I first reached out to Jeremy Brecher in 2015 as I was doing research for “Allan Nevins Is Not My Grandfather.” Brecher had been the lead oral historian for the Brass Valley History Project, widely considered the most significant project that came out of the People’s History movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Ron Grele referred to the project as “genius” and “so much better than anything yet produced.” The more I learned about the project and others from the period, the more I agreed with Grele. Not only had Brecher produced a groundbreaking work in the field of “New Labor History”; the project had played a significant role in fostering a workers’ movement that led to what may have been the only successful workers’ buyout of an industrial plant in the United States. This oral history is an in-depth exploration of Brecher’s sources of inspiration—his radical roots.

The interview took place over two sittings a year apart, on January 30, 2016, and January 24, 2017. The first sitting focused primarily on the period before the Brass Workers History Project, and the second one picked up from there. The interview does not undermine the argument I made in “Allan Nevins Is Not My Grandfather”; rather it complicates it. Oral history, of course, is rather good at that. As the interview makes clear, Brecher situates himself in a genealogy that does not nest neatly with the one I trace. He includes well-known figures such as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Alan Lomax as sources
of inspiration, as well as figures who may not be as well known, such as Tim Costello and Dorothy Lee.

While Brecher productively complicates the genealogy, the interview solidifies my understanding of Brecher’s work as breaking new theoretical ground in the field of oral history. His innovations should be taken into account by anyone interested in doing a radical community history project.

**DK:** What inspired you to think about using oral history as a tool in your work?²

**JB:** Well, I think there are a lot of things that were in the air at various points in my life. There was a woman named Dorothy Lee [Dorothy Demetracapoulou Lee],³ who was a professor of anthropology, who came to Yelping Hill, my little community, and spent summers next to me. I probably first got to know her when I was about ten. So it would have been around 1956. She called herself an experiential/existential anthropologist. The idea of trying to get at people’s experience through what they said or what they wrote was amplified and held up as an important way of knowing for me. She was a huge influence and mentor for me. As I became a teenager, she gave me a book called *Metamorphosis* by a German maverick psychoanalyst Ernest Schachtel.⁴ He was drawing on phenomenological approaches, experiential approaches. So how do you get at experience, and how do you get some understanding of other people’s experience?

And I was certainly aware in some vague way of the Freedman’s Bureau slave narratives and the WPA [Works Progress Administration] oral histories. In my family, I don’t know if there’s anyone who had been in the WPA oral history projects, but there certainly were people who knew all about them and talked about them. They regarded it as part of their cultural background from the 1930s.

There was a series of pamphlets on methodology of using personal documents that was done by someone with a name like Social Science Research Council.⁵ They actually did a series of sort of manuals, sort of critical guides to using personal documents in the social sciences, which I acquired at some early age. I have no idea how I found out about them, but I read them.

Another strand that flew into this for me, and I think for a lot of other people of my generation really, was folk music and folklore. You
had the Folkways Records, with their massive booklet of notes inside, which were mostly oral histories of the people who were the performers and their stories about the songs, and about the background of them and their family and community backgrounds. I read the pamphlet by Alan Lomax called “Folk Song Style” very early. What does it mean as a folklorist to capture the things that are the social experience that the song comes out of? Eventually, I ended up doing ethnic music collecting in Waterbury and Naugatuck Valley after the Brass Workers History Project. I would go in like an oral historian, get people’s story throughout, the culture of the community, the family history, et cetera, and embed the songs in that milieu.

So that gets us to the point when I actually started doing history. I went to Reed College from 1961 to 1965—dropped out. I started the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] chapter at Reed. The sense was strong that the radical student movement and the antiwar movement were cut off from the working class. We were in a sort of situation where the radical student movement and the movements associated with it were at loggerheads with the established White working-class and trade union movement. It was a split about racial questions and above all about nationalism and the war. And at the same time, we were kind of at a dead end from a power point of view. We had pretty much won the population to be against the Vietnam War and had all kinds of direct action and mass action going on against it, and it seemed to not change anything.

I got a bunch of the early issues of the *New Left Review* from England, and they had a big influence on my early politics. The *New Left Review* at that time was quite different from the hyperintellectual publication that it became. It had a special issue on workers’ control, which I devoured. It said basically, “This is participatory democracy in the workplace, and why the heck isn’t our participatory democracy movement propounding the idea of participatory democracy in the workplace and reaching out to working people?” That has been a central theme of my thinking and writing ever sense, and it was motivated both by the same values that motivated participatory democracy in general—why should somebody else be telling people what to do, why can’t they get together and figure out themselves what to do, and why shouldn’t they? At the same time, if we are going to build a political movement, antiwar, antiracist, for democracy, that obviously has to...
have at its core working people, organized working people. And yet that’s not happening, and how can we move that forward?

Raising the question of workers’ power in the workplace seems like a no-brainer; to me, it seemed like a no-brainer. I discovered the very short labor history shelf in the school library at Reed and read everything, and I was pretty dissatisfied with it and wanted to know much more and didn’t find it out there. And so I eventually just continued pursuing it on my own.

My first book, *Strike!* was really politically motivated by two concerns: Could you connect with radical traditions in the working class and stories from working-class history that would both be a vehicle for the means to assist the self-transformation of the working class and also a way to create some kind of common dialect and sense of common experience and common objectives between the radical movement of the day, which was student and youth based, and the more mainstream working class? To write *Strike!*, I basically researched by sitting in the stacks of the Yale library and reading the old labor journals and whatever sources I could find without doing serious primary research, because it just covered too huge, too vast a canvas to do that. When I was done, although I liked the book and I still like the book, I realized there was something fucked about the way it was done: I didn’t talk to a single worker who had experienced the things that I was writing about.

There’s an enormous amount that you couldn’t get at from that distance, so I became very interested in trying to find one community where I could really sink some roots in and where I could talk with the people who had experienced the stuff I was writing about. It wasn’t something I had an action plan to pursue. But that year, just before *Strike!* came out, I was helping develop a tiny homemade magazine project called *Root and Branch.* Hovering around the fringes of it was a guy name Tim Costello, who was a young worker intellectual. We both needed a place to live, so we rented an apartment together. Tim and I became fast friends and writing collaborators for forty years starting then.

There was a highly publicized young workers revolt at that point in Lordstown, Ohio. The publicized flash point of it was worker resistance, young worker resistance in the auto plant. So we decided we would take a trip across the country in the summer, and interview young workers, and do a book about it, which became *Common Sense for Hard
We really didn’t know anything about oral history—I mean, I probably had heard about the Columbia Oral History Office. I probably had heard of it as an elite thing. But it wasn’t really in the air yet. I was aware of Staughton Lynd’s work in Chicago through his article on the writer’s workshop that was in *Radical America*. That definitely had an influence on the Brass Valley work when we get there. But the thing about Tim was that he had always interviewed the people he worked with and got their stories and tried to understand their way of thinking and the background of it. He was, from the time I met him, basically trying to reinvent working-class consciousness and the working-class movement. We had very similar views. We had always been a faction of two basically.

That was really our takeoff point in *Common Sense for Hard Times* and that trip we did. We would go into and set up formal interviews. I mean, they weren’t very formal; we didn’t record them. We must have known that people did record these things. Partially we just didn’t have any experience with that. We didn’t know anyone who was doing that, but we also wanted to talk about sabotage and various forms of on-the-job resistance. That was what we were trying to get at, which Tim was an expert at on his job, and so we didn’t think that people would want to record that. So we would just sit down with people and take notes, and then write it up as much as possible immediately afterward. But we were making this up as we went along; we had no guidance about how to do any of this. Somebody who sat in on one of our early interviews said, when they saw our write-up, he said, “They’re going to think you smuggled a tape recorder in there.” So that was reassuring. Although somebody else said, “The problem with this book is that every worker talks in exactly the same way.” So between those two sides, we probably made a pretty accurate capturing of the content of what people said, but the nuance of the expression, we probably were very poor at; it all sounded like us. But I think we did what we set out to do, which was to collect those stories and put them in a book and a framework that informed it with historical perspectives of working-class experience. So that’s really the start of doing oral history.

**DK:** Was your vision that by collecting the stories and putting out the book, that would then generate dialogue? Who was the perceived audience for the book?
**JB:** Right, good questions, because those aspects of it are very germane to my later Brass Valley work and the participatory approach to doing community history. So we definitely saw it as a book for young workers, and we said that. Some academic wants to learn something about the current working class, that’s the secondary purpose. But the main purpose is that we are part of this young working-class world and our exploration of it is to amplify a dialogue that’s going on within that community. I knew nothing about Freire [Paulo Freire], and I knew of John Dewey, but everyone was influenced by John Dewey. He was the Stalin after 1956, permeated the atmosphere even though no one really talked about him by the time I came along. But he had been such a dominant force in the culture and politics of America. So Deweyian, reflexive learning-by-doing permeated everything. As well it should.

**DK:** And then the agenda of talking about sabotage and some of the—

**JB:** Yeah, well we were talking about on-the-job resistance. We were talking about sabotage in the broad Wobbly [Industrial Workers of the World] conception of it, not necessarily machine breaking, but all the things—stealing work time was the main thing that people were doing. Any specific sabotage that was being done was a means to just getting a little more freedom on the job. Everybody we talked to talked about it. They sometimes would say to us, “Why are you concentrating on this? There’s other important things going on: we’ve got pollution, we’ve got war. Why is this informal resistance on the job so important?” But we had no problems getting people to talk about it.

**DK:** You said Tim had a lot of experience interviewing before that.

**JB:** Yeah, and that was what we built on. He had done this very similar kind of thing with similar questions. He would ask his gang of fuel oil drivers—which was the job he had when I knew him in New York and in Boston, and they would have incredibly long hours. But the job had to get done. They had very elaborated techniques for soldiering, informal job control. Everybody knew how much time you could take to do job X, and nobody would do it in the shorter time. And that left a couple hours to go have a cup of coffee or go hang out with your buddies. In Tim’s
case, he set up a desk in the back of his truck and he would go hide out for a couple hours and study, and maybe he would go back and make the next delivery. But you could only do this if you’ve got an informal network that protects people and makes sure nobody does a nine-hour job in six hours. He was the total master of that and was raised up in it. His father was a railroad worker, and that was part of the tradition.

By that time, a friend of mine, Steve Sapolsky, had gone out to study with Dave Montgomery at the University of Pittsburgh. Dave had done a series of papers that hadn’t been published that were circulating among his grad students about soldiering, job resistance, Taylorism, and all of the nitty-gritty of workplace struggle at that level, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So we had historical background for this and got more of it when we came back and were writing a book. So we took these troubles that people were telling us about and put them in a historical context in *Common Sense for Hard Times*, and that was kind of the fun of it.

**DK:** Was the essential understanding that this form of everyday resistance was the foundation for what a larger working-class struggle could be built off of?

**JB:** Yes, exactly, and you’ll find that motif in *Strike!*, where it talks about the cell unit of the mass strike being the day-to-day job struggle and the struggle over conditions of work, informal, usually not through the union, although often interpenetrated with the union. So that was very much what it was, and because I think we (not just Tim and me, but our wider peer group) tended to view the trade union movement as more or less a uniform reactionary monolith, which was probably not too far from the truth. Even if it was a little overdrawn—it didn’t have enough room for exceptions. So we saw the creation of the independent working-class movement that was independent although not totally opposed to the existing trade union movement as the course forward for working-class self-organization. And you can see that in *Strike!*

**DK:** You talked about your dissatisfaction after producing *Strike!*, what was your assessment at that point, after publishing *Common Sense for Hard Times*?
JB: Well, first of all the book came out at an economic crisis point. It was the peak of 1973–75 crisis, and our publisher was shut down when the book was in something called mechanicals, which was the final stage of production. It’s beyond page proofs, literally ready to have the things put on the press. And it was years before we got it out, like two or three years. The magic moment was missed. So in terms of any impact it might have had for the audience that it was aimed for, it was greatly reduced by that. We essentially self-published it, and then it got picked up by South End when I think South End was on the first press list. So if it had come out at the time that it was ready to go, it might have had a very different impact, because young workers were hot, hard times were hot, but as it was, I think it had a very limited impact.

The Woody Guthrie line about “let me be known as a man who tells you something you almost already knew”—that was definitely our intent, and I think we were trying to invent how to do that. I think we made a noble effort at doing it. I don’t think that we completely solved all the problems in doing that. Staughton Lynd didn’t like the book at all. He wrote and he said he loves *Strike!*, but we raised so many questions that we didn’t answer, but that might be the virtue of the book. I think, for me personally in terms of my own development, *Strike!* is still a lefty book in the sense that it has a lot of the underlying paradigms of what social democracy and communism have in common. It’s a very cleaned-up version of socialism. *Common Sense for Hard Times* is much more dialogic, much more assuming that there’s not that much gap between the audience and the writers. It’s not that we know the truth and we’re bringing enlightenment to the masses. It’s we’ve hung out with the masses, and we’re taking what we’ve learned there with some things we’ve learned in the library and made our best synthesis. And now we’re putting that out for people to do the next round—what they can make of this. I think you’ll find that pretty explicitly articulated in the book, a Hortonian [referencing Myles Horton] approach, even though we didn’t know his full rap on that.

DK: So you’ve got the two-year delay, things have changed over that time, and now you’re in about 1975, 1976?

JB: I have the idea of wanting to find a place, one working-class town where I can dig in, get to know people, and have people involved.
First of all, do labor history in a way that’s drawing on the experience of workers with some kind of collaboration with the people that are being studied. The people whose story is being told being part of telling the story was definitely part of what my thinking was. I knew that the people that I would want to interview would know a tremendous amount and have a tremendous amount of insight into the history that we were developing. So it was in a way a no-brainer to assume that they would in some way be involved, not just as the object of study but also as cointerpreters. I didn’t have that language fully developed then, but certainly the idea. It wouldn’t have occurred to me not to do it that way by then.

**DK:** One quick question: so right in this early stage, you’ve thought that this was more than just a study to better understand the conditions, that this was about some form of radical mobilization?

**JB:** So it is all grounded in having a very unfavorable view of organizing society based on a very small number of people bossing everyone else around. And it all one way or another comes out of the idea that the people who are subjected to those conditions need to find some way to get together and make things happen in a way that’s more fair and favorable to themselves—so some very broad notions of class struggle and class self-organization.

**DK:** Participatory democracy in the workplace?

**JB:** Yup, and then I tried to find more concrete ways that that’s been manifested, that people have done that, and then what can you learn from that, what can they learn from that, how can that be developed to a further extent? It always comes out of that, just about everything I do. I could attempt to justify it, but probably the explanation is that everything in my background, and my experience, and also the world that I look at—but that’s obviously shaped by the categories that I look at it in. So the answer is yes, and it’s definitely all some contribution to working people being able to get the understandings that are necessary, to get more cooperative control over their conditions of life. After *Strike!*, it became less guided by a left paradigm of “The masses are going to be organized and then storm the barricades and destroy
capitalism.” I became more agnostic about that whole historical paradigm. It became more Deweyian in the sense of “Here’s problems the working people are facing.” Addressing them requires getting together in some way and addressing them collectively and formulating objectives about how to do it, what needs to be done, and how it ends. So that’s got to grow out of people’s experience. So let’s look at people’s experience, what they’ve done with that experience before, and draw and put that out not in a way that “Here’s the solution,” but put it out in a way that says, “Here’s the experience, here’s some lessons that maybe we should draw from it, what’s the next phase of problem solving that we need to look at?” Maybe if I see some hypotheses that are reasonable, I don’t try to hide them, but they’re presented as things we might explore in addressing a current phase of the problem we face. So everything comes out of some version of that paradigm.

So the origin myth for the Brass Workers History Project is one day I got a call from Peter Marcuse, son of Herbert Marcuse, who I didn’t know at all but who turned out to live in Waterbury. And he was having a party, and Rob Burlage, who I had known forever at SDS, was a friend of his and was coming up for the party. Rob said he should get in touch with me, so he invited me and Jill. And I went to this party at his house in Waterbury where there were a bunch of old left of various kinds, the older Waterbury radicals.

There was an old Italian guy who had been an organizer for smelters in the 1930s and actually remembered as a young immigrant kid the general strikes of 1919 and 1920. And so I was back in the corner, interviewing the Italian guy for an hour—I mean we were at a party, but I was just sitting and asking him questions—and it occurred to me, maybe this town is the place to do a study with participation by workers who had experienced the history that I wanted to tell about.

I started doing research, and I discovered more about these two general strikes, so there was a fantastic story here, and other pieces of the story I began gleaning. Then two things happened. I heard about two young filmmakers, Jan Stackhouse and Jerry Lombardi, who were making community videos about unemployment in the lower part of Naugatuck Valley. And this was a time when the brass industry was hitting the skids. It was very hard hit but not totally gone, but everyone was kind of expecting it to be gone. And there was very large unemployment
in the towns where the brass mills were already starting to close and cutback. They were making videos and showing them in the local library or community centers. I saw an announcement of one of their showings, and I just went down and met them. So we had kind of the idea of collaborating on something because we were doing similar things. It struck me that doing video would be a great way to put some of this back into the community.

We’re in the Carter administration, which started in 1977, and this is in the lead-up to the reelection campaign. We were told they’re bringing money to the labor movement around New England in saddlebags, and they’re looking for any way to give money to labor. And there was a guy who was making the rounds for the National Endowment for the Humanities, going from state to state and doing presentations through the state labor councils to say that the NEH wanted to fund labor projects. Somehow, I got invited to this, and Jan and Jerry got invited to it also. So he gave us a presentation, and I thought, “This is kind of weird,” and I was much too radical and alienated to think of actually doing something like this. But we found out that they couldn’t directly fund unions to do these projects, because it wasn’t scholarly, respectable, to have people studying themselves. So they had this weird situation where they wanted to do labor projects, but they needed somebody to do labor projects where labor would look favorably on it but where the people who were doing it had some kind of scholarly cover for what they were doing. So if you look at the string of projects that you have identified in that period, many of them are the result of this odd political reality.

**DK:** So they ended up giving the more radical guys the money because you didn’t believe in the unions.

**JB:** That’s exactly right. And I think you’ll find a similar pattern to half a dozen other projects like this.

**DK:** How did you pitch yourself as a scholar?

**JB:** I kind of suppressed my lack of academic background. I didn’t have—and I’m forgetting the chronology here, maybe I already had
my mail-order PhD. Actually, yeah, I did. Common Sense for Hard Times was my dissertation equivalent, as they said, PDE (Project Demonstrating Excellence). So yes, I had a PhD from the Union Graduate School, and somewhere after I got it, Union Graduate School actually got accredited.

We talked to Hank Murray, a UAW organizer and rep in Connecticut. We said we wanted to do some kind of project, and he said, “You’re going to do it on the brass workers, the brass industry is going down, it’s not going to be here anymore, it has an incredibly rich labor history. What you should do is the history of the brass workers of the Naugatuck Valley.” And that made perfect sense. I realized that there was a confluence between the themes of the new labor history as they were being developed by Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery, and the idea of worker self-organization, and the idea of a community-based history project. These things fit together very well. Now we had the video component so that we could produce materials that would be useful to local working-class communities and people like them elsewhere.

So we did the proposal, and we got funded and had to look for models and some idea of what to do. There had been various city histories: Yankee City and so on, done by sociologists from Middletown and so on. Middletown has all kinds of oral history in it, although they used whatever statistical data they could get. And it has a sort of people’s history of Middletown—migration patterns and stuff like that largely come from interviews. We vaguely knew about the History Workshop in England, although not very much. But Jim Greene, Susan Reverby, and Marty Blatt were just starting the Massachusetts History Workshop. I missed the first event they did in Lowell. But the second one was in Lynn, and I went to it.

That was really all of the background that we had for doing this. So we faked about a lot of things. We did the best we could to talk like we knew what we were doing. Actually, we had no clue what we were doing.

**DK:** When you went to this workshop in Lynn, what was your thought—

**JB:** First of all, it validated the basic premise that workers can tell most of the story of working-class and labor history. The people who had worked in the shoe industry were perfectly capable of laying out the
main lines of their history, and they argued with each other over points of interpretation and so on. So it completely validated that premise that there would be interest. It also taught me that we would have to learn the right approach to engaging participation. We weren’t just going to hand out a flier and people were going to say, “Oh, how wonderful, they’re doing the history of the workers in the brass industry. Let’s go to the meeting that’s announced in this flier.” It required much more of a process of figuring out how you were going to do it, how to make it be meaningful to people, how to get rid of the barriers that prevented people from participating.

What happened in Lynn was that they connected with a woman who was the administrative person for the retirees’ unit of the old shoe workers’ union, who knew everyone who was still alive who worked in the industry. She was a wonderful person, understood exactly what they were trying to do, and would pitch it to people who would come in for whatever kind of events they were running. She was seeing large swathes of the retirees. And over time, she started calling it a reunion. People suddenly said, “Of course I have to come to the reunion.” It redefined what was going on, not “Are you coming to the history workshop?” but “Are you coming to the reunion?” She also made it clear that having food was really an important thing. If they knew that they were going to get a free meal and see their friends, they would have a really strong motive to come. What I learned from that was not so much the specifics of reunion or food or whatever, but that you have to think strategically/humanly about what it is that’s going to draw people in and get over all the reasons that they might not want to do it. Our approach involved a lot on the participation side.

The Brass Workers History Project was basically three people. Jerry was really the video person, and Jan was basically an organizer, a union and community organizer. Jan also had some administrative skills, had done some fund-raising, and knew how to budget a project. God knows what I was—sort of a historian, definitely a writer, but not someone who was either big organizational or had any video experience. None of us were really local in Waterbury. We rented an office with a little apartment upstairs where I lived; they were living in the lower valley. The next day, we opened the office and looked at each other and said, “What do we do now?”
Because we didn’t know until the last minute whether we were going to get the grant, we were very reluctant to get people excited and draw people from the community into the process until we knew it was really going to happen. We didn’t want to disappoint people. We really had to hit the ground running. We hadn’t been able to recruit people into working on this project.

Over the course of several weeks, we didn’t know what to do. So we made some rounds of the retiree organizations and the union locals and anyone else that we could talk to and explain what we were doing. We kept a very low profile, mostly because of the political situation. Extreme anticommunist and nationalist views were widespread. There was a minuteman center. There was Ku Klux Klan, not in Waterbury but in Sheldon, in the lower valley. We were afraid of getting shot out of the water by the right-wing local paper. We assumed that if anybody found out about our crazy project and that the government is paying for this, it would be a total setup for some kind of extreme red-baiting response. That meant we couldn’t do a big article in the local paper as a way of contacting people, and we avoided that all the way to the end. As a matter of fact, I was told that the people with the local paper, when they saw the books, said, “How could this have been going on in our community and we didn’t even know about it?” So that’s how low our profile was. We made the rounds of all the organizations we knew about and our union contacts were helpful for that.

So at a certain point, I just said, well, we can’t just keep spinning our wheels like this. We need to go out and start doing interviews, and do audio interviews; we’ll get to the video later. We’ll identify the people that we want, but we need to go out and start getting the story. I’m somebody who had, at that time, an aversion to making a cold call, so it was very difficult for me to telephone somebody who I had been told about and chum them up and end up with an appointment for an interview. I made myself do it, but it’s not the kind of thing I was particularly comfortable with. Where we had contacts to go through was much more comfortable and worked much better, and it was much easier to get people’s trust.

And so we just basically worked the network that we had and asked people, “Who should we go see?” By that time, I knew a fair number of people, and I knew the outlines of the historical story of the labor
movement there and of the industry. So we just started doing interviews. It immediately opened up everything; I mean, it was extremely exciting and revealing and just great. So that was really my role; my initial approach to things was just a lot of interviewing. And we went around to senior centers to build up our network. We found a woman who ran one of the senior centers and knew everybody. It was a labor-based senior center started by the UAW, and so she would say to people, “We have these nice young people who are doing these interviews. Would you be interested in playing the intermediary role that way?”

We also had some internal tension. Jan felt very strongly that we should be targeting the interviewing pretty carefully around what now we call diversity issues. I don’t even know if we were even using the term that way at that time, but the representation of women, of African Americans, and I was for that, but I was probably more oriented toward the how are we going to have people from different occupations, different generations, the different companies—get the different stories in those kinds of terms, people with different union experiences, organizing experiences. In particular, how are we going to get some of the accounts of the events, notable strikes, starting with, as I thought, 1919? And how are we going to find people who had participated in the various labor struggles? We ended up with a pretty good variety of people. What we basically did was come around at the end and fill in the holes. And of course, this community is so ethnically complex. We aren’t just talking about Black and White; that’s a small bit of diversity in a place like Waterbury at that time.

We had a description of what we were doing, and we worked up a rap to explain why we were asking people to be interviewed and what the project was about. Along the way, not very far in, I realized we were saying to people, “We want to help you tell your story.” I realized, no matter how much we said that, people thought, “Oh, well, here are these nice young people, and we’ll help them with their project.” It was definitely a question of they’re helping us, not our helping them. And that actually reoriented the way we thought about the personal and community dynamics quite a lot. And that was the same when we started asking people to be on the advisory committee. We learned that we weren’t helping them; they were helping us. If they got some benefit from it one way or another, that was gravy.
We were originally planning to have people participating with us and doing interviews and all the activity of the project. We rapidly learned that that was not going to happen easily. One of the things is that in the original proposal, we had a slot for an organizer, because Hank Murray said, “You need to have an organizer. That’s really what you need to make this project go,” and that got cut out in the budget. And so that was part of why we didn’t have an outreach operation unless we did it ourselves, even though that wasn’t what I was good at. That meant that our original participation plan wasn’t staffed, didn’t have anywhere to go. Gradually, we created an advisory committee, and that was largely Jan’s work, in sort of pulling people in as we got to know people. If it seemed appropriate for them, we asked them would they be on it.

Very early on, before we even started doing the interviews, I did a lot of archival research to try and find out what the heck the story was. Because there’s also a very complex intraunion conflict within this—a line that runs right through the history of the brass workers union history. And we were going to have to deal with that. I went out to University of Colorado library in Boulder, which is where the papers of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers were—which was the first union in the thirties, forties, and fifties—and copied a vast amount of stuff. Then I went and spent a lot of time at Harvard Business School library, which had the collection of the Scovill Manufacturing Company, which was absolutely fantastic. The written research both helped orient us toward how to deal with it as a piece of history and also added another level to the products that was very complimentary to what we were doing with oral history and video documentation. It also allowed us to have a much better sense of what the story was when we went in. People that we were interviewing and working with appreciated the fact that we actually knew something about the history of labor and the history of the valley. It also helped us know where the minefields were. You needed to know this guy and that guy had run against each other in a union election and it had turned to almost fisticuffs—that kind of stuff.

Explaining to people what we were doing turned out to be a very important part of the lead-in to the interviews. We had a short presentation of what it was about and why we were doing it and how the material would be used, because that was always the question. What’s going to happen to this stuff? And we were very clear that they’ll be
stored in a local repository, future generations, including your descend- 
dants, will be able to access them. This is not somebody who’s going 
to go someplace and write their PhD and become a professor. This is 
something that’s being done for the local community. But what we very 
rapidly learned was that people would make their own interpretations 
about what we were doing. We came to realize that was actually the way 
it should be, and we stopped trying to set people straight about what 
we were doing. We’d give them our basic rap and then let them watch 
us, let them talk to their friends who had already been interviewed 
by us, and make their own judgment of what it was we were doing. That 
became a much more comfortable and equal way of relating. Like yeah, 
we’re another type of animal that wandered in here, and you know you 
can look at us and say, “Oh, they’re so sweet. We don’t believe for a 
minute that this project is ever going to happen, but we’re certainly 
going to help them have a nice experience doing this.” When we came 
out with the book and the movie, I remember one person we did several 
interviews with being absolutely flabbergasted and saying, “We never 
thought this was going to happen. We thought that this was all just 
like some fantasy of yours, that anything would get produced out of 
this. We played along because you were nice.” And different people 
had very different takes on what we were doing. Our coming to accept 
that was I think an important milestone in the development of this as a 
human project.

So we started doing the interviews, and we ended up doing over 
a hundred before we were done, and that really was a very, very big 
part of the initial work. When we interviewed people, we were not just 
collecting the stories of the events and what happened. We would ask 
people what they thought it meant and to put things into historical 
context. We really said, “The people that we’re approaching are the 
experts, and they’re the theorists.” They had spent their entire lifetimes 
watching, listening, analyzing, trying to figure out what was going on. 
There were people who were just spectacular as far as their depth of 
understanding and reflection on what this whole experience meant.

I did a lot of what would be fairly conventional oral history: “Tell 
me about your background and your family, where you come from, and 
how did you get to the valley, and if you went to school there, what was 
it like?”—that type of thing. Then leading into “How did you get to be
a brass worker, what was it like, what happened when times got slow?” all those kinds of questions that reflect aspects of working-class life and would allow people to talk about what it meant to them and how they lived it. But then we would go to the union and organizing and that kind of thing, and “When did you first hear about the union, and what did you think when you first heard; well, what did your parents think about that?” et cetera. The questions directed what the subject matters were, but they were opened-ended and encouraged people to make their own story of what it is and their own interpretation of what that’s about.

When we did the videos, we assembled the first draft of the book. Making a video was a huge task. I don’t actually remember their using razor blades to cut tape. But they must have, I don’t know how else they could have done it. It wasn’t easy. Jan made an alliance with Connecticut Public Television to make the documentary, and that really made it possible. They gave us a huge amount of editing time in their studio and let us just keep going. This would not be nearly as big an issue today, but in that time, if you didn’t have that, you couldn’t make a movie.

So we took the rough edit of the movie and the rough edit of the book and we had our advisory panels that were really involved, who read them, looked at them, and gave us feedback. And we revised a fair amount based on that. That was another part of treating the community people as interpreters. One of the first things that was said to us is “In the old days, Waterbury was all sectioned off and people didn’t mingle too good.” Mingle and sectioned off, I learned, were local words for “segregation” and “integration.” And they said, “If you treat this just as a labor story, you’re never going to understand it. The ethnic dimension of this was overwhelmingly the most important dimension, and the whole labor piece of it was secondary. And you won’t understand the labor part if you don’t understand and put front and center the ethnic part.” And after the tenth person told us more or less the same thing, we realized we were dealing with people who were more capable of interpreting what all this meant than we were.

Then the actual process of making the book and video went forward. We held shows of the video in each of the main valley towns. The union did an edition of the book and distributed it to all their locals in the state, certainly in the valley. They made a lot of copies available and put it in all the school libraries and public libraries. I think that we
could’ve done better with distribution and outreach, but we were out of money. We had one guy who was selling copies of the book from his locker at American Brass. There were things like that that could’ve made it much more adopted by the community as its own. We could have gone on with an organizing strategy for the distribution part of this but didn’t, partially resources, partially we didn’t have the right imagination for how to do that, and partially we all had to go on with our lives. And there’s a certain burnout factor to it that meant that we didn’t do as well with it as we could have.

The movie was shown on public television repeatedly all over the state and in the valley and in local showings in the libraries and stuff like that for forever. A better job happened with that almost osmotically rather than through a conscious design on our part. And I did two subsequent shorter documentaries on the valley, and I think both of them gave a new lease on life to the Brass Valley documentary.

There were tensions among the three of us as a team, but I don’t know how germane they were. They were on the one hand roles and on the other personalities. There were some things where we had disagreements about what the subject matters were and who to interview. There were political or intellectual differences that were not really part of the personality difficulties. I don’t think we really need to go into that.

**DK:** The personality part. What about the political part?

**JB:** Jan was pretty much a conventional leftist. And Jerry was a less politically experienced person who took her lead. And I am what I am, a radically participatory democratic, anti-Leninist type. We were on a somewhat different wavelength politically, within basically a broad agreement that the working class should organize itself to get treated better. In a broad sense, our politics were the same, but within that, they were somewhat different. I think that Jan would have gone for a more conventional, leftist interpretation of the internal fights within the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers and subsequent labor movement. She would’ve had us tell a story that was more certain of who were the good guys and who were the bad guys. Whereas my inclination was to try and let all the different factions present their versions of what
happened and then try to make some kind of sense out of it that was not mainly about who was right and who was wrong, but more about understanding how this came to be and how this local working class came to be divided around issues that probably 90 percent of the people had no idea what they were about even.

This is what was known at the time as a left-right fight, although I question even that characterization of it. But it was around the question of communist leadership in Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, and then it filtered down to battles between different local leadership groups. The ones who were identified as the left, as far as I could see, were not by any reasonable criteria that much to the left of those who were identified as the right. But they were allied with the Communist Party group, and so it got to be called the left-right division. And it was certainly a very festering sectarian division within organized labor in the valley. One of the reasons that the valley was a political minefield for this project was that when we came in, the people who had been on the two sides of that battle were still very antagonistic to each other, in a lot of cases didn’t talk to each other. This is thirty years later maybe, and it was particularly horrifying to me because they’re all like heroes as far as I was concerned. They were all people who took tremendous risks to fight for the same things. I think we ended up not disagreeing about how we would present things. Maybe the movie emphasized some things a little bit more, the book something else, because we had a somewhat different story in our heads about it. I don’t think it was of major significance.

Another disagreement we had had to do with the decline of the industry. Initially that was not part of how we saw the story, but as we did this over a couple of years and the industry was literally hitting the fan as we were doing it, we became more aware of it. As we started working on the later part of the story, Jan said, “We have to deal with international capitalism.” I said, “Get off it, we’re trying to tell a local story, we’re trying to do something that no one has really done in terms of this level of depth and intimacy of understanding the local community.” “Well, yeah, but you can’t understand what’s going on unless you look at the broader picture.” And as we went on, again the people we were interviewing would say, “Well, the companies are moving their plants all over the world, and that’s why nobody has a job in Waterbury
Eventually it began penetrating my brain that she was right. So we ended up putting it in the context of the concentration and centralization of capital. We didn’t use those words, but the way in which the local brass mills went through a concentration process, and they became the big three from many different small plants. Then the brass companies were acquired by national copper companies, and they in turn were acquired by international oil companies. The decisions about these local plants were being made by the people who were sitting in a boardroom somewhere, for whom they were specs on a balance sheet.

There was a strong community identification with these industries, separate from the class questions. They had built the brass industry, and this was their thing. The fact that these distant companies that weren’t even brass companies were making their community be puppets of their economic interest was a theme that people were very responsive to. It was very different from the usual picture widely propagated and believed, even by a lot of workers, that the greedy demands of the working class and the unions were what were responsible for the decline of the industry. We told a different story.

DK: You said you set out for this not to be a project about the book and film, and clearly, as you’ve laid out the story, that was a big portion of what it was about. But what was that other part that it was about, and do you think that was actually a successful component?

JB: Good question. I mean the book and movie were always conceived as what we would be producing out of this project and out of the process, but I would say we had a very optimistic concept of what the community participation part would look like. Our original conception was, we would have an organizer and the organizer would organize a history committee in each of the locals and the retiree organizations. There were a lot of senior centers in Waterbury whose main people in them were former brass workers or their wives. We expected we’d have committees in them. The original concept was that there would be like twenty committees that would be researching each of these subareas. Retirees of one company would work on the history of the workers in that company. It was just overambitious, both because we didn’t have the organizer to do it and because we didn’t understand the process.
which people would need to go through before they were interested in participating at that kind of level. We had people who were extremely interested in participating, for whom it was a very meaningful thing to do. But other people were more interested in fixing their car. And that was something else we had to learn to accept. If we really thought that somebody was an important person for us to talk to, being on our committee was not more important than working on their car, but taking an hour and a half to talk with us was really important, and they should take the time out to do it. We had to learn how to manage our expectations of what it was reasonable to ask people. The original vision of it was a mass participation community research project, even in the scaled-down version.

We had a hundred people involved with being interviewed. A lot of those people were involved in other ways. We had scores of people in the network around the project. That’s where I learned about building a network around your project. We thought about it as organizing committees and organization. But what really worked was to have an informal network around it where we could go to so-and-so and say, “We don’t have anybody from Cape Verdean community; can you steer us toward someone that we could talk to who was a Cape Verdean brass worker? We’ve got these pictures from nineteen twenty of Cape Verdean brass workers, we haven’t found any of them or their families.” People steered us to a Cape Verdean family. And we had great stories from it, and there’s a section in the book. And then there were the meetings, the events where we showed the products and had discussions. What it was, was a sector of a community participating in making a construction of its history. And then that process was incorporated in the products that three people, who happen to be professionals at making these types of products, made. But they were profoundly influenced and guided from what we had learned from the people in the community. And then those products became available over the longer term for the community to understand its history, and for younger people to be able to learn something about it, and as a way also of saying, “This is meaningful. This is important, this is worth recording.”

The quality of the products I think really impressed people. They really thought it was valuable, worthwhile to do something like that! I’m reminded of Jack Tchen’s project with Chinese laundry workers. He was going around saying, “I’m researching the history of Chinese
laundries in New York,” and this guy slammed down his iron and said, “Laundries have no history.” That emphasized that sense of, we’re nothing. I think that in many ways what we’ve done has had an impact on that community, countering that and saying, “This is valuable and important.” That’s gone way beyond the book and the movie as the outcome. I think the whole work of the Mattatuck Museum, the ethnic music project, the Naugatuck Valley project—all are outgrowths of the work of the Brass Workers History Project.

**DK:** Did you have a sense that crafting this own history was more than just kind of a democratizing history but kind of a radical project that would potentially make some form of positive intervention in everyday lives?

**JB:** I saw it in that framework but not in a way that I wanted to have overdefined. I wanted it to be an exploration: we’ll talk with people about what they have experienced and how they see it, and we’ll have a dialogue. I come with certain things that I have come to think are important. A lot of people have found it weird that I was so interested in informal, on-the-job resistance, for example. I went in and asked a lot of questions about that and how do people get time to themselves on the job and so on. I was very much confirmed in the importance of that, and it turned out that there was a lot of informal class struggle over the generations around piecework and control of piecework. It was almost so much part of ordinary life that people might not have told us about it because they wouldn’t have thought of it. But because we came in with a sense of that as an important thing, we were able to ask questions that brought it out. I didn’t go in with a tabula rasa, thinking, “I will just listen to what the workers have to say about their lives.” But I tried not to go in with an assumption that I already knew what was important and what it meant. And so, it was “Let’s see what happens if we do this. And then as we finish it, let’s see in what way this is useful.” I think we did always have a sense of being part of the new labor history movement—the idea of participatory history about working people as a sort of a movement.

I don’t think that we believed the workers would occupy the factories because they read about what the people did in 1919. I had the participatory democracy sort of view, and obviously from the subject
matter we chose and the way we approached it, a strong sense of the important and collective roles of class in understanding American life and American history. We were interested in the experience of working people and also the importance of class in terms of working-class self-organization as a crucial dimension of trying to make a better life for people who so far have not had possession of the means of production. We saw class specifically as a shaping feature of the actual society and actual economy we’re dealing with, which is why it was a workers’ project, not a community history one.

**DK:** When the project was over, why did you decide to stay?

**JB:** So first of all, my home was about thirty-five or forty miles from the valley. I was there; I wasn’t going to go and live in some other place for any extended period of time. Although I’m not a valley person, and I regard myself as a pet outsider. I’ve been there so long now that I’m more of a valley person. It’s more part of my identity than it certainly started out being, and I think I’m viewed as a little more than a pet outsider now. It’s like, “Well, he’s not exactly one of us, but he’s kind of part of us.” If I had said, “Well, OK, I did that, now I’m going to go on and do something completely different and unrelated to that,” it would have been totally alien to me. It would have been like getting into a forest and starting another family somewhere else. We wanted to go on with it. I actually designed an oral history project for ethnic communities to do their own histories. We went to get a grant for it from the humanities council. It was shot down, and I was told it was on the grounds that oral history wasn’t something for community people to do. It required people with professional training.

I had a Fulbright to New Zealand for six months. When I came back, I had no means of livelihood. I quickly designed the Waterbury ethnic music project, and it got funded. And so that was the next big project I did, and that’s what I was doing for a couple years. And then we did the collecting project, which was totally a development of the Brass Workers History Project. That was phase two of the same work. We did five festivals after that annually, or every two years, so for the next seven years, I was involved with doing that. Although they were ethnic music festivals, they were organizing projects in the sense that we organized within the ethnic communities. They were organizing projects in terms
of building the audience, and they were also very much historical projects. When we did the music recording, we did extensive interviews on the history of the ethnic communities and how the music and the culture fitted into them. When we presented the material, it was encased in the local cultural context as well as what it meant in the old country. And we featured people from those ethnic groups as the interpreters, much to the chagrin of the National Endowment for the Humanities. By then we had pretty much brainwashed the state humanities council to accept our community experts as the real experts. But the question of whether we would have licensed humanologists or licensed folklorists to oversee the presenting of the folk was a continual struggle. We were never able to make an institutional home for this work that could be an ongoing occupation. I’ve gone on to having the center of my attention be other things. But I’ve kept a hand in the valley and its history and movements down to the present.

**DK:** Could you tell me a little bit about NVP [Naugatuck Valley Project] and its relationship to the Brass Workers History Project?

**JB:** The plants were collapsing, sort of serial shutdowns, as we started the project. The valley was extremely hard hit. I referred to it as an outpost of the Rust Belt. It was very much the same generation of closings as Youngstown, and Lorain, and all the Midwest steel shutdowns. It was very much a question of international competition and a question of the plants being bought and milked and shut down by international corporations. It was more a sense of runaway plants than of competing foreign companies, although that was also a factor. When we did *Brass Valley*, there was a strong elegiacal quality to what we did in both the book and the movie. It was not so much elegies for the brass industry as for the working-class communities and the incredibly dense social networks and cultural networks that they had developed. There’s no way that you could envision something that would be next. There was a labor community that was formed to try to oppose plant closings, but not with any significant reach. That was it. It looked like there wasn’t anything that looked like the next piece of this story.

Then I got a call from a guy named Ken Goldstein who had become a student radical as a result of the Vietnam War, gotten interested in worker co-ops, gotten interested in community organizing, and went
and spent a number of years with the Alinsky organization. He originally studied with Alinsky [Saul Alinsky] himself and then eventually became a lead organizer in Buffalo and various other places. He then went to Yale School of Organization and Management, which is basically the Yale business school. I got a phone call from him, and he said he was looking at what could be done to save jobs in the valley, and people told him he should talk to me. And I thought, what kind of Yale asshole was this going to be? But I went and met with him, and he was going around doing interviews, talking to people and trying to find out whether something could be done here. He had been in Buffalo while the huge plant closings were going on, and they were doing typical community organizing things—trying to get a traffic light fixed or something like that. Meanwhile, the parishioners of the churches he was working with were all losing their jobs, and he realized that something needed to be done that was different. He went to Yale School of Organization and Management to explore whether you could apply these techniques, community organizing techniques, to more fundamental economic problems like plant closings. This was something that Alinsky had totally opposed doing. So I gave Ken a copy of Brass Valley and tried not to discourage him, but everybody who talked with him walked away thinking, “He wants to do what?”

A month or two later, I got another call; he had his organizing committee, and they had their first community meeting, and they were launched. I got a call from the union at Seymour Specialty Wire—Bridgeport Brass—which was one of the oldest mills. If you look at Brass Valley, there’s lots and lots from people that worked there. The workers had snuck me through on a secret tour while the managers were away. We had a lot of relationships there. And they said, “We hear the plant’s going to be sold, what can we do?” And Ken said, “You ought to tell them that you want to be considered as a bidder.” And that was the beginning of what became Seymour Specialty Wire—workers bought the plant. And there’s at least two, maybe three, chapters about it in Banded Together. I became involved with it and supportive of it and wrote about it a lot and always assumed that eventually I would have to do a book about it. I started doing interviews at the beginning. And I did a hundred interviews along the way, with all kinds of participants, leaders, all the executive directors. Every six months, I did a long
debriefing interview. I had massive documentation on it. As far as my role was, I was a resource that people could call on.

Very often, they would say, “Well, we got a call, this plant is being threatened with being closed down, what’s the background of this plant?” And I would talk with them about the history of it. In Ken’s initial round of talks to community groups, he’d put up a newssheet on the wall, and he’d ask about the companies that were threatened with closing. And then he would say, “OK who owns this, who owned it before, what was it?” And he would trace the genealogy. And of course, everyone knew well, “That’s the clock shop, and that was started by so-and-so, and originally employed all the Italians who were new greenhorns” and so on. And he would do the industrial genealogy exactly along the way that I was describing it and ending with the fact that they were controlled by distant corporations that had no concern for the people of Waterbury whatsoever. And basically, we need to organize ourselves to resist that and get some control back over our economy. Their idea was that they would organize on a community-wide basis and that local small businesses and churches would all be part of the coalition to try to save their local economies. He picked up what we had written in the later parts of Brass Valley. Unbeknownst to me until I started tracking the NVP, the alternate paradigm we had presented had actually permeated. And then when they began using that for organizing, it became quite central to the people who were doing that. So that was not due to our thoughtful, brilliant insight into where things should go. It was not strategic on our part. It was just our attempting to tell an alternative story that fit better with people’s experience.

That was probably the biggest impact of the Brass Workers History Project on the subsequent development of working-class organization in the valley. For quite a big time, the NVP was very lively, they had like sixty organizations, they had regular meetings with hundreds of people up and down the valley, changed a lot over the years and decades. It was a significant player in its glory period. And it still plays a role, but the fighting and the plant closings was a huge mobilizing issue that there’s not really any equivalent to.

Seymour Specialty Wire, the one the workers bought out, was one of the places that we had spent the most time and written about a lot in Brass Valley. And the people there knew probably as much as any group
of workers in the valley about what we had done and the story that we had told about them. After the buyout was well under way, somebody said to us, “Of course this is happening because of what you guys did.” I said, “No, what’s the connection?” And they said, “Well, that’s why they thought it was worth saving. They didn’t accept the notion ‘we’re going to lose.’ They didn’t just see it as this old falling-down plant. They had some sense of it as something with a heritage, of value that went beyond a purely economic value. It was of value as part of a community, as part of the life inheritance of these people.” And that kind of rocked me back to my heels, because I hadn’t thought of it that way. That was something you can never measure. But I think the fact that somebody had said, “OK, you guys are important, you matter; what you’ve done, what your ancestors did, that’s part of history. It’s part of the heritage of people today.”

Throughout, I always did some consulting and projects in cooperation with the Mannatech Museum, which is the local art and culture museum in Waterbury. We had numerous exhibits, participatory oral history projects that were done out of there. I was the writer and historian for the two big permanent exhibits. The first one was really like *Brass Valley* in an exhibit form; it very much drew on it. And the second one not so much, but it too was deeply influenced by the *Brass Valley* work. So we had a museum that was visited by thousands of people every year. School kids that went to the Waterbury schools went to those exhibits.

We had an evaluation and planning meeting for the Mannatech Museum around the time that we were starting to think about what the new exhibits should be like. The director asked basically, “What are we really trying to do here, what’s really our mission?” I finally said something like, “Everything that people who live in Waterbury and in the Naugatuck Valley hear and are told about themselves is that they’re worthless. There are different layers of disrespect for them in cultural terms—‘Oh, they’re just dirty immigrants. In education, people at other places, they all go to college, but these people don’t; in the political system, they’re a stepchild; and on and on of the different ways in which they’re denigrated. What this museum does, because of the kinds of exhibits it runs and kinds of programs it runs, is fundamentally about giving respect to the people of the valley and treating their history and
their experience with respect, and making a loud statement thereby that they are worthy of respect.” That’s a continuing legacy of the Brass Workers History Project and its sequels. I think it contributed to the idea that it was right to think of people in the valley and people like them as people who are worthy of respect and therefore whose institutions and ways of life were worthy of respect.

**DK:** What role does oral history play in terms of community mobilization and social justice work?

**JB:** At one pole are the broad reflective things that have a community coming to create a sense of itself as worthy of respect, revivifying and understanding things that people have done to make a better life for themselves, for each other, sacrifices people have made for that reason, and artistic cultural contributions that people have made that are worthy of respect. That’s sort of at one pole. In the center is maybe a broad sense of “people can win stuff if they get together and fight for it.” And sometimes you have to stick up for yourselves and your group in ways you’re told not to, sometimes you have to strike, sometimes you have to be ornery and refuse to go along with it. People learn about sit-down strikes from reading about sit-down strikes. The occupation that was done by the mine workers in the Pittston strike was led by a guy who was a labor history buff. He knew about the Flint sit-down strikes. You can trace the effect of labor history on labor struggles of the last twenty or thirty years pretty well. I mention a few examples of that in the updates of *Strike!* So that’s a kind of a midpiece, still in the sense of learning about possibilities and so on. Then there’s a part of it that’s very directly connected to current social struggles, where it blends over from history to current social engagement. The history of the Naugatuck Valley Project that we did was directly empowering for the Naugatuck Valley Project, and it was also a valuable way to explain what the project was to the wider community. It got full-page stories in the local newspaper and a lot of people coming through to see the exhibit. It drew a fairly direct contribution in that way.

There’s a place for all of those. You don’t want to reduce the reflective dimension of oral history to propagandizing, and at the same time, it’s completely legitimate to take people’s experiences and learnings
and identities and make that be a part of and a vehicle for struggles that they themselves and people associated with them are involved with. It was a way for them to tell their stories, in a way that’s germane to the things that they’re fighting for right now. But I wouldn’t want to have it be all one or all the other. I don’t feel like any one point on that continuum should subsume the others. I wouldn’t be interested doing something that was all reflection and no relevance, or that was all relevance and no reflection. I think that almost anything you do of this kind should have an element of both. The radical side of Deweyian thinking is always hovering back there somewhere.

**DK:** Staughton Lynd does not use the word *organizing*, whereas you do use the word. Why?

**JB:** I think our critiques of that would be aligned. I usually use *cooperation*, or *learning to cooperate*, or *coordinating activity* more than *organizing*. Or I use *self-organization*. I mean, the main problem I have about the organizing concept is that as it’s usually used in the Alinsky tradition and the trade union tradition and a lot of other traditions; the idea of who’s the subject and who’s the object is all too clear. There’s the organizer, who is the subject, and there is the organized, or the disorganized, who are going to be organized by the organizer, and it’s often used with inherently elitist bias. When I use it, it’s almost always in terms of self-organization. It’s either self-organization or it’s negative.

**DK:** You use the term *pet outsider* and also referred to the folks you’re working with as experts of their experiences. But I’m wondering how you go about being an outsider, given your critique of the outsider organizer.

**JB:** I have moved away from the idea of whatever group, the valley, the working class, whatever it is, as a totally enclosed object in which the people in it are all part of one common unified experience and identity. I have come to see overlap and the nonnesting of social groups and individuals in social groups as a much more important part of the story. So the fact that someone is a worker and also Black and also a woman and also gay or straight, and they’re all those things, and they
had a grandmother who came from Italy, and grandfather who came from Poland—the reality is very, very complex.

That doesn’t mean that social groups and collective identities aren’t important, they’re enormously important, but they are things that are constructed and reconstructed all the time out of the past experience and the preceding definitions of identity and role. And so the challenge is to make those experiences as creative and constructive as possible, but it is all a construction. Which is not to say that it’s not a reality, but it’s a constructed reality.

As you’ve probably picked up, I’m very influenced by Piaget, who was another person influenced by Dewey, which is not well-known but profoundly important for him. Everything is an inside-and-outside question, everyone is always negotiating the fact that they’re both part of a group and an outsider to the group, or they’re partially in the group but they’re also a part of other things. And the group itself has divisions within it so somebody may be part of the group in one way or not in another. These are fraught matters. You could say, “Well, they’re all just working class,” or you could say, “They’re all just Black, or green, or Latino,” or whatever it was. Both in the practice and in the understanding, the inside-outside division is not meaningless. But it’s only one aspect. The first thing that I would say to anyone is if you don’t respect the people you’re doing stuff with, you have a problem at a human level. That goes with insider group, outsider group, and in between. On the other hand, if you treat the people that you’re dealing with with respect, the question of being insider and outsider is not as fraught.

I guess another part of the critique that goes along with this is the etic-emic thing, where there’s this ideology that the insider has a certain type of knowledge that’s not accessible to the outsider. Well, there are people who have common experiences, and that is important in terms of who they are and their group and how they function and what they might be able to do in terms of a common practice, but it can’t be reduced to that. It’s one set of things out of many, and it’s important to recognize that, but it’s also important to recognize that it’s not an absolute. In my case, because I’ve been there so long, I’m like the repository, the residual—I’ve interviewed hundreds of people in that community who have died. As the person who talked to them, there is something
that is in me that makes—I wouldn’t say I’m a valley person, because in all kinds of ways I’m not, but I’m not really an outsider. To say I’m an outsider would be going too far in the other way, or it would be a reductionist statement in the opposite direction.

**DK:** One of the unusual aspects of your work is the extent of how long you have been committed to different iterations of it within a local area. Could you describe why there’s some significance or importance to that longevity?

**JB:** When I was younger, people would say, “Are you going to do Bristol next or Hartford next?” I’ve only scratched the surface of Waterbury and the valley, and I could do ten more projects, each one of which would add to my understanding and the available understanding of that community as the brass workers project or ethnic music project. When I was working on the *History from Below*, one of the main things that I realized was that we did parachute into this community; we knew a few people there beforehand, but it was a bad thing in relative to what it should have been. Jan and Jerry had lived there more than a couple years, but we weren’t people with deep roots.

And I started saying to people after that that the ideal person to do this kind of work is a librarian, a teacher, a curator in the local museum, somebody who has an organic connection to the community, and a functional connection, and a long-term involvement, and a long-term basis for interacting and taking in knowledge and information and understanding and giving it back out. While I haven’t achieved that, the appeal of doing that and the benefit of doing that has certainly been part of what’s kept me deeply engaged with this community.

I think it’s a labor of love. Love is never an unambiguous emotion; I certainly wouldn’t say I have no feelings about the valley other than love. I hate what the kind of life that people in the valley are forced to live does to them. What it makes them into is like what any of us get made by our circumstances—not always good or what people in their better selves would want to be. So I don’t dote on the valley, but my engagement with it is a labor of love. I’ve never used those words for it before, I don’t think, until this minute, but it is that.
DK: I think you’ve thrown in some complexities in terms of looking at the fissures and the ways in which there are different groups, and insiders and outsiders, and ways in which when you’re walking alongside people who are arguing with each other sometimes. Would you characterize, at least what you’re striving to do, as kind of a form of accompaniment, a walking alongside?

JB: I wouldn’t. It’s not the way I think about it. Because actually, it’s still too close to the subject-object thing. I think about it as, we’re all bozos on this bus. We’re all just people trying to figure out what the heck is going on and what the heck we can do about it. And at the most fundamental, epistemological level, none of us has any privileged, epistemologically privileged position of any kind. And the same goes for politics—none of us has a moral or superior place to stand. We’re all just swimming in this confusing sea and trying to figure out what’s the right thing to do. My problem with the accompaniment, it’s not the way I feel about it, because it’s not me accompanying them. It may be at one particular moment that I know something, and I have something to share with somebody. But the next moment, they may have something to share with me. Unless it’s that at this particular moment, I’m the accompanier and they’re the accompanied, but tomorrow it may be that I’m the one that’s drowning and they’re the one that has to throw the rope to help me—unless it’s strongly qualified by that, I’m not comfortable with it. I also think it’s unnecessary. I find it more comfortable to be a bozo on the bus.

Actually, Freddy Gardner, who I won’t try to explain, but there’s a great song which is called “The Vanguard Song,” and actually, if I may, I’ll sing a verse instead of just reciting it, and it goes:

I don’t know nothing,
Neither do you.
We don’t know nothing,
Let us not pretend we do.
He don’t know nothing,
Neither does she.
They don’t know nothing,
They don’t any more than we.
I don’t know where my elbow is,
From where my ass is.
Don’t look for me in the vanguard,
Baby, look for me in the masses.

And I guess the bottom line of this is that the masses are not a “they” for me, I’m just another one. And either they aren’t the masses, or I’m not the not-masses.

Notes


2 Editing transcripts for print is an act of translation, as the spoken word loses its coherence with literal transcription. All words and meanings in the excerpts are the narrators own. Through editing, we have removed false starts, digressions, and redundancies. The order of sections has been changed and similar accounts of the same story have been combined. These editing practices draw upon the best practices in the field of oral history. See Linda Shopes, “Editing Oral History for Publication,” in The Oral History Reader, 3rd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2016), 470–89. The unedited transcripts and original audio are housed in the Humanities Truck Community Archive, https://dra.american.edu/islandora/object/humanitiestruck%3A1.

3 For an example of her work, see Dorothy Lee, Valuing the Self: What We Can Learn from Other Cultures (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976).


6 Alan Lomax, “Folk Song Style,” American Anthropologist 61, no. 6 (December 1959).

7 Special issue, New Left Review, no. 10 (July–August 1961).


10 For a more recent example of a publication that lays out their shared political commitments, see Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, and Brendan Smith, Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000).


13 For more on John Dewey, see his work Democracy and Education (Norwood, MA: Macmillan, 1916).


15 This work was eventually published; see David Montgomery, Workers’ Control in America (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).


20 Jeremy Brecher, Jerry Lombardi, and Jan Stackhouse, eds., Brass Valley (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Brass Valley, directed by Jerry Lombardi, Jan Stackhouse and Jeremy Brecher (Stamford, CT: Color Film, 1984), DVD.


