

BOOK REVIEW

Yates, Michael D. 2009. *In and Out of the Working Class*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring. ISBN 9781894037358. Paperback: 19.95 CAD. Pages: 170.

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In and Out of the Working Class weaves Yates' own personal story as a working class kid and college professor into a larger critical examination of working class life in the United States, the failures of its conventional education system, and the still pressing need to link class analysis to the practical knowledge of its working people. The book amounts to 'a life' very examined – and what a story it tells. He writes of his grandparents and parents growing up in desperately poor working class communities. He chronicles his own upbringing in industrial America. He goes into detail about how he was changed by his college education and later transformed into a radical by trying to reconcile his own working class background with teaching undergraduates about an economics that seemed irrelevant to 1960s America. And he recounts his growing disillusionment with academe in the 1980s and his desire to reconnect with the working people who desperately want to learn. Yet these stories are not merely biography because Yates never loses sight of the larger sociological class reality that they are embedded within. There is much here of value to those who want to understand working class communities and find a way to link them back to radical politics.

First, Yates is a talented writer who constructs moving accounts of working class life. He manages to capture the vulnerability of working people in the United States, without romanticizing them or neglecting the twin blights of racism and patriotism. His narrative-styled accounts of his parents, written as if from their perspective, captures the excitement of their initial adult life choices while highlighting the narrowness of the social contexts shaping their choices. For instance, in 'Bud: My Father' his dad is excited to take up a job at the glass factory after WWII, determined after his war experience not be pushed around. But his sense of hope and opportunity quickly fades. For Yates, America's working class struggles to make choices in the spaces that define their immediate existence, usually unaware that a broader set of choices may exist at all. Indeed, Yates'

portrait of working class communities is one typically marked by ignorance, fear and silences – ignorance of the larger world and other classes, fear of retribution by one's social betters (bosses, teachers, authority figures in general), and silence about whatever social problems one's family may be having.

Second, Yates takes up his exploration in a number of distinct forms. Many pieces are vignettes: episodes that illustrate some point about racism, or class power, or teaching. Others are sweeping and demonstrate Yates' skill in synthesizing complex and difficult ideas. In 'Class: A Personal Story' Yates crafts an amazing one chapter summary of the strengths of and challenges to working class consciousness, given its often contradictory roots and paths. Starting from the company town where he was born, the larger industrial town he grew up in, to his own eventual conversion to the professional middle class as a professor, Yates describes how living classed lives creates the space for a kind of working class solidarity, but also how it can weaken working people through personal doubt and self loathing. He notes how stratification can offer individual solutions as some move up the class ladder, and race, gender and jingoism weaken possible class alliances. And even when workers do move forward, as in the aftermath of WWII, he notes how the state can respond with policies like suburban mortgage loans to channel aspirations back into acceptable channels. Even what working people do for their children to help them get ahead ends up breaking the bonds of working class solidarity as they move into the middle class and can no longer communicate or identify with their parents. This is a sympathetic yet not uncritical portrait of the working class and the deep, difficult challenges they face in creating a class response to their condition.

The book is divided into five sections that mirror Yates own experience and development. Sections I and II, 'Growing Up Working Class' and 'The Seeds of Consciousness,' reflect on his working class roots, upbringing, and the experiences that moved him to ask questions about just why the world seemed ordered as it was. Sections III and IV, 'The Workaday World' and 'Alienation and Redemption,' offer biting analysis of the failure of higher education, and education in general, to foster critical thinking, both from the perspective of a student and a teacher. These pieces also touch on the value of work, and how unsatisfying work is so soul destroying. The two themes came together for the author, a longtime lecturer in economics at a state college, when he realized that redemption, for him, would only come with giving up on higher education in favour of teaching workers directly through labour education programs and offering

classes in political economy to convicts in prison. Finally, Section V, 'Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will,' wraps up the book with a penetrating essay, 'Removing the Veil,' that clearly sets out the basics of where power is in capitalism and what kind of power a worker has in relation to the boss.

In style, the contributions here take a number of forms: fiction, non-fiction, and fictionalized accounts of real events. The fictional pieces (e.g. 'The Year of the Strike,' 'The Demonstration') try to capture the complexity of political choices, but these often pale in comparison to the non-fiction accounts that they are clearly modelled on. This may be less a comment on the quality of Yates' attempts at fiction than simply a recognition of the more direct power of his non-fiction efforts. A strong exception is his 'creative non-fiction' account of working with Cesar Chavez, where in story form he skilfully underlines the contradictions often inherent in poor people's movements, namely, that powerful external enemies and situations can require strong leaders, but these same leaders can weaken the democratic elements needed to keep the movement dynamic.

In and Out of the Working Class joins a growing field of what might be dubbed 'working class studies,' an academic subgenre that explicitly privileges studying class as an experience rather than a position in a class structure or set of class relations. But it doesn't quite fit in because Yates refuses to accept such a dichotomy. Any number of contributions from this book would make a great addition to a class reading list, or just good reading for the general public or activist interested in the working class.