

# EDITOR'S REMARKS

## New Agendas for the Study of Class and Consciousness

What E.P. Thompson has called "the *dialogue* between social being and social consciousness" lies at the heart of historical analysis of working-class experience. Those terms, "social being" and "social consciousness," have both a global and an archaic quality, in comparison to the vocabularies in vogue among historians and social scientists today. Implicit in every set of concepts proposed for the discussion of workers' ideology, mentality, or culture, however, is both a particular notion of the relationship between workers and the society in which they have lived and an agenda for historical research.

Sean Wilentz has addressed this question in his analysis of important new studies of American workers in the early nineteenth century by Alan Dawley, Susan Hirsch, Howard Rock, and Bruce Laurie. In their books Wilentz has discerned a common emphasis on the role of artisans, but also important differences in the way that role is analyzed, depending on how the authors defined and conceptualized the social and economic transformation of early industrialization and how they related the "making" of the American working class to the corresponding making of bourgeois society. His discussion highlights the question of how historians treat the interaction of folkways, material conditions of life, and the deliberate activity of militants in the constantly unfolding struggles of working people.

The concept of a "sub-culture," so widely applied to the working class in general, is scrutinized by Chris Waters in a very specific application: studies of working-class youth groups in England since World War II. His concern is with a "structured hierarchy of artifacts and values," evident in such tangible phenomena as dress, music, and hair styles. Yet, as Waters sees clearly, neither youth nor class constitutes the sort of "closed and homogeneous sub-society" to which most anthropological models are attuned. Interaction with the larger context of existence and ideologies is decisive in the nature and evolution of these "sub-cultures." Above all, Waters argues, nothing in the artifacts and postures of the youth groups he reviews determines their political orientations.

Both essays deal with international problematics in national contexts, and both of them are sensitive to what historians and social scientists can learn from each other. Waters has also drawn our attention to the vast scope of the changes in working-class life since 1945. All three of these themes reappear in the report of Madeleine Rebérioux on working-class history in France and in her discussion of the priorities for future research set by our colleagues of *Le Mouvement Social*. Here the historical links binding today's political climate, the critique of historical concepts, and an agenda for future research are made explicit. D.M.