The British Working-Class in the Twentieth Century: Film, Literature and Television (review)

Jon Lawrence

Enterprise & Society, Volume 12, Number 4, December 2011, pp. 912-914 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press

John Kirk. *The British Working-Class in the Twentieth Century: Film, Literature and Television*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009. viii + 224 pp. ISBN 978-0-7083-2190-4, £24.88 (paper).

It has to be said that the title of this book is a little misleading, especially if you fail adequately to register its subtitle. For this is primarily a critical analysis of cultural representations of the British working class in the 1980s and 1990s. Only the first chapter deals with the period before Margaret Thatcher's election victory in 1979, and that too is concerned specifically with how we should read a range of classic representations of the working class in literature and to a lesser extent film. Throughout Kirk's approach is resolutely that of cultural studies, with the author particularly strongly influenced by the work of Raymond Williams and by the Gramscian-influenced Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies during its heyday under Stuart Hall. To be fair, the first historical chapter is substantial—at over forty pages—and draws out some nice comparisons between the literature of poverty and unemployment that predominated in the 1930s, and the literature of "affluence" that flourished two decades later. The landmarks are mostly familiar—Greenwood, Orwell, Brierley, Jones for the 1930s; Braine, Delaney, and Sillitoe for the 1950s, but the treatments are often fresh and insightful. Kirk also explores some less well-trodden paths, with notably sharp discussions of John Summerfield's *May Day* (1936) and Colin MacInnes's *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959). But as a historian I struggle with an approach that appears confined solely to the classification of different cultural representations according to their essential ideological purpose. We are told that

Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* was most popular at the time and has endured most successfully because it is "more acceptable to the dominant culture and its literary institutions, recuperable to a liberal reading which robs its narrative of any oppositional class discourse" [51]. Kirk has a point, Greenwood's brand of moralized, "reformist" socialism, was very different from the self-consciously agit-prop class-conscious propaganda associated with writers influenced by the ethos of the postwar Communist Party of Great Britain. But rather than simply judge it as therefore less "adequate," it would be more interesting to explore the cultural and political forces that shaped the sensibility of so many would-be "proletarian" writers who, like Greenwood, came from socialist families steeped in the peculiar traditions of Britain's ethical socialist revival of the 1880s and 1890s. And if one does want to spend time judging a work's "adequacy," is proximity to an a priori model of "correct" class politics really that useful? One might wish to ask which representations tell us most about actual, rather than idealized, working-class "structures of feeling," which deal best with the complexity and diversity of working-class life as lived, and so on. One might even want to ask old-fashioned questions about idiom and style. I teach a Special Subject on class between the wars, and Greenwood and Lawrence are usually the most writers, but this is because students find them the most stimulating and enjoyable to read. Many baulk at the same political subtexts that Kirk decries, but they see beyond them.

First published in hardback in 2003 under the different title *Twentieth-Century Writing and the British Working Class*, the book is most concerned with analyzing cultural responses to the radical defeat of the working class (or rather the author's vision of the working class) with the shift to radical right, neoliberal government after 1979. Over four substantial chapters, Kirk surveys how writers such as Pat Barker, Alan Bleasedale, Tony Harrison, Barry Hines, and James Kelman have sought to make sense of the destruction of "traditional" working-class communities and their value systems by the accelerated pace of deindustrialization under Thatcherism and its heirs. Again Kirk's readings are generally astute and sensitive. He is alive to the subtle interactions of class and gender in accounts from this period—exploring how writers such as Pat Barker have sought to restore working-class women's distinctive voices to the narrative of class struggle—a voice too often silenced in earlier socialist fiction. Kirk's focus is deliberately confined to those who purport to be able to speak for "the working class"—insisting that subaltern experiences and values should be heard not just as authentic "testimony," but as powerful counterblasts to an apparently hegemonic market. Strongly

wedded to his own collectivist vision of the working class, Kirk would have no truck with the argument that British workers pioneered the triumph of a populist variant of liberal individualism in the 1980s, no truck with sociologist Ray Pahl's contemporary argument, based on his intensive ethnographic study of the predominantly working-class Isle of Sheppey, that individualism and privatism ran deep in the English working class, and that solidarity had been an instrumental strategy born of necessity, and now happily put aside by most workers (*Divisions of Labour*, 1984). Arguably, Kirk's politicized model of class leads him to exaggerate working-class decline in late modern Britain. The number of manual workers may have more than halved since 1979, and socialism may have suffered a great reversal, but the proportion of Britons who self-identify as "working class" has barely changed. As Kirk argues, class still matters, but we need to recognize its fluidity—its lack of fixity: "Class is complex, class changes, class is multi-dimensional" [28]. The fact that most Britons still mobilize languages of class to negotiate social difference, especially unequal power relationships, underscores the force of his claim. It is a great tragedy that Kirk's premature death at the age of 53 has robbed us of his powerful voice championing the relevance of a humane, politically engaged class analysis.

Jon Lawrence
University of Cambridge

doi: 10.1093/es/khr006

Advance Access publication February 15, 2011