ATOM BOMBS, UNIONS, AND SOCIAL HISTORY

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I think all of us have had our academic careers shaped to one degree or another by experiences and events outside of the academy as much as by intellectual exchanges within it. This has certainly been the case with me. Many of my defining experiences took place in settings very different from those of educational institutions. Moreover, some of them seem to have developed out of sheer chance. For a male born in the United States in the year 1927, the month in which you were born was of critical importance. If you had arrived early in that year, you were likely to have a few months of basic training and then be sent to some massive wave infantry action in either Europe or the Pacific. Because I was born in December, the war was over when I was drafted. Indeed, I was one of the last people to be taken by the World War II draft before it was ended.

My basic training ended shortly after Winston Churchill’s famous “iron curtain” speech. An officer then came before my unit and asked if any of us were willing to be assigned to a secret mission somewhere in the United States. That question made all of our ears perk up. As any of you who have been in the military know, there is an unwritten soldiers’ rule that one should never volunteer for anything. At this point in the spring of 1946, however, all of us also knew that British forces had already started bombing in Sumatra as an opening battle in an effort to help the Dutch retake Indonesia, which had declared independence the previous fall. None of us soldiers wanted to be sent to die for the Dutch empire. So, many hands went up, volunteering for that secret mission. Next thing you know, I was on a bus winding its way up mountain roads of New Mexico toward Los Alamos.

There I volunteered a second time, when a warrant officer asked if any of us newly arrived soldiers had ever worked in a radio station. I had never done so in my life, but the prospect was too good to pass up. Within a few days I had been taken on as an announcer and control operator by station KRS of the Armed Forces Radio Service. The station was designed to broadcast only within The Hill, as we called Los Alamos (although once in a while we would get some comment on a program from someone as far away as Hawaii). It was through that job that I really got to know the diverse community of Los Alamos. There were programs at various parts of the day and evening directed at various segments of the community. The evening broadcast, Music of the Masters, was then run by scientists on a voluntary basis, and working with that program I came to know many members of the scientific community.

The spring of 1946 turned out to be a critical time for many scientists, because when I had joined the KRS staff Louis Slotin had just died from radiation. Slotin was a Canadian, one of whose tasks was to assemble the critical mass of fissionable mate-
rial for a bomb, as he had done for the famous first three bombs. The job was still done Rube Goldberg style. Slotin literally spooned the material into two hemispheres until indicators showed that their combined contents had reached critical mass. In the spring of 1946 he made a misstep and unleashed a fatal dose of radiation. Slotin quickly took a screw driver and jerked the two sections apart, stopping any further nuclear action and thus preventing anyone else in the room from being killed. He returned to his office, finished some paper work and went to the hospital to check in to die.¹

He survived ten more days. During those days The Hill’s scientific community experienced an extraordinary moral crisis. Unlike the soldiers, who had no choice but to be where we had been sent, scientists (especially those who were well known in their fields) could pick up the telephone and call some university to announce their availability for an appointment. There were three reasons for the moral crisis and the many abrupt departures. First, Slotin was well known and well liked among his peers, who considered his actions heroic. Second, the terrible accident raised the question of why it had taken place at all. Why, nine months after Japan’s surrender, had the production of new bombs never slowed down enough even to permit mechanization of this assembly process? Instead of the famous three bombs of 1945, there was now material on hand for quick assembly of at least 24. That realization led readily to the final question: what are we doing here anyhow? Within a few months all the scientists with whom I had worked on Music of the Masters had departed, while the FBI systematically interrogated virtually everyone who remained on The Hill—including many soldiers—trying to learn what was happening.

The moral questions raised by Slotin’s death inspired several members of the Association of Los Alamos Scientists (forerunner of the Association of Atomic Scientists) to use the studios of KRS to record a series of radio broadcasts about the atomic bomb. Most notable among them was Philip Morrison. A close friend of Slotin’s, Morrison and his colleagues decided to instruct the public about what atomic bombs were and what should be done with them. They revealed no secrets. The technical information they explained had already been made public the previous summer in the Smyth Report, which had been authorized and released by the Truman administration after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.²

In these broadcasts Morrison and his colleagues drew upon the Smyth report with hopes of explaining to American voters what such a weapon meant for the world and how its dangers to humanity might be curtailed. They made a series of about a dozen programs, transcribed for possible distribution to radio stations around the country. Those programs had an enormous influence on my life. While the scientists spoke, I was sitting on the other side of the studio’s window, operating the controls that inscribed their words on the large, slowly revolving transcription disks. That is how I got my basic education in nuclear physics and also on what was going on politically in the world at that time. The Association of Los Alamos Scientists had a
two-point program. The first point was that the government should keep all nuclear activity out of the control of private industry. The second was that any mechanisms that could be used for war purposes had to be kept out of the hands of any sovereign state and turned over instead to the newly formed United Nations.

I must confess that – whatever their views about their earlier mission in creating the deadly weapon – the scientists I encountered at Los Alamos exhibited more social conscience than any other large group of scholars I have ever encountered. Certainly Morrison epitomized that virtue. To the best of my knowledge, however, no other radio station in America ever played those programs. They were simply too hot to handle. So, I was not only the recording engineer for the programs but almost their entire audience.

Some eight months later, Congressional adoption and Truman’s signing of the McMahon Act transferred Los Alamos from military to civilian control. I was discharged “for the convenience of the government,” and so remained at the greatly enlarged station KRS until September as a civilian employee. During the intervening months enthusiasm for world federalism swept the ranks of The Hill’s remaining scientists. Even Edward Teller (who later proudly accepted the title ‘father of the fusion bomb’) adopted the discourse of world government. He and I were both among those who addressed a large meeting on the subject at the Los Alamos high school, which was chaired by Enrico Fermi.

In the Fall I returned to Swarthmore College, where I had already completed one year of studies before entering the army. Among the students at that Quaker college were many highly politicized military veterans of World War II. The vets made Swarthmore’s seminar system especially stimulating. These grown men and women, many of whom had been through hell, were certainly not going to be intimidated by any professor. Almost all of them were intensely concerned with the future of the world, and their attention was directed especially toward the victory of Britain’s Labour Party, the far-reaching political program adopted in 1946 by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the creation of the state of Israel, ending segregation at home, the Marshall Plan, and political developments in Czechoslovakia, where, for all too brief a time, there appeared a possibility that communism and democracy might blend. Swarthmore’s honors seminars were unforgettable: in any group of eight students there were likely to be at least six different political and philosophical positions. In my dormitory there was a large room where we veterans would drink coffee until about midnight, before loading carbons in our typewriters to hammer out our papers for discussion the following day.

In this exciting intellectual atmosphere there were also a few teachers who really stand out in my mind. Wolfgang Stolper led a provocative economic theory seminar. Among the diverse and often conflicting approaches to the economy that we studied (Schumpeter, Marx, Mill, Hayek, etc.) was the first textbook based on Keynesian theory, just published by Paul Samuelson. Equally challenging was a seminar in political
theory led by J. Roland Pennock, a rather more conservative scholar, but one whose
commitment to J.S. Mill’s On Liberty was so consistent that he encouraged each of us
to think and speak for ourselves.

Pennock was subsequently responsible for getting me a Woodrow Wilson
Fellowship. On the day after I had finished the honors examinations, Pennock came
over to where I was sitting on the lawn and asked if I would like to go to graduate
school. Frankly, I had never given the matter much thought. He quickly added that
he had taken it upon himself to put me in for the Woodrow Wilson, and that one
had been awarded to me. In those days the fellowship was so lucrative that it allowed
me to cross the Atlantic twice before enjoying a comfortable and instructive year
at a university.

My original intention had been to enter the London School of Economics, in
hopes of studying with Harold Laski. On my way to London, however, three things
happened to change my mind. First, on the ship crossing the Atlantic I met my future
wife. We have been together ever since. Second, I travelled by way of Prague to attend
the 1950 congress of the International Union of Students, and there I had some direct
experience with the Communist world. Third, the United States had just gone to war
in Korea. Although my previous service had left me no longer eligible for the draft, it
was clear that the war’s impact on American political life would be severe and opposed
to everything many of my fellow vets and I had campaigned for. The total demise of
the CIO’s 1946 program under the impact of McCarthyism and the CIO’s expulsion
of its own left wing rapidly narrowed the range of political debate and persuaded me
that I belonged in my own beleaguered country, not in England. I reversed course, ap-
plied for and (thanks to my Woodrow Wilson) was immediately granted admission
to graduate study in political science and sociology at Columbia University.

This was not only an age of political repression, but also a period in which the size
and importance of higher education in the United States was expanding prodigiously,
thanks not only to the GI Bill but also to government funding often appropriated by
way of the State Department and the Pentagon. The convergence of rapid university
growth and a narrowing political and intellectual environment fostered among social
scientists a new consensus called modernization theory. It envisaged only one path
that world development could take. At Columbia the profound influence of Daniel
Bell shaped our classes around the notion that any talk of social class was obsolete,
while the important ideological division provoked by modernization arose between
cosmopolitan elites and parochial, often backward-looking, publics.

Thinking along these lines dominated historical writing and especially sociology
by the time I entered Columbia. I encountered one great exception: Franz L. Neu-
mann. He was a refugee from Germany who had a simply extraordinary grasp of the
many-faceted history of political theory. He almost convinced me to stay in the aca-
demic world as a political scientist. But, I must confess, my other classes at Columbia
were so dull and narrowly constructed that I dropped out of the university after only
one year and left even Neumann behind.
Hoping to help rescue some of what the labor movement had stood for in 1946, I went to work in various shops in New York, initially as a machine operative. Over the course of time I began to master more and more of the machinist's art, while I became a shop chairman and executive board member of United Electrical Workers (UE) Local 475, a multi plant local based primarily in Brooklyn. My schooling on those jobs and in that union were to influence my thinking for many years to come. I found experienced (and often beleaguered) union activists, among them some members of the Communist Party, to be often undogmatic and imaginative. They taught me how to listen to others in the workplace and to carry on the work of the union despite the constant assaults to which it was then subject. Local 475 became my new training ground. As is often forgotten today, union ranks in manufacturing continued to grow through much of the 1950s despite the hostile political environment, and union members proved to be collectively assertive on the job itself, if not in the political arena. That assertiveness was encouraged by the fact that during the 1950s it was relatively difficult for employers to fire unionized workers, except on explicitly political grounds.

Later in that decade I left New York for reasons that had nothing to do with either politics or the study of history. I was still basically a country boy. I wanted to be able to open the door and let the children run outside. My wife and I decided to move to Minnesota. On my first day in St. Paul I went to the U.S. Employment Service, which turned out to be very different from its counterpart in New York. In New York the USES tended to deal primarily with the dregs of jobs. Minnesota's social democratic tradition was reflected in the fact that many companies listed their better jobs with the USES. When I told a clerk about my machine-shop experience, he sent me off to Minneapolis Honeywell, where I got hired as a turret lathe hand that very day. My family soon also found a comfortable duplex and settled into life in the Twin Cities.

Working at Minneapolis Honeywell confirmed my impressions of American workers during the fifties. The largest local union in the state had organized Honeywell's workers during the war, initially into the UE. The Cold War had persuaded the Local's officers to quit the UE, institute their own internal Red purge, and ultimately affiliate with the Teamsters (IBT). Nevertheless, the workers' level of self-assertion remained high. The company had every production job under time and motion study, so that each task had fixed daily quotas to be filled (providing me the lessons on modern workplace management for which my later writings became well known). If one of us workers had a grievance, however, all members of the department would run exactly 10 percent of their particular quotas, until supervisors had resolved the grievance. I sometimes thought the whole practice was a conspiracy sponsored by the Coca Cola Company, because when we were working slowly, the Coke machines were operating intensely.

Jack Metzgar’s book Striking Steel has captured this epoch well. It is based on Metzgar’s conversations with his steel-worker father in Ohio. True, pervasive anti-
communism made political discourse difficult, though bold demonstrations in the South had begun to make civil rights a subject of vigorous lunch-hour debate among northern white workers. Nevertheless, working people still had a sense of group power when they were dealing with issues close at hand.

My involvement in this community came to a close at the end of the fifties. The economic downturn of 1957-60, which President Eisenhower called "a rolling readjustment," rolled me out of Honeywell, along with everyone else in my building (the 29th street plant). The company simply closed that pesky portion of its massive works. Over the next couple of years I went from job to job, though ironically my income actually improved slightly. I knew the trade, never went more than two or three working days between jobs, and every place I was hired was working overtime, usually on military contracts. As soon as a company had filled a particular contract, however, it laid people off.

It was in that context of constant turnover that the FBI effectively put me on its blacklist and warned employers that I was a subversive. Thanks to their diligence I was finally forced out of the machinist trade in the Twin Cities. Fortunately for me, after having been turned away from half a dozen positions, I applied to a very small machine shop, whose owner asked for no references but simply had me make some parts as a test. He found the parts met specifications, quibbled a bit about hourly salary, and then took me on.

That small shop was my refuge. It was also evident, however, that working at night, often with only one other person in the shop, I had been effectively isolated from the region's labor movement, and from its public life in general. Clearly, I needed occupational retraining. So, I applied to graduate school in history at the University of Minnesota.

Meanwhile, while still a machinist, I had written my first published history article. The person who made that publication possible was Meridel Le Sueur, an extraordinary writer who had herself been effectively blacklisted among major publishers at the time, but who still wrote children's stories, which she would sometimes try out on my youngsters. Le Sueur noticed that public celebrations of the one hundredth anniversary of Minnesota's statehood (in 1958) were conspicuously lacking in commemorations of its workers and farmers. To remedy that absence she gathered a group of people, mostly veterans of the previous generation's political struggles, to write a volume which was ultimately entitled The People Together. I volunteered to write a research piece on the Great Northern Railroad strike of 1894. The victory of Eugene V. Debs' American Railway Union in that region-wide strike, ultimately mediated by none other than the grain milling magnate Charles A. Pillsbury, galvanized the hostility of other railroad executives and paved the way for the decisive Pullman Boycott of the same year. Although I had drawn my material almost exclusively from regional newspapers, writing that essay did reorient my interests toward historical research.
After I had enrolled in the University of Minnesota it took me less than four years to earn both an MA and a PhD. I could not afford to dawdle, with two energetic sons in elementary school and my night job as a machinist our only source of income. (I later learned from a professor who befriended me that the history department had considered me too old to be worthy of a teaching fellowship). Moreover, little more than a year had passed before my employer sold his patents to a larger corporation and went out of business. By that point, however, the journal Forest History had taken me on as an assistant editor and the History Department had asked me to teach several night courses on my own.

I had reentered the academic world at an exciting time. Visible cracks in the kind of closed thinking that had dominated the 1950s were beginning to emerge in the historians’ profession and especially at the University of Wisconsin. That institution attracted radical students, especially from New York. Most of them were drawn to diplomatic history, as taught by William Appleman Williams, but others were interested primarily in the history of popular movements and popular culture. Among them were Herbert Gutman and Ira Berlin, with both of whom it was later my privilege to be closely associated.

New writings from Europe, especially from Britain and France, were also reshaping the way some of us thought about the history of working people. The most influential among the historians involved was E.P. Thompson, whose masterpiece *The Making of the English Working Class* first appeared in 1963. Like many of his colleagues, Thompson had been a member of the Communist Party until the late 1950s, but had come to reject its style of history, which depicted the industrial revolution as having not only impoverished the working class but also obliterated its pre-industrial customs and beliefs, paving the way for a vanguard party to lead toward a revolutionary consciousness—or to mislead them away from such consciousness. Thompson broke with that fixation on vanguards and directed his research toward the study of working people’s own cultures, customs, and styles of action. His influence inspired countless other scholars to reframe their own research.

My encounter with graduate study at Minnesota was fortunate in more ways than one. Although my primary interest was in labor history and no one offered a course in such a subject at the university, I was taken on as an advisee by David Noble, whose own specialties were intellectual history and the history of the American South. After considering my age (roughly the same as his) and experience, Noble declared that I should chart my own course of studies, and he would sign the appropriate papers. One day while I was perusing library shelves, I encountered a group of Republican Party pamphlets from the Presidential election of 1872. What I found in those tracts bore little resemblance to any descriptions of President Grant’s reelection campaign that I had ever encountered in a class. An issue featured in the literature was the eight-hour day. The pamphlets celebrated the party’s support for what was then the foremost demand of the newly-formed National Labor Union. In the Spring of 1872
a series of overlapping strikes waged by some 100,000 workers in New York City demanded and often won an eight-hour limit on their workdays (only to lose it again during the depression that began the next year). Republican literature emphasized the party’s support in Congress since 1867 for legislation establishing an eight-hour day for federal employees. Moreover, it entitled Senator Henry Wilson, who had recently been nominated for vice-president on Grant’s ticket, the “Father of the Eight-Hour Day,” because Wilson had instituted the shorter work day in his own Massachusetts shoe factory.

Because standard treatments of the history of the Republican Party during that period featured (among its admirers) its support for African-Americans’ civil and political rights and (mostly among its denigrators) its promotion of tariff protection and banking legislation to promote American manufacturing, I decided to investigate political and social impact of labor struggles during the intense and sometimes bloody controversies over post-Civil War reconstruction policy. Needless to say, the topic turned out to be considerable more complex than the election pamphlets had suggested. Nevertheless, that investigation provided the basis for my doctoral dissertation and later for my first book, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872*. It also drove home to me the decisive importance of research in primary documents—a lesson that was subsequently to shape the manner in which I taught both graduate students and undergraduates.

Another element of my good fortune was that I went on the job market at a moment when universities’ demand for new historians was bountiful. Able to choose among several attractive offers, I decided in 1963 to join the History Department at the University of Pittsburgh, where a diverse and exciting group of young scholars had been assembled under the chairmanship of Samuel P. Hays. There I published my first book, then turned my attention to the American working classes of the early nineteenth century, and within a decade had been joined by a truly remarkable group of graduate students.

My own education took on a new configuration in 1967, when I was invited by the new University of Warwick in England to join E.P. Thompson for two years, helping to launch its Centre for Social History. Pitt generously granted me the necessary leave of absence. The appointment turned out to be an extraordinarily enlightening opportunity for me. In the first place, it allowed me to work day in and day out with Thompson and with other members of the department, shaping and conducting the seminars we were teaching and library collections we were building. Second, the university was only in its second year of operation when I arrived, and all members of the department participated in designing its courses, requirements, and examinations from scratch. Virtually all the British members of the faculty had come out of Oxford or Cambridge, but most of them were determined not to recreate the practices of those institutions. Consequently we devoted more time and careful thought to pedagogy than I have ever experienced anywhere else. The more conser-
ervative members of the department forthrightly and creatively contributed their own views to such debates, rather than simply rejecting those of their more radical colleagues. Moreover, we conducted our discussions in the context of the student revolts of the late 1960s. When students raised demands for curriculum revision, Warwick did not respond with either of the courses of action so common elsewhere: calling out the police or simply yielding. Instead we organized teach-ins, evaluated the demands together (and often through intense controversy), and together decided on the most promising responses.

Finally, during my years at Warwick I began my participation in a social history colloquium which continued to meet for a decade, mostly in Paris but at times in England and once in Pittsburgh. The colloquium gave me a chance to exchange thoughts with an outstanding group of scholars. Prominent among them was Georges Haupt, whose influence strongly reinforced my own penchants for archival research and for international perspectives.

Haupt had been born to Jewish parents in Romania, but had moved to France by the time I met him. He had been transported to Auschwitz when he was a teenager, but while a prisoner there had joined the Communist Party and ultimately survived the Holocaust. When he returned to Romania, party leaders had sent him to Moscow for higher education, at the conclusion of which he was put in charge of his country's historical society. Haupt displayed the legendary Eastern European gift for languages. Finding his own views increasingly at odds with those of the party's leaders in academia, he fled to France, where he put that gift to good use in bringing a global perspective to the study of history in his new homeland. A crucial feature of Haupt's research and influence was to be found in his ardent devotion to archival research. Look up his name in any good library and you will see one important collection of documents after another. Some collections illuminated parts of the world to which French and other historians had previously devoted little attention. Others permitted their users to reexamine crucial portions of the history of the socialist and communist movements that had become encrusted with official party cant. My intellectual contact with him continued until his untimely death.6

My years at Warwick also provided me with yet another, and quite a different type of experience. The Coventry region was still the center of England's automobile industry. Many local manufacturers were then introducing a new payment system called “measured day work.” Ever since British metal manufacturers had defeated the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (machinists union) in the historic strike of 1897-8, they had substituted piece-work payment for standard daily wage rates, over the workers' futile protests. When new piece rates were announced, the few workers directly involved in the particular operation in question stood alone against the decisive power of the company. But after World War II the industry's workers had become solidly unionized and also represented on the job by elected shop stewards. Under these conditions, the balance of power had been reversed: now each new job rate the
company might try to introduce, even for just few people, had to meet the approval of representatives of the whole body of employees. Individual workers’ actual earnings rose substantially above the standard rates fixed in national contracts. In response, the employers now sought to abolish piece work and replace that practice with standard wages coupled to fixed output quotas for each individual task (akin to what I had encountered at Minneapolis Honeywell).

Shop stewards from different companies around the region met frequently, often in large conferences, to discuss the best response to this innovation. They knew that the new pay system had been imported from the United States, and they learned that a Yank, experienced with a similar practice, was at Warwick. So, I was invited to address one shop stewards’ conference after another. While I offered what advice I could, I also started rethinking my own experience from the 1950s, and soon was inspired to investigate precisely how American workers had dealt with changing management practices during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That research gave rise to a group of essays and then to the publication, shortly after I had moved to Yale, of my major work *The Fall of the House of Labor*.7

Evidently, Coventry’s employers did not appreciate my activities. Shortly after I had returned to Pittsburgh I received a telephone call from Thompson informing me that Warwick students, who were occupying the Registrar’s office because of a longstanding grievance of their own, reported that upon opening a file cabinet they had discovered a report on me, authorized by the Vice-Chancellor of the university and a member of the university council who was a director of Roots Motors. The report was written by a Legal Adviser of the company (whose name, so help me, was Catchpole). His mission was to take notes on a speech I made to what was in fact a small meeting of the local Labour Party held in the aftermath of the more important regional shop stewards’ gatherings, and advise whether I might be indicted under Britain’s Subversive Aliens Act of 1919. Catchpole cautioned against such an effort, pointing out that no one had ever been convicted under that law and that my recorded remarks would not provide a good test case. Although all this had transpired unbeknown to me at the time, the publication of Catchpole’s uncovered report in the local press unleashed a storm of denunciations of the vice-chancellor by Coventry trade unionists and by Warwick faculty, culminating in a vote of no confidence, as well as demands by students around Britain to see university files about themselves.8

By the time these controversies erupted in Britain, I was far removed from the scene. I had returned to the University of Pittsburgh, where an outstanding group of graduate students soon gathered. All of them were committed to working closely together—sharing and cooperating in the various research projects in which they were engaged. They were also devoted to research in primary sources, to recreating the modes of thought and action in which working people of previous epochs had engaged, and to cultivating an international perspective on the questions under consideration. Late in the 1970s the editorial office of the journal *International Labor and
Working Class History moved to Pittsburgh (and subsequently to Yale) under my editorship.

In 1993 many of the Pittsburgh graduates joined with students working under my direction at Yale to organize a joint conference in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, which lasted several days and produced many friendships and collaborative efforts that have continued to this day. All of them were aware that the study of history is essentially a group endeavor. By this time, however, they were carrying on their own research (as was I) in the context of new, dramatic changes in economic and social life at home and abroad. The great factory of the so-called “developed” portion of the globe, which had long been the centerpiece of labor history, had yielded to new forms of globalized production and exchange. Most workers in manufacturing were no longer to be found in Europe and North America. New patterns of immigration had emerged, along with renewed importance of unfree labor. Students’ interests turned quite properly to men and women employed in service and retail occupations, and also toward earlier forms of indentured servitude and chattel slavery.

The world will not stand still. Neither can the concerns of historical research.

Notes


4 (London: V. Gollancz, 1963)


6 For a review of Haupt’s career and historical contribution, see the special issue of Le mouvement social, No. 11 (April-June, 1980), entitled “Georges Haupt parmi nous.”
