

Laura Hapke: American Work: A Narrative History

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There is little doubt that New York is a city in which what you do for a living helps define your status, socioeconomic place, and perception of others. But in so upwardly mobile a city, does anyone admit to being from or part of the working class anymore? Over the next 15 weeks, we will explore the representation of labor in documents ranging from novels and short stories to newspaper articles to union websites to visual images and other resources. We will focus on three key concerns:

1. In American society, and especially in the culturally diverse New York City area, work and class help to form individual and community identity. But in a society still devoted to the American Dream of upward mobility, what are dominant perceptions of people who do manual labor?
2. Literature exists within this class framework, not as something separate from its culture but rather as a set of texts that are intimately involved with it. We will chart what ways the studied authors create stories that mirror or subvert the notion of working-classness.
3. Writing about literature using a variety of narratives can yield rich, complex insights into representations, including those in literary texts, and into the meaning of George Orwell's famous statement that people who work with their hands are largely invisible.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to demonstrate your understanding of these concepts in the following ways: a) Your papers and complete projects will use specific information about work and socioeconomic class derived from both required and chosen readings, and b) You will write about literature and other representations in ways you position them within your own life story and that of your family.

Remember that originality often flows from disagreement with "received opinion," and your essays can reflect your preference for interpretations quite opposed to working-class studies approaches!

Texts

Italo Calvino. *Invisible Cities*

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America*

Who Built America? Joshua Freeman et al.

Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York*

Labor in America: A History. Melvyn Dubofsky. 7th ed.

Laura Hapke, *Sweatshop: The History of an American Idea*.

Handout packet with excerpts from Pete Hamill, Anzia Yezierska, Claude McKay, Thomas McGrath, Edwige Danticat, and others tba .

Sequenced Assignments

(inspired by the Youngstown Center for Working-Class Studies website)

Single Text analysis - Choose one reading and write an analysis that explains what the text says and how it conveys its ideas. 10%

Text web - Match your literary text with at least three others from the same period (SEE HANDOUT PACKET), and write an essay explaining how the texts relate to each other. 20%

Adding history to the mix - Using the same four texts, write an essay that positions them within the New York City life with which you are familiar, whether as a subway commuter, a part- or full-time worker, a student, or all three. How does knowing what you know about the work world enhance your understanding of the texts? 30%

Family history paper- For this project, you will either research the labor history of your family or interview a coworker or employer. Then write an essay that positions the history you have mastered in the context of the materials and ideas you have learned about in class. 20% (or 40%)

OPTIONAL Integrative Project - Write an analysis that links texts, family history, personal views, and the ideas that have formed the core of the course. This assignment can include an on-line exhibit or illustrated paper. 30%