

Laura Hapke: New York Blue Collar: A History Of American Work

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Course Description

The course examines laboring in America by studying historical texts and documents on what would now be called the blue-collar experience, locating each group in terms of each other, of urban mainstream culture, and of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Through readings not usually studied in American history classes, students can explore a body of protest fiction that gave ethnic, racial, and gender minorities a voice; questioned cherished American myths; and posed questions about personal and economic equality still not answered by American society. **All students, not simply those from working-class backgrounds, can use their responses to the course material to make connections between their family histories and the larger political histories of working-class people. Those who wish to interview relatives or friends regarding course issues are encouraged to do so and to write up their findings. Similarly, those who wish to complete the interview assignment in a small group can do so as well, provided they confer with the instructor in advance. Extra credit assignments are also feasible.**

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. History 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 documents and texts expand or challenge the idea of class boundaries in America.
3. Writing about labor history can help us understand George Orwell's famous statement that people who work with their hands are largely invisible.

Course Objectives:

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 historical changes in labor 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

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

Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York*

Priscilla Murolo, *From the Folks Who Brought You the Weekend: A Short, Illustrated History of American Labor*

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