

Reflections on the Role of Social Narratives in Working-Class Formation: Narrative Theory in the Social Sciences

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THIS ARTICLE explores the role of social narratives in working-class formation.¹ The primary goal of this exercise is to generate concepts for the comparative analysis of working-class identities and practices. My thesis is that more successful cases of working-class formation involve the elaboration of coherent narratives about individual and collective history, stories that are coordinated with one another and that are organized around the category of social class. In such narratives, events are selected for inclusion due to their relevance to social class, or they are excluded or deemphasized because of their irrelevance to class, and events are interpreted, emplotted, and evaluated in a way that emphasizes class rather than other possible constructs. By contrast, working-class formation is less pronounced where individual and collective narratives are based on alternative, nonclass forms of identity, such as nationality, gender, ethnicity, and race. Working-class formation is also weaker where individual narratives are asynchronous, where

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the individual and collective levels are not coordinated with one another, or where identities fail to attain narrative coherence.

To qualify as narrative, discourse must have a beginning-middle-end structure that describes some sort of change or development, as well as a cast of *dramatis personae* and other features elaborated in the second section below. This definition encompasses a wide variety of types of textual material that are normally the province of different academic specializations. Most familiar to historians and sociologists are narratives provoked by researchers' interventions, such as oral histories, interviews, and written life stories.² Also important are "naturally occurring" personal documents, including working-class autobiographies, letters, and diaries.³ In these "lay" narratives, the working-class storyteller is identical to the central subject of the narrative, although the narratives speak also of various collectives, such as social classes or alternative constructs of "peoplehood" (Wallerstein 1991), such as race, nation, and ethnicity.⁴

Any analysis of the cultural aspects of class formation must focus on the stories people tell about themselves. Yet it has long been recognized that the construction of individual life stories is strongly conditioned by cultural narrative models (Holland and Quinn 1987) or by the "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1950). For this reason one must also attend to the various discourses that influence the ways individuals narrativize their own lives. These include "expert" nonfictional narratives told by official historians, chroniclers, journalists, and politicians, among others, as well as novels and other fictional genres. Individual self-narratives are also shaped by a specific type of ideological structure that we might call *collective narratives*. Like the "ideological structures" discussed by Sewell (1985: 61), the entirety of a collective narrative is "never present in the consciousness of any single actor." Collective narratives differ in this respect from *stories about the collective* (e.g., the social class, nation, or ethnic group), which are narrated by individuals. The study of the narrative side of class formation is thus concerned with written and oral narratives, "naturally occurring" stories and those solicited by past and present researchers, self-narratives, narratives by external "others," and anonymous, collective narratives. Of course, each of these types presents different interpretive problems. This article addresses only the features they have in common.

Past research has found that the lives of individuals and the histories of social collectivities are amenable to a multiplicity of narrativizations. Real "experiences" or "events," in other words, are narratively promiscuous. This means that the comparative analysis of social narrative is more than a redundant supplement to the comparative study of objective life conditions. Interpretation of the subjective side of class formation is concerned less with the historical accuracy of stories than with plot structures and the criteria by which events are selected for a narrative, arranged, and explained.⁵ This concern with form and structure does not mean that lying and forgetting are unimportant, as Maynes (1988) points out. Deliberate distortion precludes access to the stories that people are actually telling themselves at the time of reporting; forgetting obscures the social narratives that were subjectively active in the past.

Narratives vary in what we might call their temporal inclusiveness, or range. Some follow an individual from birth to the present (or to death), while others cover only sections of the life span. Collective narratives may follow a "nation" from its supposed origins to the present, as in the Norddeutscher Rundfunk's television series "Wir Deutschen," broadcast in 1991-92, or select only a critical segment (e.g., Nipperdey 1987-90; Wehler 1987). Although social narratives deal primarily with past events and end in the present, a crucial subtype of messianic working-class social narrative concludes in a utopian future. Even in less dramatic forms, the conclusion of a social narrative may be projected into the future.

Other central questions concern the formal coherence of narratives. Some individuals are unable to tell a coherent story about their lives, just as some social collectivities fail to narrativize their history.⁶ The different "levels" of an individual narrative may also be incompletely coordinated among themselves. As Portelli (1981b) has noted, individual life histories are broken down not only along the syntagmatic axis (i.e., periodization) but also along the paradigmatic axis, into different "levels." He identifies the main levels in oral histories as personal, collective, and institutional, recognizing that these "are never entirely separate and discrete since they all run simultaneously and mix together in the way people think and tell their lives" (ibid.: 171). Yet Portelli implies that each narrator will assign a position of dominance to one

of the levels in his life story, "from which he will select epoch-making events for periodization and interpretation" (ibid.). This quasi-structuralist assumption of narrative orderliness is surely unwarranted, however.⁷ The degree of coherence within narratives is thus a variable rather than a constant feature of social discourse.

Class formation is also dependent upon the coordination among different narratives. Two working-class individuals or groups may narrativize their lives in a working-class mode, but in different ways. The diversity of ethnic backgrounds in the U.S. working class, for example, has been paralleled by an equal diversity of modes of "experiencing time and history" (Kristeva 1986: 276).⁸ Another key issue is the coordination (or lack thereof) between individual life stories and collective narratives. Working-class formation is weaker where individual stories are told in a class mode but are not echoed by parallel narratives referring to the collective level. The converse is probably even more common; stories of the collective—the working class as a whole—are not mirrored in individuals' understandings of their personal lives.

The first section situates the discussion of narrative within a framework of processes of class formation, especially its cultural dimensions. This section is organized around a discussion of Ira Katznelson's (1986) introduction to his influential volume *Working-Class Formation*, edited with Aristide Zolberg. The second section of the article develops the notion of narrative and its role in social life. The third section then links narrative to working-class formation.

THE PLACE OF IDEOLOGY IN CLASS FORMATION

Katznelson (ibid.) has proposed a four-tiered image of the process of class formation. The first two levels are analyzed without reference to actors' consciousness. At level 1, capitalist economic development provides a succession of maps of *class structure*. The second level, labeled *ways of life*, refers broadly to "the social organization of society lived by actual people in real social formations" (ibid.: 16). This encompasses social relations in the labor process and work, market relations, and relations between home and workplace. The third and fourth tiers are of more interest in the present analysis. Katznelson refers to class formation at the third level as *shared dispositions*. It is appropriate to speak

of classes in the realm of “dispositions” when people occupying similar positions at one of the first two levels exhibit similar subjective orientations, discourses, and ideologies—and, we might add, when these subjectivities differ from those of other groups. It is important to stress that workers need not exhibit what the classical Marxist tradition called “class consciousness” (e.g., Lukács 1971) in order to qualify as a class at this third level. Class formation here simply refers to the convergence around similar subjective forms among people in sociologically similar class positions, regardless of the specific content of their “dispositions.” Katznelson’s fourth level of class formation concerns *collective action*. It might be objected that shared dispositions cannot be clearly distinguished from collective action, since people who share dispositions will necessarily also act in similar ways—indeed, this is the heart of the notion of *habitus*. Yet subjectively formed working classes will not necessarily engage in *oppositional* practices, that is, in conscious efforts to transform social relations, and this is what is meant here by “collective action.”⁹

I would amend Katznelson’s scheme by breaking down the third level, dispositions, into several distinct parts: (1) the *habitus* (Bourdieu), a set of dispositions, or a “structured and structuring structure,” which exists “prior to” the level of conscious action and utterances; (2) *discourses*, some of which take a narrative form; and (3) other *practices*. Discourses and other practices are both generated by the *habitus* and act back upon it. Collective action is a kind of practice that is of particular interest in the study of class formation. This article is concerned primarily with the level of discourse, although class structure, ways of life, *habitus*, collective action, and other practices clearly shape and broadly constrain plausible stories.¹⁰ The other amendment is that the levels of *habitus*, discourse, and practice may have more than one organizing principle or center. Just as the *habitus* simultaneously embodies class, gender, and various other material conditions, the level of discourse is not necessarily univocal. As contemporary feminist theory in particular has insisted, people may articulate and enact more than one identity (Riley 1988: 96–114; Steedman 1987: 3–24). In narrative terms, they may tell several personal and collective stories, each with a different structure.

Although the language of “stronger” and “weaker” instances of class formation serves a heuristic function, it is misleading to speak

of class formation as if it were a continuous, unidimensional variable. As Zolberg (1986: 401) writes, it is necessary "to treat each historical situation as a case of working-class formation—that is, as something that is akin to one of several states of a dependent variable." Yet some states of the "dependent variable" are more clearly organized around social class than others. More precisely, certain *sets* of dependent variable values are more "classed" than other sets. Yet within each of these sets it is impossible to distinguish between stronger and weaker versions of class formation.¹¹ A hypothetical contrast between two groups of workers may clarify this. One group is militant and capable of collective mobilization, that is, it is highly "formed" at Katznelson's fourth level, but its discursive identity is articulated in terms of ethnicity rather than class. Another group views itself as a social class but is unable to mobilize for collective action. It would not be helpful to characterize either of these groups as exemplifying a greater degree of class formation than the other. However, both groups could legitimately be described as stronger versions of class formation than a third group of workers who identify themselves primarily in ethnic terms and are incapable of mobilizing for collective action.

Most recent research on the cultural side of class formation has emphasized the structure and content of discourse. It is no longer assumed that class formation necessarily involves dichotomous or polarized forms. While the discursive world may be divided up into two great camps—a form that Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 129–30) describe as a "logic of equivalence"—the social may also be configured ideologically into a plurality of class categories that do not fall neatly into two blocs. Social class was central to many peoples' identities and worldviews in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic, for example, and yet class was far from hegemonic; it had to compete with identifications based in nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, and other categories. Such situations characterized by a multiplicity of dispositions are undoubtedly more common than a social field saturated by class.¹² The discursive structuring of class consciousness has also been argued to have critical implications for collective action. Stedman Jones (1983) suggests, for example, that chartism's inherited middle-class radical discourse contributed to the movement's demobilization after electoral reform was achieved. Despite occasional allusions to

narrative, however, the narrated dimension of working-class formation has not been systematically addressed.

NARRATIVE IN SOCIAL LIFE AND AS A FUNDAMENTAL
CATEGORY OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

The analysis of narrative has moved gradually from formal literary criticism into fields that emphasize the social role of storytelling. In *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss emphasized “the centrality of narrativity to the structuration of cultural life” (White 1987: 34). The sociologist John Thompson (1984: 205, 207) maintains that “histories are themselves part of the social world,” that “historical events are themselves embedded in narratives.” Thompson (*ibid.*: 11) insists on the links between narrative and *ideology*, a term for which he reserves the “original meaning” of the mystification of relations of domination (rather than the more neutral sense it has acquired in some recent formulations): “Ideologies tend to assume a narrative form: stories are told which justify the exercise of power by those who possess it—situating them within tales that recount the past and anticipate the future.” In a similar vein, the contributors to a recent volume on “the new cultural history” remind us that literary criticism has “taught historians to recognize the active role of . . . narrative structures in the creation of reality” (Kramer 1989: 97–98). Jean Pierre Faye (1972: 3) refers to the social impact of narratives as the “narrative effect” (*effet de récit*): “Certain narratives have changed the face or the form of nations. It has been possible to change actual history by the way stories are told [*façon de conter*].” According to Hayden White (1987: 1), narrative is “a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted.” Paraphrasing Althusser, he argues that narrative is a “particularly effective system of discursive meaning production by which individuals can be taught to live a distinctly ‘imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence,’ that is to say, an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives” (*ibid.*: x).

There are no sharp distinctions between the “formal analysis” of narrative and the analysis of “social narrative.” Indeed, literary critics have shown that narratives fulfill the dual needs of

social criticism and the enforcement of conformity (“policing” or “making us more like our neighbors” [Miller 1990: 69]). Even more sweepingly, certain philosophers and psychologists have argued that the nature of daily action and self-construction lends an essentially narrative character to life (see Bruner 1986; Carr 1985: 114; 1986; Gergen and Gergen 1983; Heidegger 1962 [1927]; Polkinghorne 1988; Ricoeur 1984–86; Sarbin 1986; Shafer 1981). Perhaps the most extensive claims for the significance of narrative in historical change have been made by Fredric Jameson (1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1988). For Jameson, narrative is an “epistemological category traditionally mistaken for a literary form”; it is “one of the abstract or ‘empty’ coordinates within which we come to know the world, a . . . form that our perception imposes on the raw flux of reality, giving it . . . the comprehensible order we call experience” (Dowling 1984: 95–96). Contemporary subjects live the modern “texts of history” (capitalism vs. communism, civilization vs. nature) in the form of narratives, which constitute a modern form of “pensée sauvage” or “political unconscious” (Jameson 1981: 80, 167). Jameson (*ibid.*: 154–84) maintains that narratives repress real historical contradictions by proposing imaginary solutions to them (see also Greimas 1987). While from this perspective narratives are “strategies of containment,” Jameson also calls attention to their utopian potential.¹³

The study of working-class formation needs to be attentive to narratives that “repress” contradictions as well as those that thematize a trajectory of events and actions leading beyond the current relations of power. Classes may be constructed as loyal and politically integrated, as when the German working class was “rewritten” into the Nazi narrative (cf. Herbert 1983; Mosse 1975: 161–82). But social narratives also take the form of *counter-narratives* opposed to dominant and official histories and models of life (see Personal Narratives Group 1989).¹⁴ Narrative is the natural vessel for what Franco Andreucci (1982: 214) has called “collective Marxism,” the various “vulgarized” forms of Marxist discourse that gripped the minds of many people during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (cf. also Judt 1986). The German Social Democrats (SPD), for example, countered the official nationalist version of German history with one characterized by militarism, misery, and progressive proletarianization and concentration of industry, and eventuating in revolution.¹⁵

What Is Narrative?

Only a brief discussion of the general features of narrative is necessary, given the many excellent accounts in existence.¹⁶ First, narratives have a central character or subject and a delimited cast of dramatis personae (Miller 1990: 75). Secondly, they have a plot, however simple. According to Bordwell and Thompson (1979: 50): "A narrative is a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time. . . . A narrative begins with one situation; a series of changes occurs according to a pattern of causes and effects; finally, a new situation arises which brings about the end of the narrative." Or, as J. Hillis Miller (1990: 75) puts it, for us to speak of narrative "there must be, first of all, an initial situation, a sequence leading to a change or reversal of that situation, and a revelation made possible by the reversal of the situation." Narrative thus has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and the movement toward the end is accounted for by conflicts, causal explanations, and the sequence of events.

As the Russian formalists explained, a narrative contains both a "story" (*fabula*) and a "plot" (*syuzhet*).¹⁷ The story, as Bordwell and Thompson (1979) point out, is "the series of causal events as they occur in chronological order and presumed duration and frequency." In most narratives, however, the "events are not presented in exact chronological order; the order in which they occur in the actual [text] is their *plot* order" (ibid.: 52). The story therefore "embodies action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events," while the plot is the actual "arrangement and presentation of the story" in a text (Bordwell 1985: 49). The classic example is Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, with its disjuncture between the unfolding of the plot and Oedipus's discovery of the true story. The ordering of story and plot elements can diverge in nonfictional narratives as well.¹⁸

Recent work on the narrative structure of life stories (Linde 1986, 1987; Polanyi 1985) suggests some further useful distinctions. Linde (1986) distinguishes the *event* structure, *evaluative* system, and *explanatory* system in a narrative. As in fiction, events are the building blocks of the life story and other nonfictional narratives. The analysis of any form of narrative needs to ask how events are defined, which events are included in the narration and which are excluded, and what principles govern the selection pro-

cess (Frisch 1979: 76). This leads to a more subtle distinction between story and plot than the one drawn above: some events that are excluded from the explicit narration may be imputed by the reader and are thus present in the implicit or underlying story. Not only does the plot order of *Oedipus the King* differ from its story order, but certain key elements of the story that are not actually narrated are filled in by the reader—most obviously, Oedipus's murder of his father.¹⁹ Or consider Collingwood's (1956: 241) classic example of the imaginative reconstruction of a ship's path across the horizon by someone who has only seen it at two points. The two sightings represent the plot; the reconstructed trajectory is the story. And again, the distinction between story and plot is as relevant for nonfictional narratives as for fictional ones.

Another aspect of plot is the differential status bestowed upon different actions and events. Not all events are of equal relevance to the main point of the narration: some actions are key turning points while others merely repeat the main points or provide details which fill out the intermediate space. *Evaluation*, or the "process of assigning prominence" to specific events, is "accomplished by encoding the information to be accorded increased weight in a way which departs from the local norm of the text" (Polanyi 1985: 14). In spoken language, speakers signal salience by using any one of a fairly large battery of conventional linguistic and paralinguistic evaluative devices (Labov 1972). The "evaluative structure" not only tells the listener or reader what is important but also passes normative judgment about "the way things are, the way things ought to be, and the kind of person the speaker is" (Linde 1986: 187).

In his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Roland Barthes (1977) analyzes the "smallest formal units of narrative discourse" in ways relevant to the process of evaluation in both written and spoken discourse. For our own purposes, the most interesting units treated by Barthes are what he calls "functions." The *nuclei* or "cardinal functions" are actions marking the turning points or hinges of the narrative; they "open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story" (*ibid.*: 94; see also Misztal 1981: 186). The functions also include *catalyzers* (or "catalysis"), actions that "merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating the hinge functions" (Barthes 1977: 93). By no means inconse-

quential, a catalyzer “accelerates, delays, gives fresh impetus to the discourse” and “maintains the contact between narrator and addressee” (ibid.: 95). Even seemingly extraneous detail contributes to what Barthes (1986) calls the “reality effect,” a sense of genuineness and fullness.

The explanatory system of a narrative, finally, refers to the “conceptual environment,” according to which “something may or may not [be] a cause of something else” (Linde 1987: 350). In addition to interpreting past experience, it generally provides a sense of what will or should happen in the future. Linde (1987) has shown the very different explanatory systems undergirding middle-class Americans’ accounts of their own lives, including popular Freudianism, behaviorism, and astrology. The interrelations among the levels of event, evaluation, and explanatory system are important here: the explanatory model may determine the events deemed worthy of inclusion as well as the relative emphasis put on them.

These categories can be illustrated with a brief example, the narrative of German history as presented in Hans-Ulrich Wehler’s (1985) and Ralf Dahrendorf’s (1967) treatments of “German exceptionalism” (see also Blackburn 1985; Eley 1985).²⁰ The sociological *explanatory model* in this view of German exceptionalism sees politics and culture as determined by social class and economic factors (Steinmetz 1990: 249–50).²¹ The implicit *evaluative system* of the Dahrendorf-Wehler exceptionalist narrative reflects the official value system of West German democracy and its efforts to distance itself from the Nazi past. (There was also, of course, an exceptionalist narrative that condemned German history from the standpoint of the East German state’s official “antifascism” [cf. Abusch 1946; Lukács 1973].) The nuclei of the exceptionalist narrative include the points at which “German history reached its turning-point and failed to turn” (Taylor 1945: 68), especially the failed revolutions of 1848 and 1918 and other setbacks for democracy (1866–71, 1878, 1933). What these events are said to have in common is the repeated capitulation of bourgeois liberalism before the interests and culture of the traditional classes, especially the landed nobility. Catalyzers between these main events tend to fill in details, propel the narrative along, and drive home the main point. In the narration of the period between 1878 and 1918, for example, the continuing defeat and decay of liberalism and the ongoing dominance of premodern elites and values are

emphasized through a series of smaller triumphs of “precapitalist reaction” and humiliations to liberalism (e.g., the shabby treatment of the “liberal” Chancellor Caprivi by the kaiser and the bureaucracy between 1890 and 1894). Over the longer *durée* one perceives cycles in which liberalism makes momentary advances, only to be defeated even more resoundingly: the period of the Stein-Hardenberg reforms, the period from 1871 to the “second founding of the empire” in 1878, the “Bülow bloc” (a governing coalition of liberals and conservatives in 1907), and the Weimar Republic. The story’s happy ending in 1945 sees the final expulsion of the Junkers and their Nazi allies, the eradication of the Prussian Junkerstaat, and the triumphant “transition to democracy” (complicated somewhat by the nonsimultaneity of the process in the East and West, with the two temporalities converging only in 1989–90). The events cast as irrelevant in the explanatory model are *excluded* from the narrative; they include gender issues, the daily life of the labor movement, the achievements of liberalism at the local level, and the more diffuse successes of bourgeois culture discussed by Blackbourn (1985). Finally, many of the exceptionalist histories begin their narrations in the Nazi period before moving back in time (e.g., Mosse 1975: 19), although the ordering of plot and story orders tends to be matched more closely than in fictional accounts.

How do nonfictional social narratives differ from literary fiction? The traditional answer to the question is that even if nonfiction employs the familiar narrative devices of personification and plot structure,²² it differs insofar as the narrated events have actually occurred (Mink 1987). The presence of a plot is certainly not a distinguishing feature; nonfictional narratives as diverse as autobiography (Maynes 1989), historiography (White 1973), psychoanalytic theory and dialogue (Shafer 1981), life stories (Gergen and Gergen 1983), and conversational storytelling (Polanyi 1985) draw on plot structures similar to those used in fiction. As in fiction, the catalyzers in social and historical narratives typically try to convince the reader or listener of the narrative’s comprehensiveness and its ability to integrate a wide range of seemingly disparate events (Laqueur 1989). But the plot/story dichotomy points to one crucial distinction: the *dramatis personae* in most social narratives include the very people who are telling, reading, or listening to the stories. Such narratives must therefore meet a different “plau-

sibility" criterion than stories that involve less overlap between "characters" and audience; their "referential restraints" (Miller 1990: 68) are more stringent. At a minimum, the basic events in a social narrative and the ordering among them must be plausible. And for a social narrative to be plausible, there must be some correspondence between the narrative and the narratees' *perceived* experience (*Erfahrung*, as opposed to *Erlebnis*, or objective experience).²³ The line between experience and memory of experience is "not all that relevant," according to Maynes (1988: 17), "since people act, not on the basis of unassimilated facts of an existence, but on the basis of the sense they make of experience."²⁴ There is enormous flexibility within such broad constraints. Discrepancies and conflicts among contending narrativizations of the same events often reflect this lability.

A final set of categorical distinctions that is useful for the analysis of social narratives is brought out by Hayden White's (1987) comparison of three forms of history writing: annals, chronicles, and narrative history proper. Annals merely list events; in White's terminology, they *narrate* but do not *narrativize*. Unlike annals, both chronicles and full narratives are structured around a central organizing subject. They may recount all of the events that happen to a person, a city, a nationality, or an ethnic group. However, the chronicle, "like the annals but unlike the history, does not so much conclude as simply terminate; typically it lacks . . . that summing up of the 'meaning' of the chain of events with which it deals that we normally expect from the well-made story" (ibid.: 16). For White (ibid.: 5) the annals and chronicle forms are not imperfect but rather "particular products of possible conceptions of historical reality." Annals reflect a conception of reality as chaotic, aleatory, and threatening.

In analyzing narratives, one thus should pay special attention to the central subject and actors, the form of the plot and its relation to the story, the rules for excluding events from the narration, the turning points, repetitions, and "filling in." One should ask whether a given history assumes the form of a complete historical narrative, of annals, or of chronicles. Finally, one should identify the narrator, the actors in the story, and the explicit or implicit audience (Burgos 1983, 1989).

WORKING-CLASS FORMATION AND NARRATIVE

In this section I develop several hypotheses concerning the role of narratives in processes of working-class formation. First, we can now say that working-class formation requires that social class be the key organizing principle of individual and collective histories. Events are selected and emphasized according to their relevance to social class. Characters are described mainly in class terms. Other events are excluded or forgotten. Renan's (1990 [1882]: 11) much-quoted comment on nations applies with equal force to the subjective formation of classes: "The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things." We need to seek the traces of that forgetting in the text or memory.²⁵ Secondly, events that are central to the history of a *specific* working class (or working-class life) must receive the status of nuclei and be described in positive terms.²⁶ Thirdly, the explanatory schemes used to illuminate the narrated events should emphasize social class.²⁷ Class explanations are used to make sense of numerous events and processes, from the mundane to the momentous. When included events cannot be interpreted in terms of class, they are relegated to a secondary status in the narrative. Finally, histories that attain a fully narrativized form, with clearly defined characters, a beginning, a middle, and an end, and narrative coherence, will be better able to resist alternative accounts than less complete narratives.

A variety of plot structures are compatible with these basic preconditions, however. To a certain extent, the specific configuration of the plot is more an aesthetic matter than a political one. But clearly, a description of history as basically cyclical or repetitive may be more conducive to fatalism than to resistance. An understanding of the balance of class forces as shifting inexorably against the proletariat (as in certain theories of the "rise of the middle classes") is probably less empowering than a narrative in which such changes are narrativized as temporary setbacks (as in the theories that recoded the "new middle classes" as a "new working class" needing only to be brought to its senses). Marxism may need to take a narrative form in order to become a historical force, as Jameson has argued, but what kind of narrative? Countless commentators have pointed to the historical homologies and interconnections between socialist and religious salvational

discourse. Marxists have often had to confront the demobilizing consequences of framing their arguments in terms of "historical necessity," rather than describing history "in the salvational perspective of some ultimate liberation" (Jameson 1981: 101; see also Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 7-42).

I have suggested that it is important to examine both collective and individual narratives in working-class formation and to compare "expert histories" with "ethnohistories" of the same events. From late nineteenth-century Germany one finds narratives by both rank-and-file workers and labor leaders, and these stories are centered on very different levels: the individual life, the community or locality, the nation, the world. One might hypothesize that in cases such as Wilhelmine Germany, where social class was highly salient, these different layers of narrative will be synchronized, that is, they will complement rather than contradict one another. The metanarrative will provide the overarching grid of actors, cardinal functions, and boundaries for other stories. At the other levels, group, local, and individual narratives will provide new inflections, "fill in details," without contradicting the main points of the metanarrative spine. The key turning points of individual life histories may even echo those of the collective history.²⁸ Somewhat less ambitiously, the individual developmental career may echo the world-historical trajectory: the working class rises toward socialism; individual workers' lives are tales of improvement that include "enlightenment" by socialism (Maynes 1989). Although mediating between the collective and individual levels is certainly problematic, the complete lack of a story of the broader social context may even make it difficult for individuals to produce coherent stories about their lives. As Linde (1986: 200) points out, "The absence of such a discourse about what happened in Vietnam, which at least partly matches the experience of the participants and validates it, is responsible for at least some of the high rate of psychological disorders experienced by Vietnam veterans."

Successful class formation further requires that the highest-level narratives organized around class are located on at least the same level of aggregation as the major competing sociohistorical metanarratives. Besides Marxism and other popular versions of socialism, totalizing metanarratives include nationalism, liberalism, social Darwinism, and the world religions. Studies of cultural

class formation should consider the pressures from competing emplotments of history. Between the mid-nineteenth century and the present, "official nationalism" was socialism's main metanarrative rival; others have included Catholicism, fascism, and, especially of late, liberalism.²⁹ Marxism's renunciation of a "theory of history" would put it at a disadvantage, quite apart from all of its other recent setbacks.

Also crucial are the local narratives that tell the story of a particular community, organization, or city.³⁰ A key question is whether the local narratives are harmonious or incompatible with the larger-scale stories. Historians frequently point to the disjuncture between the local and national politics and ideology of the Social Democrats under the German Empire. Local socialist histories often narrativized history differently than the canonical socialist history books (e.g., Mehring 1960), emphasizing community events and heroes, local strikes and elections, and so on (cf. Gärtner 1908; Hengge 1913; Hirsch 1908; Laufenberg 1911). As long as the local accounts accepted the skeleton of the main account, they did not "interfere" with class formation. Problems could arise if local accounts substituted different key turning points or central characters into the narrative. Of equal significance, some local Socialist parties ignored the events closest to home altogether, creating a narrative gap that could be colonized by other forces.³¹

The most fundamental layer concerns personal narratives or life stories. One must first ask about the extent to which autobiographies are structured by class or by other principles. Events that would be emphasized in narratives generated by other explanatory systems (e.g., the Oedipal crisis in Freudian theory and natural life-course transitions in more naturalistic theories) would be downplayed in the working-class autobiography. Then there is the question of plot. Maynes (1988, 1989: 110, 112) finds that a subset of nineteenth-century German and French working-class autobiographies were organized around the Marxist plot of progressive development from *Klasse an sich* to *Klasse für sich*, from "helpless object of history to active subject," from "unwitting victimization to militancy." Other autobiographers adopted the models of the bourgeois success story, the *Bildungsroman*, or the picaresque genre. Some, especially women, failed to produce narrative coherence at all.³² The autobiographies of famous workers or socialist leaders, such as August Bebel (1961 [1910]),

were presented as exemplary models for others to follow. The SPD gradually acknowledged the need for a politics of individuality, to prevent the worker's personal life from being colonized by nonclass principles. One result of this was a grudging acceptance of worker autobiographies (cf. Bollenbeck 1976; Federlein 1987; Trunz 1934).

Discursive class formation is clearly very well articulated when individuals (re)write their own life histories in terms of the overarching class history. Here the relationship between the individual worker and the social class involves essentially a rewriting: the individual's life is transcribed as an exemplum of the collective, the details of his or her life "filling in" the epic narrative of the class. Second-order nuclei (i.e., those operating at the level of individual lives rather than the class) would include events such as being introduced to socialist theory or Marxism and joining a Socialist or labor party. The collective events that the set of first-order nuclei comprises would be interwoven with individual lives. Even if the individuals are unable to claim participation in key historical events, the final periodization and evaluation of their lives may be derived from the collective narrative.³³

CONCLUSION

Class consciousness and class formation have traditionally involved notions of convergence and homogeneity as opposed to fragmentation or difference. It has been assumed that class formation requires at least a minimal agreement on goals, strategies, and interpretations of society and history. I have suggested that subjectivity is strongly structured around narratives, and that these narratives explain to individuals who, where, and "when" they are (Fields 1989). Successful class formation entails a whole array of such narrative discourses, operating at various levels and accounting for the different sorts of events that may be encountered; it also requires specific interrelationships or super- and subordination among these narratives.

The focus on narrative in this article should not be understood as a denial of the importance of the other dimensions of class formation discussed by Katznelson (1986). Even at Katznelson's third level of "dispositions," which I have broken down into habitus, practices, and discourses, there are other *discursive* phenomena,

such as symbols and metaphors, that do not necessarily take a narrative form. My purpose has simply been to argue for the importance of social narrative in the achievement of a certain "classical" form of working-class formation. I am not suggesting, however, that such unifying class narratives are necessarily to be valued. A more dynamic cultural form, less constricting for the individual and perhaps even for social movements, might involve a more complex interplay between narratives of class, ethnicity or race, and gender, as well as nonnarrative forms of consciousness. But while it would be preferable for oppressed groups to move beyond ideologies altogether, it is doubtful that they can avoid at least an initial "detour through a no-man's land or threshold area of counter-myth and symbolization" (Mulvey 1987: 11). Nonideological knowledge, if it is possible, presupposes a universalization of the material and social "conditions of access to universality" or reason (Bourdieu 1990: 388). Even within the universe of ideology, however, more open forms of identity and personal history may be developing. The question that this article cannot answer is whether these forms will prove to be empowering or disempowering.

NOTES

- 1 The adjective *social* is meant to distinguish these narratives from more properly literary ones, although the boundaries between the two are obviously fluid and contested. Moreover, literary narratives clearly influence the form of nonliterary narratives. This relationship is most clearly illustrated in the debates over the fiction-history relationship (see White 1973), but novelistic forms and other formal narrative genres also structure peoples' stories about their own lives (see Abastado 1985: 75). Nevertheless, I bracket literary narratives in this essay.
- 2 On life stories and oral history see especially Bertaux 1981; Bertaux and Kohli 1984; Grele 1985; Holland and Quinn 1987; Linde 1986, 1987; Passerini 1979, 1987; Personal Narratives Group 1989; Polanyi 1985; Popular Memory Group 1982; Portelli 1981a, 1981b; Sieder 1984; Thompson 1988: 241-47; and Vansina 1961.
- 3 The original use of personal documents in sociology is in Thomas and Znaniecki 1918-20; see also Bukowski 1974, Federlein 1987, and Paul 1984. Such documents are often far from "spontaneous," of course, but result from the efforts of social researchers. Many of the German working-class autobiographies published during the empire, for example, were stimulated by Paul Göhre, Protestant minister-turned-Social Democrat. And all docu-

- ments are shaped by their implicit or explicit audience (see Burgos 1979, 1983, 1989; Faris 1980).
- 4 Linde (1986) also distinguishes between stories telling us “who we are” (the “collective” level) and life narratives explaining “who I am.”
 - 5 This specific approach to oral history was already pointed out in a 1972 review of Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times* (Frisch 1979); see also Grele 1985: 140–43.
 - 6 Polkinghorne (1988: 107–12) summarizes psychological literature on “narrative competence,” while Burgos (1983: 86) diagnoses the “narrative incapacity” of her informants.
 - 7 Most of the German working-class autobiographers who became adults before 1914 alternate uncertainly between the personal and the social or collective levels, for instance, while many of those who came of age during the war or the Weimar Republic periodize mainly with collective events. Compare the excerpts in Kelly 1987 with Hoeltz 1929 and Turek 1972 [1930].
 - 8 Grele’s (1985) analysis of two interviews from the City College Oral History Project complicates this picture further. The different plot structures of two interviewees’ life stories are traced to the fact that one was born and raised in the U.S., while the other was a “product of Tsarist Russia” (ibid.: 232).
 - 9 The distinction between Katznelson’s levels 3 and 4, as I have reconstructed them here, thus resembles Lévi-Strauss’s (1966: 251) contrast between *praxis* and practices.
 - 10 Breaking even more decisively with Katznelson’s social-structural determinism, subjective class formation might be defined as a situation in which actors identify themselves as belonging to social categories (or groups) defined in terms of economic differentiation, whether or not the individuals identifying with such categories actually occupy similar “sociological class positions.” A society in which people identified insistently and consistently with either the lower, middle, or upper class could then be characterized as having distinct class formation at “level 3,” even if it proved impossible to match subjective class identifications to any positions in an objective class structure. Sewell (1980, 1990), for instance, discusses cases of strong discursive class identity bearing only tenuous relations to class structure. In Bourdieu’s (1985: 726, 741) words, “While the probability of assembling a set of agents . . . rises when they are closer in social space . . . alliance between those most distant from each other is never *impossible*.”
 - 11 In other words, class formation—the dependent variable—consists of *ordinal* variable sets, but within each of these sets the dependent variables are *nominal*, that is, nonordered.
 - 12 Needless to say, there are also many cases of discursive settings that are polarized without being structured around class; see Sewell’s (1985) analysis of the French Revolution and Projekt Ideologie-Theorie (1980) on Nazi Germany.
 - 13 Even Jameson’s (1984b, 1988) more recent arguments about the need for a new “cognitive mapping” of the world system have a narrative dimension as well as a spatial one.

- 14 *Official* histories are those explicitly promoted by groups or individuals holding state power, or its equivalent. *Dominant* histories are located at the level of "hegemonic" common sense. They may differ from official ones without directly undermining them. Consider the relationship between "official" West German histories, which condemn nazism but blame it on the individual Hitler and a few madmen, and the readings of nazism "socially dominant" among the (current) older generation, at least, which emphasize its "positive" contributions (cf. Brüggemeier 1986; Niethammer 1983). The latter differ from but do not directly challenge the official version. Histories that differ from both official and (noncontradictory) dominant histories can be called counternarratives. The same set of distinctions can be made among models of personal life histories. In many situations there will be a hegemonic (dominant) model of the proper life trajectory; this model may differ from the officially recommended one.
- 15 The Social Democrats are much maligned for a mechanical and evolutionary Marxism that left little room for human agency, in which increased working-class political power and eventually equality and democracy were inevitable. Yet even Karl Kautsky (1902: 106, 137) presented the German working class with the alternatives of "passive decay," or "descent into barbarism," and the "energetic overthrow of the extant system of production."
- 16 In addition to the works cited below, see Chatman 1978, Cohan and Shires 1988, and Martin 1986 for recent overviews.
- 17 Other theorists (e.g., Chatman 1978) contrast "discourse" (rather than "plot") with story; Cohan and Shires (1988) juxtapose "narration" and story.
- 18 To take an example from a popular and Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiography, Russell Baker's *Growing Up* (1982) begins in "the present" with his dying mother's mental forays into the past, moves back to Baker's "entry into journalism" at age eight, then shifts even farther back in the "story" to his mother's own youth and his birth, before beginning a gradual movement forward in time that eventually returns to the moment of writing. Beneath the "U-shaped" plot structure the reader is able to reconstruct a story that proceeds linearly in time. An example of a fictional text with a similar plot structure is Tom Stoppard's play *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1988).
- 19 As Miller (1990) points out, however, the reader's acceptance of Oedipus's self-accusation may be overhasty, since the text actually leaves open the possibility of his innocence.
- 20 Although the following example draws on "expert histories" rather than "ethnohistories" (Linde 1986: 198), there is a widespread popular version of the exceptionalist narrative. Indeed, one historian has argued that "the consciousness of . . . having taken a fateful *Sonderweg* [exceptional path] is quite simply constitutive for Germans' political self-consciousness after 1945" (Sontheimer, in Institut für Zeitgeschichte 1982: 31).
- 21 Certainly, there are other versions of German exceptionalism that pay more attention to cultural factors (e.g., Mosse 1975); I am concerned here more precisely with what Eley (1978) has defined as the "Kehrite" version of the German *Sonderweg*.
- 22 Nonfiction also makes use of various nonnarrative *rhetorical* techniques

- thought to be antithetical to nonfictional and scientific writing (cf. McCloskey 1985; Reed 1989).
- 23 On the concept of "narratee" see Chatman (1978: 150), who attributes the notion to Gerald Prince.
 - 24 "All autobiographical memory is true. It is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for which purpose" (Passerini, quoted in Maynes 1988: 18).
 - 25 Rosenthal (1991) finds "speechlessness" about the World War I experience in the accounts of German war veterans; Passerini (1979) shows gaps in Italian workers' memories of the fascist period (see also Murphy 1986). Hell (1992) finds similar gaps for the Nazi period in the literary narratives of German socialist realism, and she analyzes attempts to paper over the absence through the use of specific concepts of masculinity and femininity.
 - 26 This point can be illustrated by the different treatments of labor history in East and West German writing before 1989. In most GDR histories of local labor movements, the 1905 Russian revolution was elevated to the status of a climacteric, with a separate book chapter typically devoted to its impact on the socialist movement in town x (no matter how small or isolated from the rest of the world town x was). West German social histories, by contrast, rarely dwelled on the 1905 revolution.
 - 27 Compare the efforts to describe the events of 1918 and 1919 in Germany as class struggle with the right-wing narratives of the "stab in the back," in which characters are described not in terms of class but as German or non-German, traitors or patriots. Another example: does the Renaissance represent the beginning of bourgeois cultural triumph or yet another chapter in the reproduction of patriarchy (Kelly 1984)?
 - 28 Examples of this coordination of individual and collective narratives from other realms include the "generation of 1968," for whom that year of global revolt is also often a key life story caesura; the Freedom Summer activists in the U.S. (McAdam 1989); and abortion activists studied by Ginsburg (1989) whose conversion to activism "is linked to the intersection of specific life transitions with particular cultural and historical moments, marked narratively as pivotal points that changed or reinforced the course of an assumed life trajectory" (ibid.: 60).
 - 29 One might counter that the highest-order narrative does not need to find its center of gravity at the level of world history. Liberalism's positing of the individual as the basic unit of reckoning and origin of social action would seem to argue against the view defended here. Yet the pressures on such a microcentric perspective are revealed, inter alia, by the continual resurfacing within liberalism of world-historical narratives. In 1989 *The National Interest* published a widely read essay entitled "The End of History?" written by a hitherto obscure worker in the U.S. State Department. The author proffered a reading of world events based on the classic Hegelian plot of the unfolding of history as the triumph of liberalism, a metanarrative of "history as a dialectical process with a beginning, a middle, and an end" (Fukuyama 1989: 4). (In the meantime, a book-length version of the essay has been published [cf. Fukuyama 1991].)
 - 30 Examples in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German social democ-

- racy include Heinrich Laufenberg's (1911) history of the Hamburg worker's movement, Theodor Müller's (1925) narrative of the Breslau Social Democratic party (SPD), Georg Gärtner (1908) on the Nuremberg SPD, Max Hengge (1913) on the Augsburg unions, and the countless reports in local and regional socialist newspapers. Eduard Bernstein's (1906-7, 1924) texts are of a different sort; they attempt to construct the history of the Berlin labor movement as in some sense representative of, or as a metonym for, the national working class in a nation without a historical center or capital.
- 31 This appears to have been one of the shortcomings of the Göttingen SPD during the Kaiserreich, as analyzed by Saldern (1984); see also Nolan 1981 on the Düsseldorf SPD's failed "localism."
- 32 A similar divergence of narrative strategies is found by Passerini (1987) in her interviews with Turinese workers.
- 33 Hell (1992) shows how twentieth-century German socialist-realist fiction attempted to articulate the *collective* nuclei, such as the Paris Commune and the founding of the GDR, with key *individual* turning points, such as conversion to communism. This explicit interweaving of signal events in individual lives and collective history is less common in autobiography, but the principle is the same. The chapters of Ludwig Turek's (1975 [1930]) autobiography, for instance, read like a socialist history of the 1918 revolution and the Weimar Republic: "Desertion," "Fortress Prisoner," "Revolution, Freedom, Bread!" "Hand Grenades in the National Assembly," "With the Red Army of the Ruhrgebiet against Watter and Severing," "Poland Makes War on Soviet Russia, We Speed to Her Aid," and so on.

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