

Metzgar, J. (2021) *Bridging the Divide: Working-Class Culture in a Middle-Class Society*. ILR Press.

Review by Christie Launius

Those familiar with the work of Jack Metzgar, whether through his [scholarly writings](#), his role as a regular contributor to the [Working-Class Perspectives](#) blog, or his presentations at working-class studies conferences over the past 20+ years, know that he has spent a long time developing his thinking and making a series of arguments about the existence of a working-class culture that is different than middle-class culture, and is *not* a deficit culture. *Bridging the Divide: Working-Class Culture in a Middle-Class Society* is the culmination of that thinking, and here readers will find a thorough and thoughtful articulation of what Metzgar sees as working-class culture's categorical differences from middle-class culture, as well as its more specific aspects. In broad strokes, as laid out in a helpful table in Chapter 6 of the book, middle-class culture emphasizes 'doing and becoming' and is more cosmopolitan, while working-class culture emphasizes 'being and belonging' and is more parochial (p. 103). Chapters 7-9 explore what Metzgar calls 'strategies and aspects' (p. 129) of working-class culture: 'the strategy of *ceding control to gain control*, the extraordinary value given to *taking it*, and what has been called *working-class realism*' (p. 130-31).

In and of itself, this full treatment of working-class culture is a significant contribution to the field of working-class studies (and beyond), but Metzgar has bigger fish to fry in this book; more specifically, he draws our attention to how the strengths and limitations of working-class and middle-class culture can (and should) be leveraged to help foster progressive political changes that would benefit both working-class people and so-called standard-issue middle class professionals. He calls for a 'class-cultural dialectic, whereby one culture helps balance and enrich the other' (p. 97). In this vision, working-class and middle-class people could act as 'both productive antagonists and complements' to one another, and as 'coalition partners' working to 'address our savagely inequitable distribution of income and wealth' (p. 188). More specifically, he calls for 'restoring productivity sharing and progressive taxes,' (p. 70) as happened during the 'Glorious Thirty' years from 1945 to 1975.

The unappealing alternative, according to Metzgar, is to continue as we have been, with working-class culture seen as the problem, more education posed as the solution, and middle-class people further hardening into their 'defensive crouch,' focused on 'preserving our privileges so we can pass them on to our progeny' (p. 87) and living in mortal fear of falling. This is a timely intervention and an optimistic vision, in a moment when optimism feels in short supply. He certainly acknowledges the obstacles to achieving his vision, but persists nonetheless, enough so that I found myself feeling a flicker of hope and wanting to jump on this bandwagon.

My desire to jump on the bandwagon Metzgar builds was further enhanced by the tone he adopts and the rhetorical strategies he uses throughout the book. In other words, my willingness to be swayed by his arguments was very much shaped by *how* he makes them.

This book feels conversational, because the style and tone of the writing is engaging and accessible. It is also conversational in the sense that you feel as though the thinking behind the writing is happening in real time, as if you as a reader were being walked through Metzgar's own thought process. As a reader, I found this strategy compelling, as it gave me context for his arguments and helped me see how he arrived at them.

Throughout the book, Metzgar situates himself and foregrounds his positionality explicitly. He doesn't shy away from the fact that his perspective is deeply shaped by his maleness, his whiteness, his age, and his geographical location. He acknowledges that this narrows his perspective, but adds, 'But how would I know this without putting out my interpretations for others to judge against their own observations and experience? . . . I ask readers to reflect on their own experience even as they challenge my book learning and I challenge theirs' (p. 14). Through statements like this, he invites readers to engage with his ideas and seems to envision how their engagement might run the gamut from 'the thrill of recognition to 'yes, but' to 'what the hell are you talking about?'' (p. 130).

This foregrounding of his positionality throughout the book is crucial in another sense; as he points out from the outset, his argument is as much based on his 'observation and experience over more than seven decades' as it is scholarship from the fields of sociology, history, and economics. These observations and experiences of working-class and middle-class cultures are more specifically from the point of view of someone who has at various points understood himself to have crossed over, moved between, and straddled the two cultures. Though Metzgar is at pains to argue that this book is *not* a memoir (and I don't disagree with him on this), it is a good fit with the scholarly personal narratives that [Sherry Linkon](#) argues constitute the signature genre of working-class studies. Metzgar generates new knowledge by weaving together his studied observations of working-class and middle-class cultures with his assessment of scholarly sources from a range of disciplines in what I am coming to call a straddler epistemology.

The book's conversational tone and its invitation to readerly engagement are, I think, enactments of this so-called straddler epistemology. Metzgar engages in dialogue with his scholarly sources, his imagined readers, and his own dialectical experience of the two class cultures, sifting through ideas and arguments to piece together his own. The phrase '[by my lights](#)' is sprinkled throughout the book, which serves as shorthand for a way of authorizing an argument by appealing to his knowledge of both working-class and middle-class cultures. But importantly, these observations from experience are never used as a trump card, nor does he shy away from citing evidence that runs counter to his observation.

As I hope I have made clear in the preceding paragraphs, the value of this book does not lie solely in its content but also in its form. Put differently, Metzgar manifests the class-cultural dialectic that he calls for out in the world within the pages of the book itself. While I don't always or fully share Metzgar's optimism about enacting policies that will tackle income and wealth inequality in the US, I *did* come away from the book convinced that a class consciousness that is formed by

knowledge of the strengths and limitations of both working-class and middle-class cultures is a much needed and powerful perspective. And while I couldn't fully share his optimism, I recognize how much the field of working-class studies needs people like him to have it.

Reviewer Bio

Christie Launius is interim Head of the Social Transformation Studies Department at Kansas State University. She is a past president of the Working-Class Studies Association, and co-editor (with Michele Fazio and Tim Strangleman) of the *Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies* (2021).