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Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Hitchcock Studies the Working Class in Literature, Cinema

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“While in college I took a class on literary criticism. That persuaded me that I was actually quite good at reading literature, and that I had more to say about it than anything else. Although I had been interested in literature for some time before I went to college, it was really the college itself that influenced me to study it more deeply.”

That’s how Dr. Peter Hitchcock explains why he chose his academic field. A native of the East End of London, he received his bachelor’s in the arts and humanities from the University of Greenwich in London, a master of arts in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and his doctorate in English from the City University of New York. Today he is a professor in the Department of English of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences.

One of the things that many Americans don’t understand about British society is the concept of class, which is so imbedded in the British psyche. In Hitchcock’s last book, entitled “Labor in Culture, or, Worker of the World(s),” he takes on the very timely subject of globalization, which is being challenged in many different countries. But what motivated him write about this subject?

“Because part of what I do is cultural theory, throughout the book I try to come to grips theoretically with the fact that globalization, which should have been a unifying process, has actually created more fragmentation among workers, both politically and socially.”

One wonders whether the effect of globalization on labor can be put in simple terms. Hitchcock does not think so. “What happens if the factory owner, for instance, decides to move the factory for cheaper labor? There are workers in the space or country where the factory will be built who will benefit from the access to labor and the selling of their labor. But what happens to the workers who are left behind? This is also part of that fragmentation I mentioned,” says he.

A book that Hitchcock co-edited is entitled “The New Public Intellectual,” and in this world where anti-intellectualism has taken root, one



Photo by Amanda Becker

Dr. Hitchcock being interviewed for “College Talk.”

wonders to what extent we need to explain to the general public not only what it means to be a public intellectual but also why we need them.

“Certainly, anti-intellectualism has quite a long history in the U.S. The idea behind that book was to think of ways in which the intellectual herself might intercede in what we consider to be national or international conversations without seeming to be merely academic in the negative sense. This is crucial in a time when, given the complexity of some of the issues that people are facing globally, the intellectual herself can act as a conduit between how the world is understood in academe and the public perception both of academe and of the world as a whole,” says he.

Does Hitchcock think that because public higher education is under threat by budget cuts, more people in higher education in this country should consider becoming more public? “I think

that is precisely the way we should try to shape the form of the argument and engagement. As long as there is an ivory tower image of what folks do in academia, there will be a separation between creating ideas and actually acting out those ideas in the public realm.”

Another of Hitchcock’s books is entitled “Working-Class Fiction in Theory and Practice: A Reading of Alan Sillitoe” and deals with a writer who denounced the abuse of the working class in capitalist countries but was not afraid to denounce the abuses of the Soviet Union in politics. “Here is a fellow who writes for communist publications but then sees the Soviet Union up close and sees that all is not well in paradise. There were quite a few intellectuals and writers on the left who were rethinking their political affiliation. I think in spirit he remains until the end of his life a person of the left, but not necessarily of particular political parties.”

Hitchcock has also studied how the film industry has portrayed the working class and, in a society like the British, how even accents define class. “When I was growing up, you could tell whether somebody was born south of the river Thames. But that’s not so easy now. Regarding film representation, the examples in American cinema tend not to be labeled ‘class.’ There are obvious substitute terms, like ‘blue collar,’ for instance. John Sayles’ film ‘Matewan,’ which is about mineworkers, has a definite working-class inflection, but in general people don’t self-identify as that. There’s a theme that runs through America cinema, but I do think it’s about the culture of class too, and about whether class is part of the national conversation. Maybe that’s begun to change, given the last election, but I still feel that the differences in class analysis and class expression are greater than the similarities at this moment.”

This is interesting because, when Margaret Thatcher was elected, many people from the British working-class labeled her as a traitor because she came from a working family, so one wonders if he sees things like that in this country.

“I think Thatcher’s father owned a grocery store. There was a discussion about being a class-traitor but also about the petit bourgeois, the person who wants to get ahead and actually steps up in class. By the time she became a backbencher in the houses of Parliament, she had been thoroughly enculturated into the ruling class, even though there were occasions when she played the ‘class-card’ in her discussions, like ‘I’m the outsider.’

Our readers can draw their own comparisons with what is going on in this country at the present time.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/259891311> He can be contacted via Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu