



## John Laslett: A Scholarly Remembrance

Posted on December 12, 2025 by Michael Laslett

Labor historian John Laslett died on March 23rd, 2025 at the age of 91. He will be remembered for his scholarly engagement with the history of radicalism, immigration, and Los Angeles community and labor history. He was part of a scholarly cohort who created and expanded the field of labor history.

Laslett began his career in 1961 with a brief teaching appointment at the University of Liverpool, then spent seven years at the University of Chicago, and retired after 33 years of teaching and scholarship at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The author or editor of at least eight books, Laslett was part of the generation of scholars who moved labor history from the parochial to the mainstream in the last decades of the 20th century. His deeply researched studies engaged with questions of so-called American exceptionalism, the history of the left, and the impact of migration on class consciousness and trade unionism.

Laslett strove to operate not only within the halls of academia, but to make his work relevant and accessible to those in the trade union movement. As one Los Angeles union leader said upon hearing of Laslett's death, "John was one of the labor historians who

helped document and interpret our working-class history for us activists.” As recently as 2025, Laslett’s writing was included in a local study group focused on how unions and immigrants combined forces to change the politics of Los Angeles.

Laslett was born in the United Kingdom during the Great Depression and evacuated to the countryside to escape the bombing of WWII. His father was a Baptist minister, and his mother was born into the Alden family of Oxford, whose family lineage included a Mayor of Oxford and a member of Parliament.

As a child of “dissenters” (i.e. not members of the Church of England), Laslett drew from the long tradition of “nonconformists” who played a significant role in British politics over many centuries, advocating for religious freedom, social justice, and strong moral values. He was the youngest of seven children, five of whom worked in different fields of education, including his oldest brother Peter who was an important scholar of historical demography at the University of Cambridge and a key figure in the development of Britain’s University of the Third Age.



After a two-years stint in the British army in the 1950s, John Laslett attended Oxford University during the postwar expansion of higher education in the UK, and remained there through the completion of his dissertation. In 1962, he accepted a position at the University of Chicago and moved to the U.S. with his American wife, Barbara Laslett, who would go on to become a prominent feminist

sociologist.

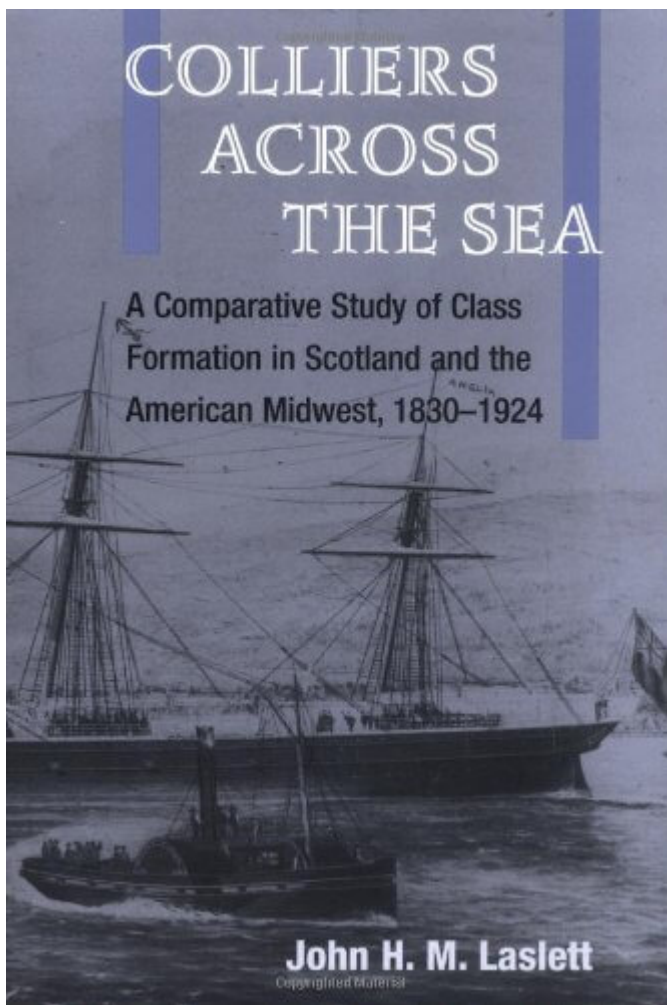
Laslett's first book, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881-1924* (1970) reflected the resurgence of scholarly interest in working-class social history that followed the publication of E.P. Thompson's, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Against the backdrop of the Cold War association of radicalism with the Soviet Union, a new generation of historians sought to excavate the story of homegrown radicalisms. *Labor and the Left*, which focused on the rise and fall of socialist influence in six trade unions, was an institutional history, not yet influenced by the New Labor History's emphasis on broader currents of working-class life and culture that was beginning to shake up the field. Still, there were expertly crafted chapters on German brewery workers, Jewish garment workers, and Irish shoemakers. Laslett argued that activists in each of these unions embraced socialism in response to Gilded Age excesses of wealth and power, and then abandoned the faith in favor of reformist trade unionism as conditions changed and trade union power grew. One can see in Laslett's book the interweaving of ethnic and working-class history shared with contemporaries, and would be the focus of his later work.

During his years in the Midwest, Laslett completed work on *Labor and the Left*. In those years, Chicago itself was a center of new American radicalisms, and Laslett and his young family marched in support of fair housing and civil rights, and against the war in Vietnam.

Laslett's first major publication followed a series of influential studies of American radicalism including James Weinstein's *The Decline of Socialism in America* (1967), David Montgomery's *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans* (1967) and Melvyn Dubofsky's history of the Industrial Workers of the World, *We Shall be All* (1969). Over the next decade or so much more was to come, including important books by James Green, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nick Salvatore. For all their differences, these works took socialism as a positive and deeply rooted force in American life, not one that was—as some conservative scholars argued—intrinsically out of touch with American realities. Much of this work was inspired by the New Left's search for a "useable past," though in Laslett's case it may have also reflected his upbringing in Britain, where socialism remained a vibrant working-class tradition.

The year before the publication of *Labor and the Left*, Laslett moved to California to take a position at UCLA. The campus was undergoing its own radical upsurge around opposition to the Vietnam War and demands for Ethnic Studies. Laslett's next book extended his work on American radicalism with a huge volume that he co-edited with sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, *Failure of a Dream? Essays in the History of American Socialism* (1974). With

contributions from a wide range of leading contemporary scholars and activists and an innovative format that included critical commentary, along with author's responses, the book also included the first English translation of a selection from Werner Sombart's foundational 1906 text "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?," an essay that has continued to be the starting point for numerous explorations of American exceptionalism. A 1984 revision of the volume, shorter but with important new material on race, gender, and ethnicity, ensured its continued relevance to debates on American labor radicalism.



Colliers Across the Sea (University of Illinois Press, 2000)

A comparative approach to American labor history and a critique of American exceptionalism, both implicit in these two works, were made explicit in Laslett's masterful study, *Colliers across the Sea: A Comparative Study of Class Formation in Scotland and the American Midwest, 1830-1924* (2000). Laslett offered a systematic study of coal mining

communities in Lanarkshire, Scotland, and northern Illinois, which was an important destination for migrants from Lanarkshire. Combining fine-grained historical analysis with an enthusiasm for tackling big questions regarding working-class consciousness, he demonstrated that—contra exceptionalism—the two regions exhibited strikingly similar patterns of class formation. Though reflecting long-held interests, Laslett's approach in this monograph was also influenced by his experience as visiting professor in 1973-74 at the University of Warwick's noted Institute for the Study of Social History in the UK, where a team of talented historians led by Royden Harrison were engaging in intensive research on British coal miners and their communities. During his research on *Colliers*, Laslett developed the idea of "overlapping diasporas" as a way to understand the trajectory of U.S. working-class history. Echoing the work of Herbert Gutman and others, Laslett came to see the working-class history of the U.S. as shaped by the legacies of successive waves of migration and the shifting social and political strategies of immigrant workers as they encountered new conditions in America. diverging only with the different political and economic situations that miners encountered after World War I. Enthusiastically greeted by social historians in both Britain and the United States, *Colliers across the Sea* marked a triumphant close to this phase of Laslett's scholarship.

Following his year at Warwick, Laslett deepened his engagement with local labor and progressive campaigns in Southern California, including organizing led by the United Farm Workers (UFW) and opposition to plant closures. In the early 1980s, he moved to L.A.'s Silver Lake neighborhood, where he met stalwarts of the Old Left like Dorothy Healey, and developed a long term engagement with the [Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research](#), a community-based library founded by labor activists who sought to preserve the history of the left in L.A. while remaining relevant to the changing demographics around them. While still working on *Colliers across the Sea*, Laslett and librarian Mary Tyler wrote a history of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) in L.A. that bridged the early 20th century immigrant radicalism of the union's early years to the militancy of new immigrants from Latin America. At the time, the ILGWU was leading an aggressive campaign to organize garment workers in LA.

After moving to Santa Monica to join his second wife Lois Banner, a prominent women's historian at the University of Southern California (USC), Laslett continued his direct involvement in organizing campaigns by taking part in struggles for affordable housing and union drives by hotel workers. He joined phone banks, went to rallies and knocked on doors.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Laslett finally became a U.S citizen, motivated in part by fears that a newly-elected, anti-immigrant federal government might strip noncitizens of their Social Security benefits. Until the year 2000, he had lived as a permanent resident on



a green card. Frustrated by the laborious process of renewing his green card, and once again being married to an American citizen, he was finally naturalized as a U.S. citizen later that year. While his experience of migration and naturalization were about as smooth as they could be (his white, male, highly educated, English background served him well), his interest in and dedication to immigrants and their historical and contemporary experiences only deepened as his career progressed.

During these years, Laslett published a series of essays and working papers on Illinois coal miners, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and trade union politics. He edited a well-received collection of essays on the history of the United Mine Workers Union that highlighted the richly empirical character of the New Labor History at its height.



Sunshine Was Never Enough (University of California, 2014)

Turning his full attention to Los Angeles, Laslett next set about writing a comprehensive history of the city's working class. Published in 2012, *Sunshine was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880-2010*, was a sweeping interpretation of L.A. history that drew on many of the themes and approaches he had developed in earlier work. In contrast to the typical Hollywood images of Los Angeles, Laslett focused on the working people who drove the city's dizzying growth, contested its rigid segregation, and demanded a dignified life for all. With its long sweep of time, *Sunshine* synthesized the rich historiography of working-class and immigrant life that had emerged over the course of Laslett's long career. In this way, it countered the often-repeated criticism of labor and social history as overly narrow and particularistic.

Having spent a career debunking American exceptionalism, *Sunshine* also refused to see L.A. as a city apart from wider trends in the U.S. and the world. The book reflected Laslett's engagement with the scholarship of sociologists and fellow UCLA faculty members Ruth Milkman and Roger Waldinger who, along with many others, explored the link between new immigrants and the revitalization of organized labor. *Sunshine* concluded by reviewing promising union campaigns like SEIU's Justice for Janitors and hotel organizing by HERE, as well as the leadership of Miguel Contreras at the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor. This union revival reflected the rise of a Latino-Labor alliance that upended politics in what had historically been a conservative environment in Southern California, and underlined a leftward shift that reverberated across California and the American trade union movement. *Sunshine* won the Gold Prize as Best California History Book of the Year.

Drawing on his deep knowledge of L.A. history, Laslett next turned from sweeping synthesis to a focused case study. *Shameful Victory: The Los Angeles Dodgers, the Red Scare, and the Hidden History of Chavez Ravine* (2015) took a deep dive into an infamous episode in the 1950s when political and business elites forcibly displaced a longstanding Mexican-American community to make way for a new baseball stadium to lure the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team to Los Angeles. Working against the endemic culture of forgetting that so often defines modern Los Angeles, Laslett traced the roots of the Chavez Ravine neighborhood in the 19th century, explored the community practices of its Mexican-American residents, detailed the political betrayal at the heart of the episode, and documented residents' long fight for justice. The Chavez Ravine eviction contributed to a longstanding resentment towards the Dodgers within L.A.'s Mexican-American community, which was only reversed in the 1980s by the arrival of Mexican pitching superstar Fernando Valenzuela.



John Laslett\_in retirement. Courtesy Michael Laslett

Laslett continued writing until the end of his life. During his final years, he and Lois Banner



were collaborating on a book about the history of the British Empire. He gave it the working title of *Pondicherry Eyes: Little Holland House, the Seven Pattie Sisters, and the Glamour and Cruelty of the British Empire*. In this work, he moved into the fields of gender studies and cultural history.

In addition to his own scholarly work, Laslett was an admired teacher, academic advisor and mentor to scholars of working class, immigrant and Southern Californian history. Among them were UCLA graduate students Mike Davis, Stephen Brier, Devra Weber, David Brundage and Lawrence Lipin, whose PhD dissertation research and writing he either supervised or actively participated in shaping. Breaking from the rigid academic hierarchies of earlier times (especially those of Oxford in the 1950s), he often invited graduate students to his home, and joined them at study groups and conferences.

John Laslett is survived by his children, Michael and Sarah Laslett, who both pursued decades-long careers in union organizing and labor education, and his grandchildren Kai and Rio Laslett-Vigil. He is also survived by his wife Lois Banner, a founder of the field of women's history, by her children and grandchildren, and by his large extended family in England.

## Authors



[Michael Laslett](#)

Michael Laslett spent 37 years in the labor movement in many different roles, including rank-and-file member; elected local union officer; union reformer; internal organizer and contract negotiator; external organizer; organizing, division and strategic campaigns director; global campaigner; and education and leadership development director. During his career, Michael worked at SEIU, the Teamsters (IBT) and Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), the UFCW, and AFSCME. His work took him across the United States and Europe. His last position was national Deputy Director for Offense at SEIU's Public Services Division. Michael currently serves on the Advisory Committee of the Washington State Labor Education and Research Center (WA-LERC) at South Seattle College.



David Brundage

David Brundage is Professor Emeritus and Research Professor of History at the University of California, Santa Cruz. A specialist in both US labor and Irish diaspora history, he is author of *The Making of Western Labor Radicalism: Denver's Organized Workers, 1878-1905* (1994) and *Irish Nationalists in America: The Politics of Exile, 1798-1998* (2016). He is working on a biography entitled *A People's Advocate: Frank P. Walsh and the Democratic Promise*.



Tobias Higbie

Tobias Higbie is Professor of History and Labor Studies at the University of California Los Angeles, and the Director of the Institute for Research on Labor & Employment. His research focuses on the history of organized labor, social movement education, and immigration in the United States. Higbie is the author of *Labor's Mind: A History of Working-class Intellectual Life* (2019) and *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest* (2003), as well as articles on immigrant workers, print culture, and robots. He holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of Illinois and is a member of the American Federation of Teachers.