send him straight back to the historical record, producing a memoir with copious citations.

In teaching with Jim at the University of Illinois during the first fifteen years of this century, we sat on dozens of graduate and undergraduate thesis defenses together. I can remember just one where he did not urge the inclusion of more maps, underscoring a reminder that large class forces contend in concrete settings. By then I was so trained by his example that I did the urging. In his emphasis on particular settings, he was moving toward the accent on individual experiences and the inner lives of workers long before he began to advocate in print for emphasizing such matters.

I begin on the personal note of a forlorn picket line walked by young people nevertheless on fire about the movements they supported and the ideas they encountered for more than nostalgic reasons. It is worth recalling that the new labor history matured during a period of significant class conflict with hundreds of large strikes each year, and with smaller wildcat strikes underlining the combativeness of workers. Moreover—and Barrett’s accounts of his own coming to be a radical and a radical historian are most

instructive on this score—the African American freedom movement and other freedom struggles had shown that creative mass actions coming from below could transform social relations rapidly. The electric mobilizations against the U.S. war on Vietnam reflected and imparted a similar sensibility regarding the power of popular mobilizations. However, things changed greatly during our working lives. The percentage of organized workers in the labor force declined by more than half, and the number of large strikes sometimes now falls short of a dozen per year.

During the decades since the 1970s, the social weight of the labor movement has declined so starkly that the question of how creative and indefatigable scholars of the working-class past such as Barrett have sustained their commitments deserves attention. The first generation of the new labor historians—Montgomery, Herbert Gutman, Alexander Saxton, and George Rawick, for example—similarly came to maturity during periods of great promise, in the Age of the CIO and often specifically in the post–World War II strike waves. However, the decline of labor’s power which they experienced was less absolute and was interrupted by the rise of new working-class social movements and periods of militancy.

The late sixties and early seventies graduate student generations of labor historians faced—or rather experienced, as the subject of how we have navigated so long and hard a period of defeat has seldom been broached—a more challenging task of squaring youthful optimisms with hard times for workers and unions. To some extent this has also been true for labor history as a field. For a time, the idea that history moved in cycles provided some solace. Montgomery’s 1988 classic *The Fall of the House of Labor* ended in labor’s defeats of the 1920s, but everyone knew that the organizational successes of the 1930s and 1940s lay just around the corner. Our own “1920s,” however, have now lingered and worsened for more than four decades, with many proclamations of new beginnings but no way forward yet in sight.

For many of us, especially those already thinking along those lines since the activism of the 1960s, one response to the crisis of the U.S. labor movement and the significant white working-class vote for antilabor politicians was a search for the roots of labor’s weakness in white supremacy. As Barrett recounts here, he was positioned to embrace some of this critique, and we worked together on a series of essays building on his “Americanization from the Bottom Up” in order to consider how immigrants learned the racial system, what they made of it, and what it too often made of them.

Barrett’s particular processing of how to sustain the writing of radical history in a period of constrained possibilities took broader forms, however.

It bears emphasis that here too setting mattered. In central Illinois, Barrett was able to participate directly in perhaps the most significant, militant, and extended set of class battles of the recent past, the “War Zone” lockouts and strikes, centered in Decatur’s Caterpillar, Firestone, and Staley factories in the early 1990s. The University of Illinois has also been the scene of impressive and protracted organizing campaigns and conflict, resulting in representation for graduate student workers and adjunct faculty and ongoing efforts by professional employees and tenured/tenure-track faculty. Jim and Jenny Barrett were and are at the center of each of these efforts. Most recently, their son Xian’s prominent role in the grassroots organizing of the Chicago Teachers Union has brought the Barretts to another high spot of recent working-class mobilization.

The writings collected in *History from the Bottom Up and the Inside Out* suggest how one leading historian has not only kept the faith during a long period of labor’s decline but also rethought the boundaries of working-class history. The very structure of the book reflects this process. Although only one of the selections is completely new, many are so fully revised that they appear new to those of us who read them as they were published, or even drafted. The revisions help develop themes that make the various sections of the collection cohere. But those themes are often ones that only emerged as Barrett wrestled with questions over time. For example, his early work with the immigrant communist Steve Nelson might fairly be regarded as a rather straightforward collaboration of the Old Left and the New. As such it was partly animated by a desire to find a useful past and, in anticommunism, a reason for the decline of working-class militancy.

At the same time, the personal mattered, not the least in Barrett’s seeing something of his own desires for a better world in the lives and risks of communists like Nelson and unrepentant ex-communists like David Montgomery. Perhaps the most salutary aspect of the revisionist accounts of the history of U.S. communism that Barrett helped to forward was a break from the Cold War practices identified by Vivian Gornick. Historians of communism, Gornick wrote, had long enforced “an oppressive distance between themselves and their subjects,” and that distance was emotional as well as political. In acknowledging a kinship in sensibilities, if not in political line, with their subjects, young left historians of communism opened exciting new terrain. It might even be argued—Jim and I have probably argued about this—that seeing the humanity and hopes of those attracted to communism actually deepens our appreciation of the toll that Stalinism exacted.

The recent and revised writings included here on the communists also take on larger questions. Confronting the radical sadness running through the life of William Z. Foster, the subject of a superb biography by Barrett, doubtless contributed to his emerging emphasis on accounting for private and emotional lives on the left. Characteristically attuned to sources, and especially to the silences in communists' autobiographies, Barrett nevertheless finds much, especially in memoirs of women militants, reflecting on some aspects of gender and personal matters. Being on the right side of large structural processes of history hardly guarantees victories in the struggle for personal happiness. This realization in turn has helped to generate Barrett's challenging call for new histories of what he terms, after Robert Orsi, the "inner history" of ordinary people—a history taking the individual as seriously as it does the global.

During the late 1970s and 1980s Jim and I met mostly in Chicago, where I studied and then taught, and where he visited for family and research reasons. One of the old-time characters we both knew was Fred Thompson, longtime historian of and organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Fred, who was fond of saying that he was "just as old as the century," came to a number of academic presentations on working-class history, especially those held at Chicago's Newberry Library. He often digressed, telling stories that he, and I, regarded as important and entertaining. Others were less convinced. I came to regard how university-based historians related to Fred as something of a litmus test for how much I was likely to get along with them. Jim never showed the impatience that sometimes greeted Fred's interventions.

Thompson provides useful points of entry to two themes that Barrett pursues here. When the old Chicago-based socialist publisher Charles H. Kerr Company, on whose board Fred and I both sat, considered bringing out the autobiography of the radical organizer, painter, and writer Arne Swabeck, Fred surprised and even disappointed me. Swabeck, a Danish immigrant ten years Fred's senior, had serially and sometimes simultaneously been part of the IWW, the Socialist Party, and U.S. Communist, Trotskyist, and Maoist parties. A delegate to the workers' council running Seattle during the 1919 general strike, he was in Moscow during early Soviet rule. His memoirs certainly did not break far from the overemphasis on political matters that Barrett identifies, but they had their moments of sharp, extended personal observations, including notes on the personalities of early Soviet leaders. Before the Internet, we at Kerr passed around the same printed copy of the

manuscript. My look came after Fred's, and I found that he had carefully crossed out almost everything that I found interesting and adventuresome. His reasoning followed along the lines that Barrett identifies as running through communist autobiography—class forces mattered, and individual personalities not so much. Fred in person was endlessly interesting, deeply curious, and at times wildly funny. He was as far from a Stalinist as anyone on the left. And yet he too thought broad structural explanations precluded an interest in things that would have fascinated him in everyday life. Barrett is probably right that such dynamics affect history writing as a whole insofar as academics, Marxist or not, pursuing explanations of historical process are tempted to minimize “inner history.”

Fred Thompson also affords an opportunity to give flesh to the “working-class cosmopolitan” at the center of the one selection written expressly for this volume. Like many old-timers whom Jim would know, Fred was as likely to quote, at length and from memory, Shelley or Burns as he was Marx. He likewise broke into song at the drop of a hat, drawing on a pretty extensive repertoire. With a high school education, he edited newspapers, wrote books, led publishing ventures, and taught at the IWW's Work People's College. One healthy aspect of my early university career was that I was steadily surrounded at the Kerr Company by self-taught working-class intellectuals who knew far more about labor history—not to mention art, literature, music, dance, and politics—than I did. I would not have thought to call them cosmopolitans, but that's just what they were. Fred was educated in Canada and the United States, in boxcars and at San Quentin, by participants in the Knights of Labor and the world's revolutions. For a time David Montgomery was such a figure, though with college in his background; so too was labor folklorist Archie Green before a return to school later in life. The leading student of race in early America, Ted Allen, dropped out of college in record time and made his breakthroughs as a working-class cosmopolitan and militant. The most insightful student of social relations on the shopfloor, Stan Weir, did likewise. Sometimes the world came to working-class cosmopolitans, as with Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer. Barrett shows well the resources on which such working-class cosmopolitans drew and the ways in which they themselves functioned as a resource.

On reading Jim's new classic article on working-class cosmopolitans, I had a brief feeling that his earlier classic on Americanization from the bottom up had also provoked—a “Why didn't I think of that?” moment. The topics seemed absolutely familiar to me, both from the documents many of us have studied and from people I've known since growing up. The autobiographical

selections in *History from the Bottom Up and the Inside Out* suggest that Jim had a jump on most scholars, experiencing the working-class intellectual first in his own household in the person of an older brother. But as is so often the case in the wonderful collection you are reading, Barrett mixed experience with study and discipline to produce profound insights. He recognized the working-class cosmopolitan in his studies of the relationship of Hutchins Hapgood, the much-traveled, Harvard-educated anarchist with the radical woodworker and “blue-collar cosmopolitan” Anton Johannsen, whom Hapgood came to know and admire.

In a still larger sense, the exemplary work sampled here is the product of persistent commitment—when picket lines had four pickets or four hundred, and when archives yielded much about working people and when they did not—joined to impatient desires to find better ways to understand and to act.

LAWRENCE, KANSAS

SEPTEMBER 2015