

Polemics and an “Army of One”: Responding to John Womack Jr.

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In our original essay, we offered a specific set of criticisms of John Womack’s vituperative *JHS* article that bitterly attacked the field of labor history since the 1960s. We explained that it was our wish to understand the origin of his anger and the impasse in his own research from which it derived. We also stated our conviction that larger scholarly controversies and fundamental epistemological issues were at stake. In particular, we argued that Womack’s own work had suffered grievously from his failure to engage with the challenge of representation and narration. Basing ourselves on the detailed exegesis of texts, we suggested that his analytical practice—which we called “abstraction by subtraction”—had led to a “world of production shorn of the cultural, social, the political and ideological.” More specifically, we offered detailed criticism of the only two articles on Vera Cruz published by Womack after thirty-five years. We concluded that his analytical and methodological approach had yielded little beyond “an imprecise and very humdrum social, political, legal and cultural explanation” of the sort he so vehemently condemned in the *JHS*. We also noted Womack’s conviction that John Dunlop, a founder of industrial and labor relations in the United States, held the key to understanding labor in Vera Cruz, while observing that Dunlop was resolutely skeptical of the sort of academic exercise pursued by Womack for so long. Finally, we pointed to his resort to generalized invective, including “sarcasm, exaggeration and rhetorical overkill,” and the frequency of ad hominem attacks couched in typical culture wars rhetoric, including complaints about the newfangled study of race, gender, or sex.

In his reply to our essay, Womack chooses to ignore all of our substantive criticisms. He neither cites chapter and verse as to where we have gone wrong, nor does he defend his own work or the positions that we had so forcefully assailed. Having realized that his article cannot be defended on its original terms, he recasts it as a tough-minded polemic aimed at “finding faults, and arguing how and why to go beyond them.” In particular, he contrasts his disputatious search for clarity to those who “want diplomacy [and] the negotiation of scholarly and intellectual differences,”

while proudly announcing that he ‘doesn’t *do* diplomacy.’ In his view, the labor history enterprise is “like doing modern military history” in its aspiration to affect public debate and even the conduct of war.

So what does Womack mean when he declares that he does not ‘do diplomacy’? What does it mean to reject the discussion of scholarly or intellectual differences? And what is his intellectual equivalent of war? The answer emerges in the very first line of his response where we are characterized as whiny, huffing and puffing, stuffy, dull, and uncomprehending. He then goes on to equate what he calls the negotiation of difference with ethically bankrupt qualities such as “intellectual backscratching, consumerism, evasion,” and confusion. This repertoire of personal insult is accompanied by other rhetorical tricks, including simple invention and the erection of straw men to be promptly set on fire. In particular, he claims that his enemies like us—on whom he “made most war”—advocate a “broadly consensual if not unanimous labor history” where “every idea about labor’s history would be as good as every other.” After an odd digression about ideas as symbols of souls, he writes that we believe that “direct exposure and refutation are insulting, *as bad as physical violence*” (emphasis added). This is an absurd invention since there is *nothing* in our text to sustain such a claim, while our article explicitly exposes and refutes Womack’s profoundly mistaken and misguided ideas, once again expounded in his reply but not defended. If he had ever accepted our invitations to participate in the annual Latin Labor History Conference we have cochaired since 1983, Womack would have seen in person how risible a picture he has painted of blissed-out consensus-seeking among historians of Latin American labor.

The third component of Womack’s *modus operandi* is to cast himself as the underdog and victim of those who have disagreed with him. If we whine, it is because our feelings have been hurt while our true motives are ignoble: to defend territory and dominate a community that is ours and ours alone. Within the community that we control, our concern is to maintain intellectual order and hierarchy, keeping heretics and newcomers like himself in line. This victim/underdog posture was, as we noted, one of the organizing conceits of the *JHS* article in which his intellectual travails were blamed on a whole field that had failed him and marginalized his concerns.

In Womack’s telling, the problem can never lie in the formulation of his claims or the validity of his arguments; disagreement can only stem from the debased nature of the enemies on whom he justly makes war. This characteristic feature of Womack’s intellectual practice is the trademark of the polemicist, as it was so well described by Michel Foucault. In a 1984 interview with Paul Rabinow, Foucault described “polemics as a parasitic figure on discussion and an obstacle to truth.” On principle, he went on, the polemicist proceeds on the basis that he “possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in search for the truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat.” For those like Womack, the game does not consist of recognizing his opponent “as a subject having the right to speak but of abolishing him as interlocutor” and the final objective is “not to come as

close as possible to a difficult truth but to bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning. The polemicist relies on a legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied.”¹

If this disposition is clear in Womack’s response, it is even more true for his original philippic in the *JHS*. None of this, however, would surprise those familiar with Womack’s trajectory as a reviewer, journalist, and professor since the 1960s. Indeed, Womack has a long history of just such polemical engagements, of which the most notorious by far was his attack on anthropologist Oscar Lewis in the *New York Review of Books* in 1977.² Purportedly a review of Lewis’s posthumous oral histories of the Cuban revolution,³ the piece was replete with innuendo, including the retailing of a Cuban government–sanctioned accusation that Lewis had been a CIA spy. Beyond that, Womack even went so far as to suggest that it was actually Lewis’s wife who was largely responsible for the earlier works that had made his reputation.

It was left to Lewis’s collaborators, Ruth Lewis and Susan Rigdon, as well as his friend, sociologist Alvin Gouldner, to defend Lewis and criticize Womack’s low blows.⁴ Their complaints have a familiar ring in hindsight. In her letter, his widow Ruth pointed out that “the web of words constructed around Oscar” by Womack was not designed to “give an honest critique of his work but to carefully build up Oscar in such a way as to make it easy to knock him down.” And she complained that Womack “says in a strangely negative way that our book is a ‘commodity’ designed for the intellectual market,” in an echo of his charge that our practice leads to consumerism.⁵ Alvin Gouldner pointed to the heart of the hypocrisy involved with Womack’s attempt to pose as morally superior, noncommercial, and uncontaminated: “Womack repeatedly condemns Oscar for having a successful career and he condemns the book for being a commodity. But Oscar was never so successful as to have a career at Harvard” or, we might add, to publish probably the most commercially successful monograph on Latin American history in English. Like Gouldner, we believe it is disingenuous in the extreme for a former chair of Harvard’s history department to pose as a victim, a beleaguered “newcomer,” a David pitted against the Goliaths of the academic establishment; in a word, the Harvard lifer as underdog.

1. Michel Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations (May 1984 Interview by Paul Rabinow),” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow, and James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1997), 112.

2. John Womack Jr., “An American in Cuba,” *New York Review of Books*, May 31, 1977, 25–29. For a nonacademic example, see John Womack Jr., “The Strange Case of Pablo Chapa,” *New York Review of Books*, July 13, 1995, 11.

3. Oscar Lewis, Ruth M. Lewis, and Susan M. Rigdon, *Living the Revolution: An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba*, 3 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

4. Ruth Lewis, Alvin Gouldner, Susan Rigdon, and John Womack, “Cuba and Oscar Lewis: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, November 10, 1977.

5. On insulting speculations about base motivations in Womack’s *JHS* piece, see John D. French and Daniel James, “The Travails of Doing Labor History: The Restless Wanderings of John Womack Jr.,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 4, no. 2 (2007): 101n25.

Even more seriously, Gouldner wondered why “Womack wants to relate rumors and stories, some from unnamed ‘reliable sources’ that can only darken Oscar’s reputation without any foundation. In effect, this constitutes the publication of unfounded rumor, a kind of oblique character assassination.” Reading Womack’s response to these criticisms, we see a familiar pattern. Gouldner, Rigdon, and Ruth Lewis, in his telling, are motivated by “resentment and lament” while Womack obeys the noble obligation of taking *Living the Revolution* seriously. In his exchange with us, he claims the high ground of hard-nosed delineation of intellectual differences while those who disagree are protectors of academic turf, anxious to maintain their privileges, and motivated solely by hurt feelings and unacceptable emotionalism.

When called on his tactics, he shifts his ground—“however our personal quirks add up what matters is the politics of the question,” he tells Lewis, Rigdon, and Gouldner. In a similar fashion, he finishes his reply to us—after a banal restatement of his original propositions—by heightening the extra-academic political stakes he claims are at the heart of the “politics of the question.” With his usual rhetorical tricks, he sets up a false dichotomy that divides labor historians into two camps. On one side, we find “historians of labor who dwell *only* on the subjective” and fail to understand that “capital ruins or subsumes movements living *only* on culture, numbers, elections” (emphasis added). Of course, no serious historian of labor holds these positions, and certainly none of those whom Womack has chosen to attack; indeed, any credibility that might be accorded his claim is dependent entirely upon the insertion of the word *only*, which would not win the assent of labor historians who, unlike Womack, take race-ethnicity, culture, gender, or politics seriously.

If one side of Womack’s false dichotomy consists of those for whom “the class struggle no longer means much,” the other side is those like Womack, who “focus on class struggle” as capitalism’s “most important social fact, however complex,” since the system “cannot itself survive without value from industrial production” by workers who can “critically disrupt the regime’s vital social relations . . . [and] overcome capitalism. . . . This is the point of industrially and technically strategic studies.” With this, Womack shifts the stakes of the exchange to an entirely different realm where the question is no longer whether his ideas are convincing, their presentation compelling, or his concepts and propositions useful. It is the realm that Foucault dissected with great acuity when he observed that polemic “sets itself the task of determining the intangible point of dogma, the fundamental and necessary principle that the adversary has neglected, ignored or transgressed, and it denounces this negligence as moral failing; at the root of the error, it finds passion, desire, interest, a whole series of weaknesses and inadmissible attachments that establish it as culpable.”⁶

Yet we have to confess that the restatement of Womack’s intellectual position in his reply, as elsewhere, is scarcely convincing. It boils down to a call for a simplified productivist Marxism as the guiding paradigm for labor history. This points to the greatest oddity in his reply: his categorical disavowal that he possesses “any theory of

6. Foucault, “Polemics,” 112.

labor history to declare, much less a philosophy of history . . . [or that he even has an] interest in trying [to] develop either a theory or a philosophy.” This disclaimer is the most outrageous statement by a man who has defined himself as a Marxist, even a nonparty communist.⁷ Indeed, his emphasis on the importance of the technical organization of production is a recognizable version of the type of Marxist orthodoxy rejected by E. P. Thompson and Jean Paul Sartre in the late 1950s. And it guides the unpublished manuscript by Womack, available on the Internet, of which the *JHS* article is the first chapter. We had been aware of the manuscript, had read it when we wrote our article, and were not impressed by Womack’s idiosyncratic tour, going back to the Second and Third Internationals, through the morass of his secondary reading about the “strategic.”

In truth, it is unlikely that many labor historians will choose to engage in an epic thirty-five-year-long quest like Womack’s to reconstruct the technical details of production in all of their intricacy. We are glad to hear that Womack now hopes that “as soon as I can, *insha’Allah*, I will write a general history of the industrial labor movement in Veracruz, 1880–1948,” although we have our doubts whether the obstacles faced do in fact derive from “publishers [who] do not like footnotes” or from his lack of time to pursue publication. In our article, we judged—based on the little that he had published—that the analytical payoff did not seem to be worth the investment. But if he does publish such a study, we will certainly give it a careful and fair-minded read.

In ending this response, let us return to the biggest difference between ourselves and John Womack Jr. If Womack does not ‘do diplomacy,’ we do not “do polemics” of the sort he has practiced for so many years. Unlike Womack, we do in fact believe in the possibility of some notion of intellectual community and harbor the illusion that we should aspire to sustain an intellectual community, which unlike Womack’s absurd parody, embraces a wide range of disagreement while sharing an underlying ethic of intellectual (and human) interaction and exchange. The problem with Womack’s modus operandi is that polemic obfuscates even as it demeans. As an “Army of One,” Womack seeks neither to enlighten his readers nor to clarify his own thought, because his true objective is to make war, even if only on paper. As Foucault observed, “has anyone ever seen a new idea come out of a polemic?”⁸ ■

7. Judith Evans, “John Womack [Interview],” in *Visions of History: Interviews with E. P. Thompson Et Al.*, ed. Marho [Radical Historians Organization] (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 257–58.

8. Foucault, “Polemics,” 113.