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Class and Culture
Dimensions of Canada's Labour Past, Montreal, March 1980

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CONFERENCE REPORTS/ RAPPORTS DE CONGRÈS

Class and Culture: Dimensions of Canada's Labour Past, Montreal, March 1980.

Tom Traves

BOOK REVIEWERS OFTEN COMPLAIN about having to write about disparate collections of articles; different approaches and styles, uneven quality, and dissimilar interests which make it all but impossible to talk about the collection as an intellectually coherent project are but a few of their grievances.[1] Imagine my reaction then when Greg Kealey sidled up, adopted the conspiratorial whisper which all editors assume when they plan to con you into doing something that you know is a foolish mistake, and asked me to "review" the McGill conference on Class and Culture: Dimensions of Canada's Labour Past, which was held on 7-8 March 1980. I am not sure why he asked me, since my own specialty has been business history and political economy, not labour studies, and I am not sure why I accepted (maybe I simply broke under the strain of hearing 16 papers over a 32 hour period), but perhaps there is some value in a sympathetic outsider's view of recent scholarship in Canadian labour history insofar as it was represented at the conference.

The most surprising feature of the conference to me was the relative lack of direct discussion about the relationship between class and culture. Perplexing theoretical and empirical problems continue to plague our grasp of this issue, but unfortunately they were not considered fully. To be sure the conference opened on a positive note with a provocative paper by David Bercuson who offered a lively critique of the "culturalist approach" which has characterized the "new" labour history in recent years. Bercuson explained that claims about the existence of a distinctive working-class culture have been used both as an explanatory device to account for working-class solidarity in specific conflicts and as the true subject of social history which seeks to describe and explain the workers' experience in the transition to industrial capitalism. But although Bercuson admitted the validity of both concerns in specific circumstances, he completely rejected the utility of class and class culture as an explanatory device on a universal scale. Workers in Canada, he argued, were riven by

[1] Conference papers were presented in an abridged form. I have chosen to discuss only those presentations for which a complete text was available to me via the conference organizers. As a result I have neglected discussion of papers by Alan Dawley, Joanne Burgess, Jacques Rouillard, and Tamara Hareven.

ethnic, religious, regional, and occupational divisions with the result that solidarity was the exception and not the rule. "Workers seem to have responded as much from consciousness of job, place, church, ethnic group, and other factors as much as from a culture of class. The assumption that Canadian workers experienced an identification and a culture much like that of British workers is just that — assumption — without proof."

A potentially fruitful debate developed when Greg Kealey asserted precisely the opposite view by arguing that "Canadian workers have behaved as a national working class at key moments in Canadian history" such as the Knights of Labor era, the unionization of skilled workers around the turn of the century, the rise of revolutionary industrial unionism during the World War I period, and the resurgence of industrial unionism during the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, Kealey rejected the view that the divisive factors cited by Bercuson undermined the significance of a class analysis of the Canadian experience. "The complexity and heterogeneity of the Canadian working-class experience does not deny the existence of a working class," he argued. "It may limit that class's effectiveness in its specific struggles with capital; moreover, it may prevent it from mounting a significant challenge to capital's hegemony; it does not, however, eliminate the class tensions that arise between the working class's attempts to make capitalism less oppressive and capital's own needs. It is on this terrain of struggle that a working-class culture is forged."

Despite the clearly opposed views, however, the great debate fizzled. In my view this failure stemmed from conceptual confusion. The absence of a theoretical discussion of the concept of working-class culture sharply limited our ability to pursue what appeared to be radical differences of opinion. Bercuson, for example, seemed to distinguish between class consciousness in a Marxist sense and the "consciousness of job, place, church, ethnic group and other factors," but I should think that the latter categories could be incorporated into the concept of class consciousness. Kealey certainly made this claim but he did not discuss it in depth so that his call for "the consideration on a national scale of the specific and particular class experiences of Canadian workers in local and regional contexts which adds up to something more than local and regional exceptionalism" certainly sounded suspiciously like a workers' version of the romantic search for the mythical Canadian identity.

Three other papers dealing with ethnicity and class consciousness were offered at the end of the conference, and hence not receiving adequate discussion by the already tired audience, bore directly on this issue. In a paper which focussed primarily on the problem of ethnicity, and not class culture, Ross McCormack described the way English workingmen and women held onto their national identity because it paid them to do so. "Like other Europeans the English began their lives in a precarious economic position, a condition which resulted mainly from a surplus in the labour market caused by massive immigration. In this country's heterogenous society where many immigrant groups competed for limited economic resources, the English were perceived as famil-

iar by a xenophobic society and skilled by an industrializing one. Clearly it was relatively advantageous to be English. As a social strategy, then, English group identity became explicit and assertive because such ethnicity afforded enhanced status and competitive advantage by distinguishing the English from other immigrants." In McCormack's view, then, ethnicity is instrumental, and its importance as a social force waxes and wanes with social context. This point was confirmed in David Frank's discussion of the decline of ethnic tensions in the mining towns of Cape Breton. Substantial outmigration and the recruitment of the bulk of the mine workers from the countryside and the mining towns themselves ultimately produced a dominant Scottish Catholic mining community which felt sufficiently secure about competition from immigrants, who usually went elsewhere, that a Cape Breton nationalism rather than ethnic tension became the predominant fact by the time of the great labour conflicts of the 1920s. The point, of course, is that ethnic and class consciousness are not necessarily mutually exclusive processes, but rather, depending upon the specific circumstances of the labour market and local social structure, are potentially complementary. Working-class immigrants understandably held ambivalent feelings about their ethnic identity and class position. Their desire for prosperity and community could promote assimilationist drives, ethnic exclusiveness, or fuel their rejection of the vertical mosaic. Clearly it is impossible to predict which tendency will prevail, but it is not beyond the limits of a class analysis to understand the process and significance of ethnicity. Allen Seager demonstrated this point in a very fine paper dealing with class formation in several Alberta coal mining communities from 1905 to 1945. After discussing a class culture that drew upon numerous cultural traditions which reinforced class consciousness and solidarity, Seager concluded, "The Bohemian and the Belgian, the Finn and the Friulan, the peasant and the artisan, thrown together into the crucible of Canadian industrial capitalism had been forged into a class. The process was not one which stripped these people bare, erasing their memories and their heritage, but rather, one which adapted them to new conditions, some familiar, some not so familiar. There was thus a definite relationship between class, ethnicity, and culture in the coalfields, but not one which is easily reducible to a simple formula. . . . The class culture of the immigrant mine workers of Alberta is probably best explained by suggesting that, for a variety of reasons, the cultural apparatus of North American capitalism failed to establish a really firm hegemony over their institutions and their movement."

This last point is extremely important. No one at the conference nor others writing elsewhere in Canada have to my knowledge attempted a full discussion of the relationship between working-class culture and the dominant or hegemonic culture. To what extent, though, can we discuss an autonomous working-class culture when that culture is essentially oppositional in character and defined by its relationship to "the cultural apparatus of North American capitalism" with which it shares many values, customs, and institutions in

common? Raymond Williams has discussed the importance of residual pre-industrial cultural forms which emerge in a new context as the basis of an oppositional working-class culture, and at the conference David Frank offered an interesting description of several traditional elements in the Cape Breton mining community, such as ethnicity and religion, which declined in importance, and oral folk traditions which became even more significant than they had been in the past. (It is interesting to note that Frank was the only speaker to deal with religion and workers' culture, which struck me as a remarkable omission.) It is far from easy, however, to identify and label such elements. When workers and masters share institutions, customs, and values do we read their common experience from the bottom up or the top down? To date the new labour history has focused primarily on the bottom-up approach with a stress on oppositional elements in working-class culture. The result is a picture which highlights conflict rather than consensus. One does not have to choose between these two poles, of course, but clearly the failure of revolutionary practice in Canada requires a cultural explanation that includes a discussion of the ways, to turn Seager's phrase around, the North American cultural apparatus did establish hegemony over workers' institutions. For labour historians to do otherwise is to submit to a radical form of wish fulfillment.

The closest the conference came to a discussion of these issues revolved around the presentation of three excellent papers dealing with the role and practice of the legal system in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The most ambitious of these efforts, by D.-T. Ruddel, launched a successful attack on H.C. Pentland's argument that a capitalist labour market did not prevail in Canada until after 1850 or so. Ruddel argued that Lower Canadian society from 1760 to 1840 developed on the margin of European capitalism, that capitalist values and institutions were a fundamental aspect of imperial domination, and that colonial development was determined by the penetrating powers of the capitalist mode of production. In this context the development of a capitalist labour market was essential, and Ruddel presented a convincing picture of the ways in which the recruitment, motivation, and division of labour in the staple trades, shipbuilding, and handicraft industries all conformed to the capitalist mode of production. The role of the state in this process was crucial and Ruddel made the impact of the legal system a central part of his argument. "Legislation prevented labour from enjoying a just share of his produce, but allowed the employer to reduce worker's wages in a number of ways. Statutes outlawed combinations of workers and employers, but the latter was [sic] rarely convicted in spite of widespread price fixing. Although many of these statutes were never legislated by colonial authorities, their authority and use in Canada is evident in Canadian court cases against labour." Ruddel concluded that his preliminary analysis of Quebec court cases concerning labour appeared to confirm the wider application of Douglas Hay's argument that in the British legal system, "the private manipulation of the law by the wealthy and powerful was in truth a ruling-class conspiracy in the most exact meaning of the word."

Ruddel's argument about the establishment of the capitalist mode of production in Canada requires further research but it is obviously suggestive of fresh approaches to colonial development. The picture of the law which he presented, however, will require some modification if Judith Fingard's thorough description of nineteenth-century shipping law and sailor's rights and behaviour proves to be true of other industries as well. Fingard's study certainly confirmed that the law favoured employers. But she also provided important evidence of the ways in which sailors were also able to use the law to press their claims on their masters for better pay and conditions. Although Fingard did not make this point it is important to note, especially given Ruddel's argument, that the legal system did not only serve an accumulation function in the development of capitalism in Canada. Clearly the law was a two-edged sword in labour relations, even if one side was considerably sharper than the other, and this undoubtedly served crucial legitimation functions as well. As Eugene Genovese argued in *Roll, Jordon, Roll*, "the fashionable relegation of law to the rank of superstructural or derivative phenomenon obscures the degree of autonomy it creates for itself. In modern societies, at least, the theoretical and moral foundations of the legal order and the actual, specific history of its ideas and institutions influence, step by step, the wider social order and system of class rule, for no class in the modern Western world could rule for long without some ability to present itself as the guardian of the *interests and sentiments of those being ruled*."

Genovese also insisted on the need for detailed case studies in order to determine the specific nature of the legal system in question. At the conference Paul Craven provided an excellent example of such a study with a detailed analysis of the law of the employment relationship in Upper Canada from the 1820s to the 1870s as it was embodied in the Master and Servant Act. Craven too found clear evidence of the class bias of the law and he offered a tentative explanation which fit the law into the process of the uneven development of capitalist labour relations which Pentland described. At the same time Craven was at pains to note that at best we can only talk in terms of tendencies rather than firmly established facts of transition in the relationship between the economy and the legal system, which again lends credence to the notion of the relative autonomy of the law. Finally, in light of Ruddel's findings for Lower Canada it appears that comparative studies of the Upper and Lower Canadian legal systems will throw further light on the complex process of uneven development in Canada prior to the onset of full-scale industrialization.

Two sessions that dealt with social structure and mobility in rural Canada West and patterns of family and work adaptation in modern Quebec were poorly assimilated to other aspects of the conference but ultimately the issues raised here will be of great significance. In their own way both sessions had a strong bearing on the problem of class consciousness. Objective material conditions, inherited cultural traditions which structure perceptions of such conditions, and individual expectations which determine the response to such condi-

tions, all play a part in the development of class consciousness. According to excellent presentations by Tamara Hareven, Chad Gaffield, and Gail Brandt, workers' expectations were heavily influenced by their stage in the life cycle and their pattern of family formation. The chance to realize the good life in the long run, which drew so many immigrants to North America, at any given moment depended not only on the state of the labour market, which influenced wages and conditions of work, but also on a worker's age and the age and extent of his family. It is not enough for labour historians to talk about the worker in the work place and within his associational groupings. Workers entered as part of a family unit and their individual consciousness was strongly influenced by that relationship. According to Gaffield, workers in Canada West could not usually hope to employ the full resources of their family unit unless they farmed. Accordingly wage labour in industrial pursuits, such as the Hawkesbury saw mills Gaffield described, was seen by many as but a temporary stop on the way out of the labour market and on to the farm. But by 1850 the chance of success was not great. For those without special skills, a working wife, or a family composed of working age children the accumulation process was extremely difficult. Leo Johnson also pointed out that despite relatively high wages in 1840 prices were high too and agrarian labourers could rarely hope to save enough to set up their own farm.

Yet land ownership was widely equated with social betterment and in a study of Peel County in the 1850s and 1860s David Gagan found substantial numbers of skilled and unskilled non-farm workers in pursuit of social mobility through such a change in occupation. Of course farmers also faced difficult times and Gagan has demonstrated elsewhere how most failed and simply moved on. For those who remained, however, Gagan argued, "it seems clear that at least half of Peel's families in 1861 would be seen, by a mid-Victorian observer, to have achieved a lifestyle consistent with the elementary social and economic aspirations of the emigrant; and at least a third of them combined the most desirable attribute, property ownership, with one or more of the other indicators of an improved lifestyle." Gagan also found that persistence in one place and social mobility were clearly related but what was cause and what was effect is not yet clear. In relation to the question of class consciousness, however, it seems that at mid-century many workers hoped to leave the wage market, that many succeeded, at least for a time, and that for those who failed geographical mobility rather than increased class conflict held out the best hope for the future. Hence we witness the situation previously described by Michael Katz and Gagan of permanent class divisions and tremendous geographical and social mobility, both upward and downward. Gagan has suggested that this process contributed strongly to "a sense of space rather than place," which I think has tremendous as yet unexamined consequences for the prospects of increased class consciousness.

Specialized conferences play an important role in the scholarly community in drawing together specialists to share their work with an educated and

interested audience. The McGill conference was well organized and exceptionally well attended with nearly two hundred people at most sessions. In my view the conference was a great success, and although certain issues could have been discussed in greater depth, the range and quality of scholarship revealed bodes well for labour studies in the near future. If it was published as a collection of essays I would urge you to buy it.[2]

"Society for the Study of Labour History:" An Anniversary Celebration, London, May 1980

Gerry Friesen

THE ENGLISH SOCIETY marked the twentieth anniversary of its inaugural meeting by holding a conference "to examine labour history's present position and possible future developments" at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, on 31 May 1980. The president of the society, Sidney Pollard, in welcoming the audience, commented on the great changes that had taken place since 1960 when a mere handful of enthusiasts, many of them refugees from the Worker's Educational Association, had conceived of an organization to promote labour studies. He noted the continuing interest of some of those founders, including Eric Hobsbawm and Asa Briggs, and said he was delighted to note that labour history had since assumed a central place within the historical discipline.

The conference had three sessions. R.J. Morris, author of *Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution,* addressed the classic topic of such meetings, "progress and prospects," and was followed by no fewer than six commentators. The plenary session then divided into special interest subgroups, including politics and ideology, archives and museums, women, and trade unions. Finally, the group reconvened for papers and discussion on the topic of "What is the use of Labour History?" The sessions were marked by an informality that seemed both customary, gracious, and entirely in keeping with the subject matter; even when discussion became barbed, there was no sense of individual tension or personal crisis — that an outsider could discern at least — as is sometimes the case at our own gatherings. Rather, one had the impression that the participants were pursuing "truth," however they chose to define it. The audience of about 150 consisted of both professional scholars and interested laymen including a number of union members. It was a normal conference in most ways — the usual numbers of acute and less helpful comments from panelists and the audience, a wide range of political perspectives —

[2] [Editor's note: A selection of these papers will be published in *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981).]