

# PRESENTATION / PRÉSENTATION

## Working-Class Public History in the Context of Deindustrialization: Dilemmas of Authority and the Possibilities of Dialogue<sup>1</sup>

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SOME 25 YEARS AGO, a friend and I were motoring along the tourist trail in Nova Scotia when we saw a sign pointing to the town of Springhill and an underground mine/mine disaster history tour. I was familiar with the then-famous ballad by Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl about the Springhill event, and so we took the turn and bought tickets for the tour.<sup>2</sup> Joining a group of some fifteen visitors, we

<sup>1</sup>Parts of this paper, which originated as an informal conference presentation, were drawn from other recently published essays, especially Michael Frisch, "Taking Dialogue Seriously," in Frank Munger, ed., *Laboring Below the Line: The New Ethnography of Poverty, Low-Wage Work, and Survival in the Global Economy* (New York 2002), 281-289; and Michael Frisch, "Prismatics, Multivalence, and Other Riffs on the Millennial Moment: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 13 October 2000," *American Quarterly*, 53 (June 2001), 193-231.

<sup>2</sup>The lyric includes the following verses speaking to the personal anecdote related here:

Michael Frisch, "Working-Class Public History in the Context of Deindustrialization: Dilemmas of Authority and the Possibilities of Dialogue," *Labour/Le Travail*, 51 (Spring 2003), 153-64.

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were led to a changing room where we were given coats and headlamp hard hats, and pointed to an exhibition about both the world of mining in Springhill and the disaster that doomed it. There we were greeted by our guide — one of the retired miners from the now-closed mine who seemed to constitute the entire staff of the museum.

From the first moment, he was relentlessly cheerful and accommodating — chatting us up about who we were and where we had come from, making friendly little jokes about the distant towns and regions represented, asking our names and inquiring about our families. As we strolled to the mine, the teasing repartee continued — he was doing everything possible to make us feel comfortable with him and each other, to define the fleeting community of our accidental group. But as the tour began, this quality did not alter — we were being told almost nothing about what we were seeing, and even less about the history it represented. Our guide's every effort was directed, rather, to maintaining a jollity that, after a while, began to feel almost

In the town of Springhill, Nova Scotia  
Down in the dark of the Cumberland Mine  
There's blood on the coal and the miners lie  
In the roads that never saw sun nor sky....

In the town of Springhill, Nova Scotia  
Late in the year of '58  
Day still comes and the sun still shines  
But it's dark as the grave in the Cumberland Mine....

Twelve men lay two miles from the pit shaft  
Twelve men lay in the dark and sang  
Long hot days in a miner's tomb  
It was three feet high and a hundred long....

Listen for the shouts of the bareface miners  
Listen through the rubble for a rescue team  
Six hundred feet of coal and slag  
Hope imprisoned in a three foot seam

Eight long days and some were rescued  
Leaving the dead to lie alone  
Through all their lives they dug their graves  
Two miles of earth for a marking stone.

Peggy Seeger, "The Ballad of Springhill," also known as "The Springhill Mine Disaster," copyright 1961, Stormking Music Inc. The extensive discography begins with a performance by Ewan MacColl, on "Freeborn Man," Rounder Records. The text here is drawn from Peter Blood and Annie Patterson, eds., *Rise Up Singing: The Group Sing Songbook, a Sing Out Publication* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania 1988; and 1992), 142.

eerie. The tour culminated with our being led to a coal face, where children in the group were given little hammers to chip out a piece of real coal for souvenirs, after which, we could see, we were to be led out and back to the changing room.

At that point, someone asked a question about the disaster — which had not been mentioned in the tour to that point. Our guide began to answer, at first hesitantly. But he continued, and suddenly he began to disappear as our jolly guide, plunging rapidly into the story he had lived. He was now speaking into the black space of the mine, not to us at all. The story rapidly became darker and angrier — about the company insisting that nobody could have still been alive in the catastrophe, about miners who knew that this was not so, about battles to keep rescue efforts going, about the experts who knew that the miners had been trapped and died on (say) Level 16 but when the sealed mine was reopened much later the bodies were found on Level 3 — those men had been alive, crawling back towards an exit that had been already sealed by the arrogant experts.

He snapped his eyes open, seemingly stunned to discover himself facing the now-silenced cluster of tourists he had worked so hard to make comfortable. There was a painful, awkward stillness — and without a word, he turned on his heel and left the mine. We all followed, in silence, back to the changing room and our cars and the Glooscap Trail around Nova Scotia.

Aside from this story representing my only direct contact with the public history of labour in Canada, the reminiscence frames some of the concerns I hope it will be useful to address here: what happens when labour history becomes public history, what is the role of workers' stories and life histories in this process, and, especially, what happens to working-class history as a form of public dialogue when the work and communities at the base of this history are being rendered quite literally historical by virtue of the dramatic structural changes of deindustrialization. Having begun with a story from long ago, I will conclude later with brief consideration of a hot-off-the-press new book I am delighted to bring to your attention; a product of a conference exploring the new world of low-wage work in the global economy, and the crucial role that attending to the lives and perspectives of workers can play in engaging these realities. These bookends surround a discussion, drawing on my own work in oral and public history, of the crucial importance of making the dialogue about history, which is at the core of the promise of public history, a more explicit resource in confronting the profound structural changes of work and working-class realities in the present.

I begin by noting that oral history has been embraced for some time as a tool for giving voice to those who have been excluded from the historical record. Yet as it happens, for historians the dilemmas and tensions embedded in this very appeal have complicated the reception and usefulness of oral history in the construction of new historical narratives.

One approach to oral history has always resisted any notion of special claims and qualities for the kind of evidence it produces: I once called this the “more his-

tory” approach, as if the point of oral history were simply to help us shine a flashlight into an otherwise dark and unreachable corner of the basement or attic to find some things to bring out to the workshop where they might then be tested, refined, hammered, and milled like any other bit of evidence. The emphasis, in this approach, has always been on oral history as data, with the privilege of analysis and interpretation reserved for the synthesizing historian.

A contrasting approach has tended to reverse this emphasis entirely, seeing the “voice of the people” as self-explanatory and self-empowering. In such terms, oral history is offered as a way to confront, challenge, contradict, and even eliminate the interpretive power of historians and what they are presumed to represent. Offered as a kind of “anti-History,” this approach has raised crucial questions about the ground and legitimacy of historical explanation; its defects have been just as obvious, a naïve romanticization of “the people” chief among them.

Much of the excitement and energy of oral history, over the past 25 years, has come from the effort to find a way between the rock and the hard place that each of these poles can be taken to represent — to see oral history as evidence in a broad sense going beyond data, and to read interviews as more complex interpretive dialogues, however implicit, in which we can hear, learn from, and engage actively the ever-present narrative perspective of the interviewee in a process that returns us to a more basic meaning of their “subjectivity,” a term that until recently has had only a pejorative meaning for considerable numbers of historians.

For many of us, though, it has remained hard to find ways to promote and to represent this complexity — what Jacquelyn Hall has called the “interpretive authority of ordinary people” has often been obscured on the one hand by the seamless historical narrative “illustrated” by vivid oral history excerpts, or on the other by relatively unmediated oral history documents presented as if their meaning and implications were self-evident, which in any useful sense tends rarely to be the case.<sup>3</sup>

Recent trends in scholarship have, if anything, made this dilemma worse. A new generation of cultural studies and social history has centered on the complex social construction of identities, on the culturally embodied intersections of race, class, and gender, on the complexity of social memory, and on understanding the profound tensions between hegemony and agency. And yet, we have paid a heavy price for these insights, mainly in the form of a scholarly discourse so relentlessly theorized as to lose touch with the people and the narrative realities it deals with, much less with any readership beyond those already invested in highly particular vocabularies and questions. Recent op-ed polemics — PC and otherwise — aside, there is an emerging consensus that for all its accomplishments contemporary scholarship has effected what could be called a “discursive disconnect” from the

<sup>3</sup>Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill 2000), xx.

very people, issues, and interests it presumes to interpret. More prosaically, it seems to be at serious risk of a terminal case of "paralysis from the analysis."

There is a striking irony in this for those of us who have been involved in oral history and documentary work, since so many of the issues contemporary scholarship has spotlighted with great intellectual huffing and puffing — the social construction of memory, the dialogics of inter-subjectivity, and so on — are issues that oral and public historians have necessarily confronted, if not always as self-consciously, in the very conduct of an interview or fieldwork and in any careful work with the evidence arising from these, and in the construction and presentation of an exhibit or documentary. They are issues embodied by definition in the vivid, complex human stories oral history produces and in the complex relationships enacted in fieldwork or interview, and they are inevitably inscribed or encoded — we would say in today's jargon, without much value added — in resulting documentary texts.

It has always seemed to me one of oral history's redeeming qualities that it presents such sophisticated and complex issues in the form of lived experience and living conversation, where they must be dealt with in highly concrete decisions about the conduct, handling, editing, presentation, and interpretation of interview narratives. In this form, the abstractions of theory can not so easily get away from the stubborn corporeality and materiality of real people commenting on their own lives and realities and presenting them to us, while conversely, it is harder to reduce narrative to simply another form of raw data for interpretation. Once this is appreciated, I think, it becomes easier to appreciate the capacity of narratives and testimonies to inform, challenge, complicate, and shape our own categories and questions — especially if we are willing to share with interview subjects the authority of interpretation, to read narratives as offering an interpretive dialogue implicit in the relationships producing ethnographic or documentary evidence in the first place, and often explicit, if we stop to listen for it, in the texts generated in the process.

I have some experience with the capacity of working-class narratives of industry and de-industrialization to provide such insights, having collected and published a series of life-history interviews with Buffalo, New York steelworkers in the aftermath of the virtual evaporation of that region's once-mighty steel industry.<sup>4</sup> In this work, I was repeatedly struck by how regularly and easily interview subjects moved around the convenient categories presented to them, frequently of an either/or nature, when asked to describe industrial work, family, and community before, during, and after job loss of this kind. They both liked their jobs and hated them. They often identified with the union and/or the company yet felt betrayed by either or both. They saw themselves as victims of the plant closings yet refused to act or feel victimized. They were deeply nostalgic and yet fully involved in moving on. Even more to the point, they resisted the very notion that their lives were de-

<sup>4</sup>Michael Frisch, with photographer Milton Rogovin, *Portraits in Steel* (Ithaca 1993).

fined by their work situation, past or present, offering instead a more seamless web in which worlds of family, neighborhood, and community were woven together with work and workplace in their own identities.

My project focused on big-city workers in a grand-scale primary industry filled with romance and awesome power. Perhaps still a bit impressed by these qualities, I have to say I did not quite expect to find such similar patterns in a very different context. Then, a few years ago, I first encountered an oral history/photographic documentary project focused on a different world. Recently published as a book, this is the story of a woman named Linda Lord, who has been displaced from her job in the “Blood Tunnel” of a small chicken processing factory in rural Maine, a woman to whose work nobody, leastwise the subject herself, attaches anything close to romance or excitement.<sup>5</sup>

As documented, framed, and commented on by folklorist Alicia Rouverol and photographer Cedric Chatterley, Linda’s work, her sense of family responsibilities, community, and place, her interests in music (she plays in a rock band) and motorcycles — all are crucially intertwined in each other and in her, making the job loss and her response to it at once more and less complicated, more constraining and more cushioned. The dense weave of detail in Linda’s narrative defines, in its sum, the perspective from which she documents and presents the complexity of her life. It is a perspective similar in complexity to the one I read in the steelworker narratives I collected. It is a perspective reducible, I think, neither to the romance of steel making nor to the non-romance of killing chickens, but one grounded, rather, in some larger, embracing realities about working-class life in communities and a world in transition.

It seems to me the lessons of these perspectives are best drawn by readers rather than pronounced upon by commentators. In the case of *Portraits in Steel*, one of the factors that took my collaborator and me to some ten publishers before being offered a contract for our project was our insistence on permitting readers to engage and learn from the narrative and photographic portraits directly, rather than treating these as so much raw material to be pushed through interpretive mills of our own devising. But for present purposes, I will claim one word — literally — in order to address some of the issues being raised here. That word is — “multivalence.” Let me explain.

I first encountered Linda Lord’s story as a respondent on a panel at the Tenth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in the summer of 1996. Our session, “When Plants Shut Down,” included a paper by Alicia Rouverol featuring generous drafts of Linda Lord’s interviews and Cedric Chatterley’s photographs. “The Berks” was wonderful, but as with

<sup>5</sup> Alicia J. Rouverol and Cedric N. Chatterley, with Stephen A. Cole, “*I Was Content and Not Content*”: *The Story of Linda Lord and the Closing of Penobscot Poultry* (Carbondale and Edwardsville 2000).

many academic congresses these days the air was pretty thick with the kind of catch-phrases that in every field serve as shortcuts to communication among those who know exactly what is being referred to, but that can be exceedingly impenetrable and oppressive to those coming from outside. Our panel was happily immune from this contemporary plague, so much so that someone said, tongue fully in cheek, that we were at risk of being buzzword deficient. So we appropriated one of our own: referring to a quality discovered in the several papers, this was "multivalence," with emphasis placed on the second syllable, so as to echo but contrast with "ambivalence."

Ambivalence inevitably suggests uncertain feelings or a confusion of values. But multivalence evokes the very different quality that we were hearing: multi-valents, many values, the holding of different values at the same time without implying confusion, contradiction, or even paradox. Multivalence implies a way of being in the world — one that may be particularly characteristic of the experience of "others," challenging and complicating a dominant culture's categories and asking us to think about things in very different ways. As in the provocative quotation from Linda Lord that Alicia Rouverol chose for the title of her book, "I was content and not content."

I would like to look at the implications of this title as a vantage on the challenges of incorporating worker narratives in either the academic or public histories of labour. To this end, I hope it's not too indulgent to offer a personal story that may seem even farther afield, if Anton Chekhov and turn-of-the-(19th)-century Russian aristocrats seem to stand a long way from the Springhill mine, Buffalo steel-workers, or a Belfast, Maine chicken factory.

A number of years ago, a friend dragooned me into helping fill out the community theater cast for a local production of Chekhov's great play, *The Three Sisters*. My role was that of Kulygin, schoolteacher and cuckolded husband of Masha, the most tempestuous of the sisters. I needed a lot of coaching, a good bit of it involving how to deliver some crucial lines: in the face of every humiliation and disappointment that is his lot, Kulygin repeats "I am content, I am content, I am content." The trick was to say these words in a way that was not merely pathetic, that made clear how determined the man was to keep on going on, to avoid the self-pity immobilizing the other characters in the play.

Personal echoes aside, I have been struck by how Chekhov and Linda Lord were speaking to each other. Consider that beyond poor Kulygin, *The Three Sisters* involves a family of fading aristocrats in the twilight years of a Russian nobility soon to be swept away by modernization and revolution. They are stranded in the provinces a long way from the center of power and sophistication in their world. "Moscow, Moscow, Moscow," the sisters sigh in their different ways. They, their lovers, and their friends spend most of four long acts complaining about boredom and bemoaning their fate.

Linda Lord throws all this into sharp perspective. Here are Chekhov's nobility and aristocrats who despite all their wealth and privilege insist, in effect, that "we are not content." Here is Kulygin, the determined middle-class professional, who unconvincingly but poignantly insists "I am content" when he so obviously is not. And here is Linda Lord, a working-class woman from Belfast, Maine who when asked whether she was content in her job in the poultry industry resists and deflects the either/or choice by saying, well, "I was content and not content," and then goes on to offer her story in her own way.

By putting this quotation on her title page, Alicia Rouverol and her colleagues mean to announce what Linda's story goes on to illustrate: that working-class people may not fit the obvious categories others so often use to engage and measure them, whether these be categories of middle-class values taken as self-evidently universal, or categories of academic analysis assumed to be somehow deeper or truer than what people can know as they reflect on and talk about their own experience. The place to start, we are told, is by checking our questions and assumptions at the door — and approaching such stories on their own terms, to see how these can challenge and complicate, rather than be squeezed into, the world of our own assumptions.

But in too much working-class history and public history, this advice is unheeded, and worker experience is simply considered a kind of emotional "salsa," at best, or, even worse, as a necessary but in itself insufficient ethnographic stock for a dazzling nouvelle cuisine of generalization and theory. Indeed, intellectuals — museum interpreters, documentary makers, and academic alike — often proceed as if they are unfolding and unpacking the meaning of ordinary experience through broader conceptualizations and theoretical frames. But I have come increasingly to sense, in my own practice, that a stronger case can be made that the process is the reverse: generalization and abstraction necessarily flatten the particularities of narrated experience in ways that may prevent us from apprehending precisely what people are expressing, and even more explicitly trying to tell us — we need to notice that Linda Lord's title comment was a parry, a response to a question whose assumptions she could not legitimize through responding, as much as it was a free-floating "expression" of her existential take on her job.

For another example, consider the story in my own project on steelworkers that Doris McKinney tells about almost losing her job in the steel mill. Or rather stories, since I discovered in editing a very long interview that she had actually told it twice, from very different vantages and to very different effect.

Ms. McKinney tells us, first, that she had been a single mother on welfare when she discovered an opportunity to work at Republic Steel, then hiring women under a Department of Justice consent decree. But towards the end of her probation period, the foreman told her that she just was not cutting it, and that if she did not do better with the heavy burning torch central to her job, she would be out. She describes what happened then:



And you say, going from two — let's see, I think how much I was making, maybe three hundred a week, and the thought of going back to the welfare and making three hundred a month — the whole weekend I cried and I cried. When I walked in there Monday, I could pick the torch up and walk with it and anything else. Because it was psychological, you know. I knew that I did not want to go back to living like I was. And if there was any ounce of strength within me, and if other women could do it, I can't see why I couldn't, and so I did.<sup>6</sup>

But later, in a conversation that had turned to other dimensions of her experience, she fills in details that throw the story into a different light. She describes how welfare permitted her to obtain community-college certification as an occupational therapist's assistant, how she could not afford to take the only low-paying job in the field she could find when she graduated, and how she only reluctantly took the job at Republic:

It was a step forward because it was a good, high-paying job; it was a step backward because it was not the kind of job I wanted to do. So it was very depressing for me ... [But] we had been deprived a long time, and the money outweighed the experience. And who was to say that the other job was going to work out? So, once I took the job at Republic, you know your whole mentality has to change in order to keep a job, you can't continue to see yourself doing something else, just doing this temporarily. No — you got to be all or nothing. I thought you could keep up with reading, and keep up with your AJOTs, *Journal of Occupational Therapy*, you know. But you can't keep up unless you're actively participating in it. So then you finally make up your mind, you say, 'Well, as long as I'm going to be at the job I'm going to do my damndest to keep it, and get some of the things I want, and if the time comes, then so be it, I'll go from there.'<sup>7</sup>

It took me a while to realize that these two stories were the same — that the welfare mother terrified of returning to poverty and the college-trained para-professional who finally puts aside her disappointment about being in a manual-labour job are the same woman, facing the same moment of truth at the end of her probation. It is a good example, I think, of multivalence in action, of identity so complex and nuanced as to be apprehensible only through the unfolding layers of expression in a complex narrative.

It is through such nuances, and through the cumulative apprehension of recognizable yet different lives, that the promise of worker narratives in working-class history, public and otherwise, may best be realized, though of course figuring out what to do with these insights is not simple.

There is more than a blunt binary of hegemony and agency in the experience and vantage of poor people — here too, a more multivalent sensibility seems called for. In my own work, for sure, these tensions are manifest. The narratives I collected are rich and variegated in descriptive level and detail, opening vistas of com-

<sup>6</sup>Frisch and Rogovin, *Portraits in Steel*, 186-7.

<sup>7</sup>Frisch and Rogovin, *Portraits in Steel*, 190-1.

plexity grounded in the singular integrity of individuals who inhabit, like all of us, many dimensions and levels at once. And yet, I would have to say, the same narrators are much flatter and other-directed in their explicit analyses, in the way they offer up a variety of conventional mass-mediated bromides and quick explanations about plant closings, the service economy, the costs of pollution control, the importance of education, the crisis of values, and the like — since they, again like all of us, are relentlessly exposed to the same mass-mediated discourses of explanation and justification, and turn to these readily when broader issues are raised.

And so for all my interest in closer attendance to the richness and complexity of narrative, I have no illusions about this being a shortcut to some sort of pristine consciousness, of agency somehow outside the orbit of the same powerful cultural and political structuring forces that have produced the very paradigm of poverty we seek somehow to get out from under. But here, as elsewhere, it seems to me the answer still lies in a deeper and more sustained dialogue, of talking and really listening across diverse realms of experience, informed by a belief in the possibility that experience as well as expertise — the two words have the same root, I like to observe — can each provide tools for the creation of a new discourse of possibilities.

This challenge brings me to the recently published book I wanted to introduce to you: Frank Munger's edited collection of essays and commentaries, *Laboring Below the Line: The New Ethnography of Poverty, Low Wage Work, and Survival in the Global Economy*. Although focused on academic understandings, it parallels precisely the issues I have been raising about the need for and uses of more dialogic sensibility in working-class public history.<sup>8</sup>

The conference that led to the volume took on a profound problem. Deeply rooted cultural stereotypes of the poor have, despite decades of critique, continued to control the discourse and politics of poverty policy, even as the focus shifts from inner city welfare to the broader contours of low-wage and marginalized labor in a globalizing economy. These have constituted a formidable barrier to policy and political action, and inhibit, more broadly, the very research about poverty and the poor so necessary to any strategy for change. As the book's subtitle suggests, the conference sought to transcend these barriers through focusing on how narratives of poverty illuminate the complexities of a rapidly changing landscape of social realities, and how making the experiences, understandings, and agency of poor people themselves a central focus might permit the creation of new research and a new politics for engaging these changes.

As an enthusiastic reader of the papers and as an active participant in what seemed to me distinctively generous and probing discussions, I was struck in reviewing the conference by how hard it nevertheless proved to focus on what listening to and learning from narratives might mean, and how hard it seemed to be —

<sup>8</sup>Munger, *Laboring Below the Line*. The volume includes one important chapter based on Canadian experience: Ruth Buchanan, "Lives on the Line: Low-Wage Work in the Teleservice Economy," 45-72, a study of call-center workers in New Brunswick.

even in a setting dedicated *precisely* to this end — to admit the voices of the poor, as embodied in narratives in a variety of modes, into active dialogue with those considering the realm of policy and political action. It was difficult to avoid completely the mode of “illustrative” appreciation, as if the point of narrative were to provide a jolt of emotional and moral authenticity, to inform and propel but not necessarily to shape our analysis (diagnosis?) and policy/political prescriptions. If that seems too harsh, perhaps it is fairer to say that the central mode of the conference was one in which narrative and theory/analysis proceeded on parallel but not intersecting planes, as if in different languages, as if the point of discussion were to translate the particularities of one system into the generalizations of the other, as if there were few cognates permitting more direct intercourse between the two.

And yet the possibility of such connections is very real, most often represented as involving an axis organically connecting local particularity with global processes and transformations. Certainly understanding the inter-penetration of these dimensions remains of crucial importance. So is the task of developing modes of exchange — experientially and intellectually — so a broader perspective can be shared by those so fully engaged in confronting the problematic particularity of their immediate context and situation. Even theory itself, in this view, remains a necessary and in some ways crucial part of dialogue — since it is only through generalization and abstraction that a concept defined by one experience or situation can be transported meaningfully into another; throwing in theory, in this sense, is something like throwing in the clutch, permitting any of us to shift gears and move smoothly and meaningfully through a sequence of contexts. But most people drive automatic transmissions these days, which is to say that both the metaphor and the connective/transmissive reality seem too often elusive, in academic and public work alike.

It seems to me that the opportunities for working-class public history in the present lie in taking on this challenge, in seeking new insights and levers for change in a more genuinely dialogic and participatory engagement among a broader range of perspectives on history, theory, and contemporary experience. For all the longer perspective on history that academics usually presume to offer, it has recently become clear that rapidly unfolding contemporary developments offer their own kind of energizing perspective, and that contemporary history can throw desperately needed obstacles in the path of what can seem the most fixed realities and assumptions.

Consider the quite incredible improvisation surrounding the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle in the fall of 1999 — a mobilization that launched what has become a remarkably sustained, deepening, international, truly inclusive and cross-class engagement with some of the central challenges of modern history. Yet this was a phenomenon any grouping of experts would previously have declared to be as unimaginable and unlikely as the evaporation of Soviet communism would have seemed to international affairs scholars as late as 1988.

So where did it come from, especially at the level of grass-roots mobilization and engagement? Such surprises give us a great deal to think about. They suggest that there is in the experience of ordinary people, however mediated and however much internalizing of the dominant culture, a capacity and an experiential basis for alternative constructions. We might see this as a kind of DNA — the generative basics of insight and understanding embedded in the cells of life experience and inherently capable of activation and replication, even if this does not occur spontaneously or easily.

These notions point us, once again, to the usefulness of making dialogue and ongoing mutual interrogation the core of cultural and intellectual practice, especially when dealing with an issue as intractable as the needed re-imagination and cultural re-situating of worker's experience, struggles, and perspectives on change. In this sense, the lesson I draw for the conduct of working-class public history is that beyond narrative as illustration, and narrative as appreciation, and even narrative as instruction, it is narrative as dialogue — which however implicitly is embedded in all narrative — that may be most worth our attention.