



WLRI SEMINAR:

Does Work Still Shape Social Identities and Action?

The event took place on,

**Wednesday 16th July 1.30 – 5 pm,
The Women's Library, London Metropolitan University
Old Castle Street, London E1 7NT
(Aldgate East tube)**

Agenda

1.30pm **Welcome** - Professor Steve Jefferys

Introduction to the Project - Dr. Christine Wall

1.45 ***Session 1. Civic Engagement and Social Action***

Paper 1. Jane Martin, Reader in History of Education, Institute of Education

Occupational Identities, Social Action and Social Change in Twentieth Century England

This paper explores the life histories of educator activists from four different teaching generations to examine how they lived their lives as agents of change and the connections between work-based identities and social action. What does it mean to be a teacher situated in a particular time and place in all the contradictions and messiness of lived experience, and how did individuals build careers in education as a form of leverage for social transformation?

I shall consider the inspiration to social action and provide a conceptual framework within which to explore the relationship between the biographies of particular educator activists and the social and political contexts in which they lived and worked. A historical ethnography of occupational and political journeys that connects, rather than separates, the domains of family, work, education and politics results, with life history as a vehicle for exploring and understanding the phenomenon of political radicalization.

Paper 2. Professor Steve Jefferys, Director of Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University.

Teller, seller, union activist: changing bank worker identities

The paper argues that part of the surviving identity of 'bank worker' is still linked to moral and social class-based definitions embedded in societal expectations. But in part, too, it suggests this identity is articulated and reproduced through trade union engagement and activism. The banking industry has long been the private service sector with the highest levels of trade union and staff association membership. This continues today, albeit at lower density levels than in the past, suggesting that union membership is one way in which strong company cultures are intertwined to form an occupational identity - although as before, beyond the ranks of the most active trade unionists, this 'unionateness' rarely manifests itself in pro-Labour political terms.

3.00 – 3.15 Tea Break

Session 2. Work Identities: cultural interpretations and representations

Paper 1. John Kirk, Senior Research Fellow, Working Lives Research Institute

Working through change: oral testimony, structures of feeling and the place of anecdotes.

The paper draws on perspectives from narrative analysis and cultural theory to explore oral testimonies of working lives, with a focus on workers from three occupations: banking, teaching and railway work. This paper concentrates in particular on the centrality of anecdote to these work-life histories, exploring how experiences of work shape wider cultural understanding and identity. The article argues that anecdotes are not merely accounts of personal experience but offer a glimpse of social structure – replete with evaluative accents that, in the telling, disclose powerful moral and ethical dimensions. Notions of affect are important in this context, as a close analysis of anecdote turns on an understanding of structures of feeling and their articulation. Raymond Williams's concept of structure of feeling foregrounds both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of consciousness, and the paper argues that this emphasis renders it particularly useful for making sense of the "affective" dimensions of work-life experience, bringing to light key thematic concerns linked to notions of commitment, recognition and worth as they manifest themselves in the telling of working lives.

Paper 2. Christine Wall, Senior Research Fellow, Working Lives Research Institute

Integrating the visual: photographs and memorabilia in the representation of work identities

The photographs of work memorabilia generated through the interviews, together with historical archive material on the three occupations, are used here to enhance and build on the oral history accounts of work given by teachers, railway workers and bank workers. Work memorabilia in particular are regarded as central to social biography as they are enmeshed in the social relations concerning their production, exchange, usage and meaning. This paper reviews the methods used in researching the visual, provides examples from the interviews made, and speculates on the possible theoretical integration of visual material into the representation of a working life.

4.30- 5.00 Discussion and summing up