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See table of contents

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NOTEBOOK / CARNET

Andrew Parnaby and Richard Rennie

THE NOTEBOOK/CARNET section of *Labour/Le Travail* is a space for short essays, op-eds, thought pieces, and commentaries on any issues related to labour and the working class. Politics, popular culture, current events, and trends are all fair game. The ideal length for such pieces is 1000 words or less. The Notebook/Carnet also publishes "calls for papers" and other information on conferences and projects. Submissions should be sent c/o Rick Rennie and Andy Parnaby, Notebook/Carnet, *Labour/Le Travail*, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NF, A1C 5S7. Or e-mail them to rrennie@plato.ucs.mun.ca

GETTING AHEAD OF THE CLASS: REFLECTIONS ON *GOOD WILL HUNTING*

Noreen Golfman

TO MY MIND, the widely acclaimed 1998 Oscar-nominated hit, *Good Will Hunting*, offers us a convenient example of how identity in popular American film is constructed almost exclusively according to gender and heterosexuality, at the expense of class. *Good Will Hunting* is particularly useful because the film pretends to be about class difference, at least for a time. Ultimately, however, the lead characters are informed less by such difference than by their youthful good looks and, in the case of the central character, a talent as large as Harvard Yard.

You might recall one of the more dramatic scenes when Chuckie, played by the jaw-jutting Ben Affleck, lectures the titular hero, played by the equally magnetic Matt Damon, on the foolishness of Will's decision to decline a lucrative computer job interview with a large corporation. The two handsome man-boys are standing

amid the rubble of their work site. At first it is difficult to tell if their work involves construction or destruction, but they are surrounded by bricks, noise, and mortar dust. They wear hard hats, swill from thermos bottles, carry lunch pails, lean against cars, require showers. Their speech is inflected with the whuz-it-to-yehs of south Boston, and although they share impossibly good looks and preternaturally white teeth, we know that everything about this scene signifies the solidly clock-punching working-class.

In a winning bit of moral role reversal, Chuckie is advising the evidently smarter Will on a correct career path. Will, in placing his tribal roots and his loyalty to neighbourhood friends over a guarantee of life among the affluent reaches of the middle-class, has been foolishly rejecting the very escape hatch the lamer Chuckie can only dream about. Chuckie might not possess a *savant's* facility with memory recall or a genius's aptitude for complex equations, but he knows what he likes — a fast-track away from south Boston and far from the dirty brick-laying business. Upbraiding Will for not heeding the soft knock of opportunity, Chuckie appeals to his friend's noble urge to be a true fraternal hero. Such a guy would leave the south streets of Boston in order to serve as a symbol of success for the vicariously happy working-stiffs left behind. Chuckie argues that unlike him and the rest of the louts who assuredly will be doing the same lousy job twenty years from now, Will has a real chance to leap to the American dream, right to the very top of the office towers they labour to build.

Take away the urban context for a moment, the dusty *mise-en scène*, and you could swear that Chuckie is talking to a Clint Eastwood or a Nicholas Cage about the need to dive from the ramparts of Alcatraz, but, amazingly, he is merely talking about the workaday life of his class and cohort. Even more surprising than the audaciously open confidence of Chuckie's speech is its successfully plotted effect. Indeed, Will is suitably chastened by his tough-loving friend, and quickly reconsiders his career choices. Given the film's astonishing popularity, not to mention its Academy Award-nominated status, we can be sure in saying that audiences applauded the wisdom of both Chuckie's lecture and Will's reaction to it.

To oversimplify for a moment, mainstream feature film works its seductive effects by coaxing us to identify ourselves with handsome, beautiful, or colourful leading figures, thereby permitting us to participate effortlessly in the narrative trajectory of their character development. This process of matching the spectator's look to the screen's gaze, well-tracked in psychoanalytic film theory for over three decades, serves to construct us in the dark, so to speak. In the projected light of the movie theatre, we emerge with a view of ourselves as stable, unifying subjects, capable of making sense of film fragments, the image-blocks of the illusory screen. Narrative films are immensely satisfying for this very reason. In a manifestly real way, every Hollywood film is the same film: all dramatic conflict is neatly resolved in closure, or at least in an ending. A spectator commonly exits the theatre reassured by her ability to have well understood the complexities of human experience.

Moreover, such understanding itself reinforces one's own unity of being, one's control over the very conflicts besetting the fictional characters. You can call this vitally central theatrical experience a dangerous illusion or a bourgeois dream, if you like, but it is as old and rewarding as the American box office.

Sure enough, Damon and Affleck are irresistible, and the plot establishes its male-Cinderella fantasy of class-transcendence as soon as the opening credits have faded. Damon is an MIT janitor by night, but evidently a genius all the time. It is only a matter of a few frames and the contrivance of circumstances before the ill-suitedness of his floor-swabbing reality to his brainy potential hits everyone between the eyes like a piece of chalk hurled across a classroom. Invariably, *Good Will Hunting* will have its audience side with Chuckie's resolute attitude, dividing the world up between the no-exit fate of working-class labour and the open-ended road of just about everything else. Although scriptwriters Damon and Affleck have defined the power of Will's character partly by his without-a-cause rebelliousness, this quality must be fully recuperated by the dominant social system of values and meaning by the end of the film in order for Will to get ahead of his class. In other words, *Good Will Hunting* openly declares that a restless young man from the wrong side of the American tracks could not possibly, *wilfully*, find an off-ramp to easy street without some extraordinary advantage, in this case an Einsteinian brain. Without it, he is just another restless loser working the night shift, laying bricks, day-dreaming of beer and punching out Harvard know-it-alls.

Some critics resented the magnitude of Will's innate and powerful intelligence, arguing that the enormity of such talent undermined the credibility of the film's realism. It seems obvious to me, however, that in order for the film to stake its complete rejection of working-class struggle and possibility, and for Chuckie to make the case he does for the immutability of an American class structure, Will must be endowed with nothing short of a miraculous capacity to startle his betters — from professional psychiatrists to MIT professors to the current class of Harvard preppies. How else could he possibly get away from it all, make the leap from one class to another in a demonstrably paralyzed system? Will's blue-collar friends hang out together in enviably comfortable ways, but they are clearly resigned to a life of shredded screen doors, used cars, and damaged girlfriends. Most disturbing for me is the realization that a Chuckie could not deliver a speech about the inertness of his — or any other —class if the screenwriters and the large young audiences for whom they composed their script did not wholeheartedly agree with him. To my own dismay, my film students universally praised the film's "realism" and expressed unqualified enthusiasm for Chuckie's sermon on the mountain of obstacles to class prosperity.

Good Will Hunting's unabashedly cynical assumptions about class fixity are all the more startling for the matter-of-fact way they inform the film's central conflict, the rehabilitation of Will's disabled character. Here I return to my opening theme about the film's real preoccupation with the construction of identity. Let us

be clear: hardly identifiable as a working-class drama, *Good Will Hunting* is, foremost, a romantic comedy laced with faint traces of dramatic seriousness, a genre intimately tied to the preservation of society's dominant cultural values. Typically, this mainstream nineties film invests the angry leading male with a quality of feminine vulnerability he must fully recognize in order to make profitable use of his genius. Under the supervision of a shaggy therapist (Robin Williams in his patented fragile-male-visionary role), Will learns to harness his energy, domesticate his anger, articulate his feelings, confront his demons, and take himself off the hook of guilt and awful responsibility. After a series of necessary confrontations with none other than the fisher-king therapist, Will manages both to transcend his class and — the ultimate fantasy of masculine individualism — reject the dead-end sameness of hi-tech corporatism, particularly its eastern seaboard variety. Too independent a hero to join the chip-producing minions of a micro-tech empire and too markedly enlightened to return to the rank-and-file of his south Boston allies, Will is last seen happily driving west in search of his gorgeous medical school girlfriend (a designer-brainiac match, made in Hollywood) and, presumably, Any Job He Wants. The open road likely leads to silicon valley with a possible part-time teaching gig at Stanford, or some such other benefit-earning scenario where the sun always shines and the class struggle is irrelevant.

The social consensus propping up the success of *Good Will Hunting* was and is probably more alarming to me than any other aspect of this film (you merely have to scan the hundreds of Web reviews of the film to believe it), but it is also not surprising in view of other nineties Academy-endorsed hits. For all of his recognized authority as a maverick indie director (*My Own Private Idaho*, *Drug Store Cowboy*, *To Die For*), Gus Van Sant has once again produced a shrewdly winning film that, for all its aesthetic charms and comic dialogue, safely foregrounds character-in-spiritual-crisis at the expense of serious analysis of class or the individual positioned within the social. So it is that we are encouraged to see Will's struggle as personal, negotiable, and, ultimately, triumphant. The film confidently asks us to believe that the south Boston-stranded Chuckie is happy and relieved to know that his buddy has fled for the Hollywood hills — perhaps because audiences know that both Damon and Affleck actually escaped the alleged drudgery of Harvard and the apparent stodginess of Boston for the glitter of Oscar-Land.

A final note: when you recall that *Good Will Hunting* was pitted against James "King" Cameron's *Titanic* among others for a 1997 Academy statue, the former, with its naturalistic representation of working-class comradery, starts to assume the loftiness of a work of socialist art. True, one film is a low-budget gesture of youthful bravado; the other is a herculean techno-epic, an obscene theatrical display of sentimentality aimed at reinforcing an audience's desire to see the rich dine in excessive splendour and lose their cake, too. On closer inspection, however, you can see that both films emerge from the same abiding certainty in the rigidity of a class system. Both films handily contain the lower classes, first by signifying them

warmly, romantically, endowed with stifled but recognizable creative potential (Matt Damon and Leonardo DiCaprio play interchangeably gifted, sweet, disadvantaged heroes who behave so much more humanly than the snobs who condescend to them), and then by underscoring their helplessness, whether in south Boston or in steerage. Will Hunting finally manages to swim, not sink, but not because he does anything much more than math and cry a little. It is hard to know exactly how he earned his given name, considering that the key to his happiness lies in his innate smarts, not any special awareness of the contradictions confronting his class, nor any special hunt for empowerment. With brains like that, who needs to struggle?

THE ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC and Working-Class Music

Neil V. Rosenberg

HARRY SMITH'S *Anthology of American Folk Music*, reissued with additional notes by Smithsonian Folkways in 1997, is an award winning (Grammies for Best Historical Album and Best Album Notes) 6-CD documentary sound recording set from America's intellectual and artistic past. It uses as its primary materials recordings originally made by and for working-class people. When Harry Smith created the *Anthology* in 1952 he constructed a document for middle-class popular culture. Originally published by Folkways Records of New York as three two-LP boxed sets, it became an icon of the American folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s.

No folksong intellectual of that era was more influenced by the *Anthology* than the late Ralph Rinzler, the man who brought Folkways to America's national museum, the Smithsonian. Hired as a field researcher for the Newport Folk Festival in 1964, Rinzler tracked down performers like those who had made the sounds on the *Anthology*, recording them and bringing them to the Festival. In the late 1960s Rinzler, disaffected with the commercialism of Newport and the folk scene, sold the Smithsonian on his idea for a Festival of American Folklife (FAF). Originally planned as an annual event building to the 1976 Bicentennial, it proved a tremendous success and remains a popular summer fixture in Washington. Just as Marius Barbeau's popular books and lectures on folklore and music led to the creation of a separate division — now the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies — at the National Museum, Rinzler's success with the FAF led to a permanent Office of Folklife Programs at the Smithsonian. When Folkways owner Moe Asch died in

1986, Rinzler had the vision and influence to bring the company with its amazing catalog to the Smithsonian.

This costly undertaking was supported in part from revenue generated by a hit album, *Folkways: The Vision Shared,* that featured re-creations by pop stars like Bob Dylan of original folkways recordings from the 1940s by folksingers like Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie. A PBS documentary publicized the process. In essence the whole record company was successfully marketed as a living museum of American "roots" — roots of rock, America's dominant popular form. The success of Smith's *Anthology* reflects this perception of it and of Folkways. When the Smithsonian hosted a symposium on Smith and the *Anthology* in Washington last fall, it was co-sponsored by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The notes to the 1997 reissue open with a chapter from rock critic Greil Marcus' book *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* that is an attempt by this influential writer, long indifferent (at best) to the folk movement's cultural influences, to come to terms with Dylan's folk side. It is appropriate that Dylan won three Grammies at the same ceremony that the *Anthology* won two. The American popular music industry, long dominated intellectually by people for whom jazz, as the source of pop, was the essential hip form, is now being taken over by a younger generation for whom folk, as the roots of rock, is the essential hip form.

The *Anthology* reproduces 84 recordings made between 1927 and 1932, originally published on 78 rpm discs. Harry Smith (1923-1991), the polymath who assembled and edited it, has been variously described as an artist, film maker, record collector, folklorist, alchemist, "beat" movement member (the reissue notes include a piece on Smith by Allen Ginsberg), and more. He was also a student of phonograph recordings — a discographer. Discographers can be described as aural historians but that does not fully capture the lure of this work; they are also aural voyeurs. The discographer establishes the date and place of recording and the identity of the people producing the sound so that the listener can become a fly on the wall on a time trip: you are there hearing it as it was at that point in time and you know where, when, and by whom that music was being made. Smith purposely chose recordings that heightened this effect because they came from the dawn of the microphone era. Electrical sound recordings began in 1926 and this new technology offered a tremendous advance in the fidelity of sound reproduction over the previous acoustic recordings. In 1952 the new technology of the tape recorder and the LP enabled Folkways to reproduce the sounds of these 78s (most of which Smith had obtained in like-new condition so that their surface noise — scratch — was minimal) with great fidelity. The *Anthology* was a hi-fi trip into the pre-war past, a technological, artistic, and scholarly *tour-de-force.* Only a handful of people could have made the connections between these recordings and the literature of folk music scholarship that Smith makes so elegantly in his original 24-page book of notes — itself a work of art, a visual and conceptual bricolage that ties together this documentary.

"Documentary" is an adjective that gained stardom as a noun in Hollywood when the Academy created a separate category under that title for their 1941 Oscar nominations. Movie, radio, and television documentaries juxtapose "actual" or "authentic" *sounds and/or images with interpretive narrative*. Sound recording documentaries work differently; their interpretive narrative is furnished through written materials published as part of the recording's packaging. Documentary albums are thoroughly post-modern: mixed-media packages which challenge their users to create their own interpretations. The *Anthology* leads those who accept this challenge into the confluence of two different folk music canons — an older one of printed text, and a newer one of aural texture or style.

Until the beginning of this century, folk music canons were promulgated in books. Since the 17th century western intellectuals, motivated by various aesthetic, cultural, and political agendas, had sought musical documents of the life of the common people. They collected these by writing down the words and melodies as performed by singers; by copying manuscripts created by singers to assist memory; and by gathering examples of the cheap print sources like broadsides and songsters that were often the sources of vernacular song traditions. These collections of documents from popular and vernacular culture were published in books as folksongs. The conventional wisdom was that folksongs reflected a predominantly oral culture of the people that contained the essence or *geist* of nation or race or language or region or whatever. In fact each collection was an idiosyncratic construction reflecting the agendas of its author, and every song has its own unique history. But by the end of the 19th century an extensive literature of folksong and an international scholarly tradition had emerged. Cross-references, monographs, indexes, surveys, and anthologies tied it together into canons.

In the 20th century recorded canons began to supplant and supersede print canons. Pioneer North American folksong collectors like John A. Lomax and Marius Barbeau were using portable cylinder recording machines to make "field recordings" of vernacular song before 1920. Around the same time record companies began making recordings of vernacular music from working-class, regional, and ethnic performers, and marketing them back to these communities (my portion of the album notes to the 1997 reissue focuses on this process). By the 1930s these recordings were found by scholars to include folksongs, much as earlier scholars had found folksongs on broadsides and in songsters.

As a document of musical performance the sound recording is superior to print because it includes, in addition to words and music — which together constitute the text — the many nuances of style or texture of performance.[1] Harry Smith recognized this. When he set out to make his anthology most of the texts he chose

[1]Any expressive performance (song, story, etc.) can be seen in terms of three levels of analysis: texture,text, and context. "Textural" refers to the details of texture, which could in the case of song be musical (timbre, volume, etc.) or linguistic (rhyme, pronunciation, dynamics, etc.); this level of analysis is sometimes referred to as "style."

had associations with earlier print canons. This can be seen in his superb bibliographic and discographic notes; they reflect Smith's intellectual bent. But he also chose recordings performed in textures that were strikingly rough-edged and idiosyncratic, that contrasted with those of mainstream cultivated and popular musics. Greil Marcus refers to this aesthetic as "weird." Certainly that's part of it; but beyond this is the fact that Smith was steeped in modernist aesthetics and the artistic iconoclasm of his times. Around the time he was working on this project, Smith was also making films by painting on the celluloid frame by frame. His abstract geometric paintings of a few years earlier present his synesthetic impressions of classic jazz recordings from the formative years of bebop, like Dizzy Gillespie's "Manteca" and Charlie Parker's "Ornithology." Examples of these times and paintings can be seen in the CD-ROM feature of the set's 6th CD. Thus when Smith brought together these recordings, the textures he chose were informed by his *avant garde* aesthetic. The result was a new textural canon that embraced regional and idiosyncratic vocal accents and timbres, and the sounds of new instruments and familiar instruments played in new ways.

Because of its new textural folksong aesthetic, the *Anthology*, even though it was not a best-seller, had a strong and lasting impact upon American popular music through the folk music revival that boomed between 1958 and the mid-1960s. In the 1950s and 1960s it cost nearly thirty-five dollars at a time when most albums sold for three or four dollars, and it was available only at urban shops that specialized in folk music. On the other hand, Folkways never took anything out of print so the *Anthology* was available for more than three decades. It was embraced mostly by the deep *aficionados* rather than the mainstream fans. Last year Grateful Dead songwriter and poet Robert Hunter recalled how, in the early 1960s, he and Jerry Garcia knew a woman in Palo Alto who had a job and so could afford a copy of the *Anthology*; when she was at work they would sneak into her apartment through a window so they could listen to it. Smith's collection became source and workshop for serious performers. And it was a guidebook for folk musical intellectuals like Ralph Rinzler, who sought to rediscover the musicians who had recorded those 78s decades earlier.

How important is the *Anthology* as a document of America's working-class past? One can find in it songs that deal with labour issues like sharecropping ("Down on Pennys Farm," "Got the Farm Land Blues"), convict labour ("Buddy Won't You Roll Down the Line"), technological unemployment ("Peg and Awl"), and the hardships of manual labour ("Gonna Die with My Hammer in My Hand," "Spike Driver Blues"). Reissues are selective recontextualizations. Ten years ago I reviewed in these pages Archie Green's reissue of labour song 45s, *Work's Many Voices*, and today I would still direct readers who want a broad sampling of commercial recordings by and for working-class people that focuses on the possibilities for studying working-class song to those albums, now available on CD. Harry Smith had a broader agenda than Green. The spectrum of topics covered by

the songs in the *Anthology* is a pretty accurate representation of what ethnographers find when they look at people's music in the context of their lives — the songs are about work and play, love and death, dreams and nightmares, mystery and reality. As I mentioned earlier, Smith's aesthetic agenda played an important role in the selection of the documents in the *Anthology*. His index (how many album notes include an index?) does include "work song" but only five songs are so referenced; "labor" and "working-class" are not indexed, although "war" and "theft" and "death" and "drunkenness" are. And much of the thrust of the *Anthology's new notes is toward explaining what made this group of recordings the aural icon of the middle-class avant garde* of 1960s America.

Smith's choices and editing embodied the political orthodoxies of mid-century America. The *Anthology* has been praised for the way in which it mixed together African-, Anglo-, and Franco-American performances, thereby breaking down rigid barriers at a time when segregation was under attack. But his is a melting pot vision of America's southern cultures that conveys the assumption that American working-class art is southern. It ignores the vernacular cultures of the rest of the nation. The same companies that produced the 78s Smith collected also had Hawaiian, Mexican-American, Jewish, Polish, Irish, Finnish, Ukrainian, and many more ethnic and regional series that sold very well in regions outside the South, in the big cities and even, in some cases, in the European homelands of the immigrants recorded in the US. American popular music was shaped by these musics as well as by the stuff in *Anthology*. This collection, while an amazing and insightful document of its time filled with wonderful music, is also representative of a particular political and cultural American mythology.

In all of the hubbub about winning a Grammy for my contribution to the notes, I was interviewed often by the Canadian media. I was asked many questions but no one asked the one that seemed obvious to me: why has there been no *Anthology of Canadian Folk Music* on a similar model? Since I moved to Canada 30 years ago I have worked off and on at discographical projects involving Canadian vernacular music. Sometimes I imagine such an anthology —juxtaposing Wilf Carter's "Hobo's Song to the Mounties" and La Bolduc's "Tout la monde a la grippe," Omar Blondahl's "The Making of the Paper," Al Cherny's "Siyanka-Holculka," Tex Bloye's "The Jim at Garry Rock," Don Messer's "Mouth of the Tobique," and much more. It could be done. It need not draw from just one region or a few key groups; there are a lot of neat and obscure old 78s and 45s out there. But the idea of recycling old working-class popular music recordings to construct a national aural mosaic has not attracted its Canadian Harry Smith. Canadian intellectuals who are interested in folk music continue for the most part to locate folk traditions in textual canons and to present them in recordings by middle-class interpreters who have developed their own textural canons. A few Canadian field recordings have been published, the majority in the 1960s by Folkways. But these, like the interpretive albums, have almost always focused on specific groups and

regions. The whys of this lie in the politics of culture in Canada. But that's an issue for another *Notebook* piece.

SPEECH

THE FOLLOWING excerpt is taken from a public lecture given by Marjorie Griffen Cohen, Professor of Economics and Chair of Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University (SFU), entitled "Economic Fundamentalism and its Threat to Democracy." The address, part of the 1998 President's Lecture series at SFU, examined the ascendency of neoliberalism — "economic fundamentalism" — in the post-World War II period and its impact on the political, economic, and social institutions that "supported the ideas of equality and democracy in industrialized countries." In this passage, Cohen sketches a "political approach" to countering the erosion of the welfare state and what she calls the "marketization" of social and economic life.

THE WORLD is changing quickly and the national political institutions with which women and disadvantaged minorities have learned to negotiate in order to improve their conditions no longer have the kind of power to shape the structures of our societies that they once did. Women, minorities, and the disadvantaged are confronting a deterioration in their ability to be effective in having their interests met in the public sphere, primarily because these groups are confronting the problem of having even less democratic participation than in the past. It is not that we will have less formal participation in government bodies; this form of representation is likely to increase. But the real decision-making power will elude us as the site of power itself shifts. Because the changes in democratic institutions are not keeping pace with or corresponding to changes in economic ones, disadvantaged groups will need to expand the focus of political pressure beyond that of our nation-states.

The following will briefly sketch an approach that should be pursued in the future, in order to counter some of the worst aspects of internationalization of our political economies. Some of these ideas clearly are not short-term measures, but will take a long, concerted political efforts to achieve. The long-term nature of establishing international control of corporate behaviour does not mean that our only course of action need focus on the distant future: there are measures at both the local and national levels which can serve to counter the notion that a social-welfare state is incompatible with a healthy economy.

At the international level four main inter-related initiatives should be the focus for action of progressive groups. First, is the need to initiate action to demand the creation of international institutions to control capital. The current unwillingness or inability of nation states to assert the kind of control over capital which is necessary to protect employment levels, the environment, and conditions of life, reflects the power which corporations have to intimidate or otherwise gain the

cooperation of national governments. The focus for discipline must shift from the nation to the international corporation. The very rationale for capital mobility is to take advantage of the economic climate in countries which are either politically corrupt or too weak to protect their people or their environments. International institutions which disciplined corporations, rather than countries, would begin to replicate some of the work of national institutions which was effective when nations exerted more power over corporate behaviour.

Second, in addition to designing international institutions to control capital, there is also a need to imitate the redistributive functions of the nation-state at the international level. As long as the enormous disparities which exist worldwide continue, the corporate sector will be able to blackmail nations into submitting to their demands for a "favourable" climate for business. This redistributive function requires an ability for an international governing institution to raise money, and to decide where money should go. The recent interest in developing a tax on international financial speculation — the Tobin tax — to both discourage excessive speculation and to raise money could be the starting point for new international institutions to control and redistribute capital.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need to begin what will be a long-term project to counter the very politically successful propaganda of the right with regard to the efficiency of the self-regulating market. This could begin with analyses which show the economic inefficiencies and real human misery which follows from imposing a uniform economic system around the world. The call would be for an ability to recognize economic pluralism in international trade agreements. A tolerance for economic pluralism requires the recognition that different goals, conditions, and cultures throughout the world require very different solutions to problems. One system, the western system, based on a US kind of economy and social system, will not serve the needs of all people in all circumstances.

The attempt of international trade agreements to impose uniform economic and social policy world wide creates impossible positions for people in countries which have vastly different problems and resources, in addition to different values and goals. We in Canada have devised an economic and social system which is different from the US because, in part, we have needed to accommodate the conditions of relatively few people living in a huge and often hostile geographical area. Canada is being forced to change many of these systems as a result of trade liberalization and however difficult it will be for many groups in this country, the problems arising from conformity are infinitely more serious for poor countries with very different types of social and economic organizations.

In the process of demanding economic uniformity, the corporate community has taken away from poor countries any innovative ways in which they might be able to find unique solutions to their problems. Poor countries will never be able to escape poverty if they are required to abide by the employment and environ-

mental standards of wealthy countries while, at the same time, they are required to maintain a competitive, market-based economic system.

The case for economic pluralism would be a natural political position for progressive political activists. In recent years the political activism of minority and disadvantaged groups has made more visible the different circumstances of groups of people in our society. This has led to the demand for distinct social policy to recognize these different needs. This pluralistic approach to public policy is an important starting point for an analysis which recognizes the need for pluralism in social and economic systems.

Any attempt to change the international rules seems an Amazonian task, particularly because the power of the corporate sector has been so enhanced by the changes in the trading rules so far. However, the very real likelihood of failure of these policies to meet the needs of most of the people in the world is going to give new approaches a chance to flourish. As the trajectory of trade liberalization continues to unfold the experiences of all of us in different parts of the world will be distinct, but the ability to learn from each other and to explore ideas for collective action could lead to significant political initiatives for change.

While the new international structures supporting trade liberalization give the corporate sector a great deal of leverage over public policy within nations, there are sufficiently different possible courses of action at the level of the nation state so that the uniform race to the bottom can be resisted with credibility.

It is very important to point out that the social systems of all countries in the west are not uniform. The substantial national differences in social policies in countries within the European Community, despite free trade and the free movement of capital, indicates that the convergence of social welfare policy is not inevitable (despite what many of us argued during the anti-free trade campaign). Not all nations have such raw approaches to the well-being of their citizens as do the US. There are differences in social programs which can be tolerated, even within what appears to be a rapid process of economic homogenization. My point is that we should not allow the existence of international trade agreements to prevent the maintenance of the social system we need.

Canada is a country which has never been wealthier and the argument must continually be made that we can afford to maintain a strong welfare state. The decisions taken, for example, to reduce the number of people receiving unemployment insurance benefits, to slash federal funding for health and education, and to ignore promises to provide a national child care scheme are political decisions based on ideological and cultural values. These are decisions which can be contested on moral and democratic bases —they have not been made "inevitable" because of globalization.

Some critics of trade liberalization — myself included —have greatly overstated the powerlessness of nations in the face of corporate power. The ability of nation states to stand up to the corporate sector's demands, although constrained,

is still strong — if there is a political will. Because government remains the primary avenue for people within a nation for addressing their interests, it is critical that political action focus on ensuring that government does act in people's interests.

At the international level national governments are all that exist to represent the collective point of view of the people of a nation. For this reason it is important that all of us work to resist the political fragmentation which is occurring in Canada. This fragmentation accelerates as each region demands more and more autonomy over social and economic programs. While the Canadian government continues to be a champion of trade liberalization and in some circumstances is far more ardent than even the US in pursuing new free trade deals, this does not mean that some time in the future Canada could not take a different lead in shaping international institutions. For this we will need not only a strong federal government, but also one which is truly democratic and represents, at the international level, the will of the nation. This representation has not occurred with trade liberalization issues: people within Canada repeatedly have voiced their opposition to free trade, yet the government continues to support the interests of the corporate sector.

Our world, as troubled as it is, can become even worse. The desires and actions of people should be able to make a difference. I believe they can, but only if we can devise ways to replicate, at the international level, those initiatives which have served to control corporate power within our country.

BARRISTAS OF THE WORLD UNITE!

IN JULY 1997, the CAW-backed workers at nine Vancouver Starbucks outlets became the first "barristas" in North American to secure a collective agreement with the trendy, Seattle-based international coffee giant. On the first anniversary of that historical union drive, *Labour/Le Travail* spoke with 25-year-old-Laurie Banong, Starbucks employee and union activist, about organizing young service sector workers, working with the CAW, and what trade unionism means to her.

Labour/Le Travail (L/LT): Did this [organizing drive] come out of one store or a couple of stores?

Laurie Banong (LB): One store, my store on Hornby Street [in Vancouver]. ... We're just a little store of ten people and we had all been working there forever. So there was a strong, ... close-knit group and everyone in my store had been with the company, if not at this store, at least with Starbucks for three, four, five years. And so they had seen the changes that Starbucks had gone through, so they knew that something was really, really, wrong with the company. ... Everyone agreed that when it was a little company it was great, great, to work for, everyone loved it.

L/LT: Its growth has been phenomenal.

LB: Oh yeah, they open up a new store everyday. ... They are in Singapore, Hawaii, they just bought a chain of stores in England. ... They are everywhere.
L/LT: You said it was a good company, a good place to work, when it was small. My perception, from the outside, was that this was a company that treated its employees well — you were not technically employees, your were "partners," you had stock options, you had benefits. It seemed to me that they had done everything and ...
LB: I won't deny that, you know it was amazing, I mean that's the reason I applied at Starbucks. I could get benefits. It was a really neat, trendy company to work for. I could say, "I work at Starbucks, aren't you jealous of me?" But over time I could see that it [benefits, etc.] was a bone they could throw to us to keep us happy. When they could do *so* much more. They said and did the right things but they really didn't mean it. That's how I felt after a while.
L/LT: What were the specific grievances?
LB: There was all kinds of things. ... We got a new Star Labour computer scheduling system. They fill out a sheet, when you are available, your manager plugs those numbers into the computer and it spits out a schedule. The computer schedules people for when it thinks it needs people. ... [It] gives you really strange staggered shifts. ... And it puts all the newer partners who make less money, they get all the long shifts to maximize their labour hours. And so the people who had been working and bringing up families on 35, 40 hours a week got cut back to 16 [hours].
L/LT Was [scheduling] part of the transition you noticed in the company?
LB: Yes. Because then we had to start punching in to the minute. You know, like factory workers. I put in my "219685" — that's my partner number — that's how they know me, "Oh, 219685 is angry again." They did not know me, but they hated my number. I just resented the fact they did not trust us any more. You know, we were their partners, we got profit sharing, or stock options and slowly and slowly they [Starbucks] grew so big — this is my theory — the company grew so fast, they could not keep up with the demand, so they hired schmucks who ripped off the company, and we all got blamed for it. As a result, everything became more strict. ... [Starbucks] started out with the best of intentions, and then as soon as all that green started rolling in they got greedy. They thought, "What better way to make more money than to jack up the prices and stiff our staff."
L/LT: What about wages? Did wages keep pace with the growth and profitability of the company? Or, did you feel like, "Wait a second, all of these other things are happening, and at the same time we're the reason you can charge $3.50 for a Grande Mocha."
LB: After I was with the company for a couple of months I get a letter in the mail saying, "Congratulations, you're all doing really great, here's a raise." I think we all got a quarter, 25 cents more, per hour. A day or two later I heard on the radio that the minimum wage in BC was going up. They wanted to stay just a little bit ahead of [it]. Then a couple months later the wages got rolled back. The starting

wage was cut back to what the minimum wage was. ... So if you were lucky enough to make the cut you kept your wage. But anyone hired after a certain time did not get the wage increase.

L/LT: So, you've got the company changing, all of these issues percolating, and you said that the store that you worked at had four or five people who'd been there for a long time. So you were friends, you knew each other well. How did those relationships at work or your friendships help this idea [to unionize] to get going.

LB: Well, [co-worker, co-organizer] Stephen [Emery] and I, we always make big plans, but we never do anything. We'd been hearing what other partners had been saying about how the company changed and we realized that it was just, something had to give, 'cause everyone was just so angry at being at work, it was not a fun place to be any more. We felt we were being taken advantage of, all that sort of stuff — all that feeling stuff — which I suppose you should leave at home. I don't know, I kind of think that working should be fun. ... We all knew that we could rely on each other. We were all in the same boat. We were all college or university educated, working at Starbucks, we knew we deserved better than what we had. And we were bitching and moaning and complaining, but at one point we got an idea, "Wait a minute, there is something, well, of course, why don't we, we gotta unionize, that's what we have to do. That makes so much sense." We are all like, "Yeah! Like duh. If we all went and said we wanted a raise maybe we'd get one. That's a great idea."

L/LT: Anything that I have read about people organizing in the service industry says, "Look, people are in and out of this place all the time, there is just not a stable core of people to do anything."

LB: That's exactly what it needed, they needed enough people who were fired up about it, who could go to the other stores, everyone who had worked there forever had contacts, and they knew they could talk to other people about it. ... I didn't know what kind of struggle I'd be in for. But I did know that I needed a lot more help. ... We went to the old labour board office on Howe Street [in Vancouver]. We wanted to see if we could organize our own union because I didn't think there was such a thing as a service sector union. Because I thought, you know, I hadn't heard of any company of this nature that was unionized. So I thought I had to go and start my own. ... We went into the [labour board office] and talked to a secretary, realized that that [starting our own union] was nuts, and on the way out we ran into an organizer from the CAW [Canadian Auto Workers] who was there on business. Because we didn't know what to do, he overheard us talking, he's like, "Here's my card." ... And so Steven and I talked to him for like an hour just that same day. And I'm like, "This sounds pretty ok." And then he [the CAW representative] talked to everyone, then we got everyone else together from the store.

L/LT: The people who came to meet you from the CAW, what was their background? CAW obviously has its core groups, but they have also branched out.

LB: They've got all the KFCs [Kentucky Fried Chicken], White Spot restaurants. And they are going to get into hotels. They got the Parkhill on Davie Street. The Pacific Palisade. The Rosedale on Robson Street. A lot of nice, big private hotels. So they were looking, where else was the union going to organize but the service sector. So this was new ground for everybody. Pretty much.

L/LT: So, of the ten [people in your store], how many signed up?

LB: Everybody. Every single person. ... I felt pretty good. So then we thought we could conquer the world. But then nine stores later ...

L/LT: So you get the one store, you start getting other people interested, two things I'd like to know: what kinds of tactics did you use to interest other people? and what was the response of the company itself?

LB: We had our little song and dance, "We want dignity. We need lives, blah blah blah." But then we said we are going to ask for ten dollars an hour. That's what got most people signed up.

L/LT: Is that what did it?

LB: I think that's the biggest factor. I'm like, "You can make more money, it'll be easy, if we all work together." It was basically just the dollar signs that got their interest. Other people had personal vendettas against shitty managers. And wanted to see them crushed — that was one of my motivations. "I'm gonna make you pay." But we'll say it was a moral victory.

L/LT: Was it tough to politicize people?

LB: It was. When we went on "unstrike" — this was a couple months into it, I'm jumping ahead — we all came to work in our own clothes, we didn't wear the uniform, we didn't wear the apron, we wore CAW baseball caps, and handed out propaganda at the counter, at the till. When we weren't working, we would stand in front of non-union stores and say to the customers, "Hey, look at these bastards that you are giving your money to, think about what you are doing." I wouldn't get into arguments exactly, but I would get into long discussions with passersby going, "If you hate your job so much, why don't you quit?" And what am I going to do, get a job at Burger King? The same damn job, but for less money? I don't want to give up what little I have earned already.

L/LT: What are the store managers doing at this point?

LB: Starbucks did a lot of damage control. They told their managers, "Whatever you think, shut your mouth, do not give anything away, as far as you are concerned you do not have an opinion." The managers were not allowed to say boo about it. ... They knew that if they punished us in any way they would get in trouble for it ultimately. The best thing for us, the thing that put us over the top, that made them bargain, was that we got the pastry centre signed up. It's a place out in Burnaby [a city east of Vancouver] where, at midnight, they go around to the bakeries, they pick up the stuff, bring it to a warehouse, sort it all out for God knows how many stores in the Lower Mainland, from Vancouver to Tsawwassen to Chilliwack, put it all together and deliver it to all the stores by five o'clock in the morning. That's

their job. They have a tough job. And they found out we were organizing and they called us up and they are like, "Where do we sign?"[2]

L/LT: Were they [Starbucks] floored? Were they like, "Look, we've given you so much."

LB: Yes. They were so indignant. Like, "How dare we?" They did not like us at all.

L/LT: Once the CAW got involved, how much did the grassroots stay involved in the process and how much was it taken over by people who are professionals?

LB: We would sit at this big, huge table as long as this room. And there would be the ten of us on the union side and four guys from Starbucks. And just ... our representative, and their lawyer would talk to each other the entire time. And sometimes we would pass notes, or lean over and whisper. The entire session was them just kind of arguing back and forth. A lot of it was machismo. ... Like we were the fire hydrant and they were like circling us. They kind of strutted their stuff. Back and forth for a while. But the thing that really dragged us down was that they refused to talk money issues, any kind of money issue, until every other issue had been decided.

L/LT: That's a very strategic choice.

LB: How can we negotiate anything without knowing how much we are going to make? ... It was a smart move on their part — from a business perspective. We were all demoralized, we were all depressed; we were all bored senseless. ... It was like a siege. We were slowly being starved out. We started organizing in October [1996], we started bargaining in late November, December [1996] and we did not get done until July [1997]. Six months of bargaining. At that point we'd lost members of our bargaining committee, we've got staff turnover during all this time, they thought they could just stall us. It could've worked. But we wouldn't let them. But by the same token, I also knew that we wouldn't win if we went on strike either. Because, we could walk out, we'd be locked out forever.

L/LT: How did you fare on the wage question?

LB: We got the starting wage to $7.75.

L/LT: Up from?

LB: $7.50.

L/LT: Were you disappointed?

LB: Yeah. But we also know this is our first contract. Now that we are guaranteed the hours, we'll get more money. ... So we just settled that, we have our foot in the

[2]Starbucks closed down the Burnaby Pastry Distribution Centre in April 1997, just two months after it was successfully organized by the CAW. This move by the company prompted workers in Vancouver to go on "unstrike." The CAW challenged the closure before theLabour Relations Board, but Starbucks was able to prove that it had in fact discussed closing the centre and moving to "third party distribution" before the CAW union drive began. "Yes, they had enough proof that they had been discussing this for a while," Banong remarked. "They won. It's totally unethical. It's really wrong. But it's not illegal."

door, boom, we'll hammer out something better next time. That's what we told ourselves and that's what we told everyone else who works there.[3]

L/LT: How many women were involved?

LB: There is myself, Megan, Maria, and the president of the local, her name is Denise.

L/LT: How did you find that relationship between the male CAW staffers and the ...

LB: I was not really worried about it at the beginning because I figured you guys [the CAW representatives] have been arguing about union stuff since Jesus. They know what they are talking about. At the same time we were trying to tell each other about how this is different from talking to truckers or loggers about whatever. There are a lot more things that we have to look at ...

L/LT: Did you find that there was a lot of give and take on that educational [level]?

LB: We're like, "Why can't we just burn down head office?" And [the CAW representative] is like: "Well now, kids." And he would ask us, "Is it really important that you get this?" And we're like, "Yeah, damn straight its important that we get two hours off that [coffee] bar."

L/LT: What about the language of ...

LB: If I'm in the mood I can talk the talk. But after a while its like, "What?"

L/LT: Did you find you had to educate or clue them [the CAW] in that ...

LB: I would take notes. What does this mean? What are you talking about? What the hell is that? So I had to get my whole spectrum of labour history and learn all these new words. And get a sense for why things were happening the way they were. Why is this so slow? What is going on? Why is this point so important?

L/LT: I am interested in the woman angle on all of this. Was it a problem that you had to work through?

LB: You know, it never really occurred to me. It's never really been an issue. I don't think. If anyone on the company side took a dislike to me just because I'm a girl they didn't let me know. I didn't pick up on it. To be brutally, brutally honest. I don't get what the big deal is. So what? Maybe you know what the big deal is. Is there a big deal?

L/LT: A big deal ...

LB: ... about being a girl in the union movement. Is it just because we are in the service sector?

L/LT: There has always been a real tension between women and the labour movement. Are they in positions of authority? Are they activists? Are they organizers? Are they shop stewards? What kind of respect do they get from their higher ups? Why are all the men still at the top of union movement? Also,

[3]On 16 July 1997, 95 per cent of workers at 9 Starbucks outlets ratified the new collective agreement. The deal included: seniority considerations in scheduling; maternity leave; wage increase of $.75 per hour; severance pay; and retraining for laid-off workers from the Burnaby Pastry Distribution Centre. Shortly after the agreement was signed, Starbucks extended these benefits to all of its workers in BC.

recognizing that [women's] work environment is different, their experience of work is different. And that in order to get them involved, unions have to be more attuned to that. So, historically its always been a problem. ... So this is interesting because it is in the service sector, the service sector is still woman dominated and ...

LB: I always thought it would make more sense for women to want to join unions because that's what the whole thing is about. Working together to make it better for everybody. That's why we are called brother and sister. We're a little family and our job is, we work well in groups. We want to take care of each other. It just made sense that way. It never really occurred to me ...

L/LT: Maybe things have changed ...

LB: The CAW, at least our local is chock full of women. The president is a woman. When negotiations were breaking down, they [the CAW] flew out Buzz Hargrove's right-hand person. ... She got everything going. She kind of settled down the macho bullshit that was going on, smoothed it over, and got it going again. There were three girls on the bargaining committee. And we were the loudest and the noisiest of them all. The guys just kind of sat there. They were great, they were helpful, we needed them, I'm so happy that everyone was there, but they weren't as vocal or as concerned. They just wanted it to be over, they wanted their cheque. So, I guess in our case it was perfectly normal.

L/LT: What lessons do you think the CAW learned from trying to organize service workers [at Starbucks]?

LB: If I was going to give somebody advice, it would be don't do it just for the money. There are so many more issues at stake than that. That is what got people signed up but those are the people we lost as well because they did not see the results right away. The difference between a Starbucks and any kind of trade union is the union philosophy is: "Wait your turn, pay your dues, and you will reap the rewards." Starbucks says: "Join the company and in a couple of months you can be a manager. You know how much money you can make as a manager? You know how much power you are going to have." They suck you in with the money and power thing right away. You get it all and you get it now. And they kind of satisfy you instantly like what we've become accustomed to. So the union has to learn it's a lot faster now. You just can't sit and look at each other at a bargaining table for nine months. You've got to make it happen now. ... We have to learn to be more patient and they have to learn to hurry the hell up. I learned that it's not just about the money. It was an important issue to me, but so was so many other things.

L/LT: Like what?

LB: Like don't make me feel like shit because I serve coffee for a living. I'm sorry, you know, I'm not a brain surgeon. We all can't be brain surgeons. Someone has to do this job. Like our waitress here [at Denny's]. She's friendly, she's making this breakfast fun. ... It's demeaning and it's crappy and as difficult as it is to have a job like this, its really hard to do it well. Any monkey can serve coffee, but it's really hard to do it well. So, if you want to organize your workplace, you actually

have to want to be good at your job, you actually have to want to be glad that you have this job. You come out at the end of the day, and it's like, "I got something accomplished today." I guess you have to want to care about your job and take a sense of ownership in your job. This is my career. Fine. I'm going to do it as best as I can.

L/LT: Do you see the union being part of that?

LB: If you are going to jump through all these hoops to join a union, you're going to want to stay at this job. You're going to make the wages and you got to do it well. This is not a quick fix solution.

L/L: I'm curious about the youth angle. Why do you think young people are so resistant [to unions]?

LB: It requires effort. After I would have a negotiation session, I would come back to my store and I'd try to tell everyone. And they're like, "Uh huh, hmmm, oh yeah." They just didn't care. They knew it was an important issue, but they did not want to take the time to learn about it.

L/LT: Why do you think that is?

LB: I think it's a sign of the times. Our attention spans are nothing any more. And kids think they are going to live forever, that they are going to grow up, and they are going to have a great job, and a big house, and it will just fall right into their laps. Reality has not set in yet. They are watching the [TV show] "Friends" and two of these unemployed chicks have a great Manhattan apartment.

L/LT: Do you think it has something to do with the general, conservative times, we are living in?

LB: Young companies like Starbucks, they don't actually say it out loud, but they let you know that this is probably the best you are going to accomplish so don't go messing with a good thing. "You know how lucky you are to have benefits? Do you have any concept of how lucky you are to have a job, period? You should get down on your hands and knees and thank me that you've got this job." In one sense they're right. There is a lot of people who don't have jobs or have to have all kinds of jobs.

L/LT: It's amazing just how fundamentally resistant [young people are] to the very idea of a union, or that it could even be a positive thing, or that they are responsible for wider things, not just wages, but ...

LB: Child labour. Weekends.

L/LT: Eight-hour days. Politicizing people who, in their daily lives, are not normally politicized. That larger, like you spoke of earlier, that larger idea of it's not just about wages ...

LB: There is a whole set of ethics involved.

L/LT: But that message does not exist "out there."

LB: In school we learned that Henry Ford was a great man. He shot and killed his union organizers, but look at what he managed to accomplish. I remember Roger [a CAW representative] one time asked what we learned in school about unions and

I'm like, "Nothing. Nothing at all." We learned about saboteurs in college. The end. ... Union equals communist I suppose as far as everyone is concerned.
L/LT: Jimmy Hoffa.
LB: I say that all the time. I'm going to end up dead. I'm going to end up a dead fucking commie. [laughs]
L/LT: Are you comfortable with [organizing]?
LB: I am now. I was terrified. Oh God, I hated it so much. I hate organizing. That is the worst, worst thing about, people are just like "huh, slam." You know its like being a Jehovah's Witness. No one wants to hear it. It's like I'm a homeless Jehovah's Witness. That's what it's like. Nobody can see me. I'm not there. They *think I want something. Please, please just listen to me for a second. No, no, no,* you're going to ask me for something. That's what I hate about organizing. I can do an interview. I can go on TV now and not stammer and blush and freak out any more. That's good. I have much more self-confidence than I did before.
L/LT: A year ago you are working at Starbucks, you are noticing these problems, you have an idea, let's go and do this, and now a year later, you're at a fifth annual convention, you're at workshops ...
LB: I have an autographed picture of me and Buzz Hargrove. [laughs]
L/LT: Really?
LB: We're doing this [thumbs up]. There are perks and there are perks. We got to stay in the Hilton when we were in Portland. They [the CAW] made the reservations.
L/LT: But you yourself must have changed a ton by this experience.
LB: Oh yeah. I mean it has really opened my eyes to the way the world really works. You know, how government and politics and labour and business are just hand in hand. And how the union movement is still a business unto itself. You know they got to go out, they got to get their customers, and ... make the customer want to come back. Just as we do. It's the same thing. Except they're selling peace of mind, I guess. ... It made me realize how stuff you read about in the paper, and voting, and how politics and *God knows what can really do, really can personally affect* me. [Before] I felt separated from the world political movement because — I work at Starbucks for God sakes, what do I have to do with anything? with this? nothing!
L/LT: Would you characterize yourself as a political person before? ...
LB: No way. No way. Who gives a shit? Come on. I voted. I always voted NDP. I believe that we should share and help each other. I know the general values of the party and that's good enough for me. ... Put my X. I'm out of there. I got four hours off to vote today.
L/LT: There aren't many people who sell [peace of mind] these days.
LB: No. Starbucks tries it in a cup. That doesn't work. *It just makes you all cranky.*

ANNOUNCEMENTS

THE 25TH ANNUAL Conference of the Southwest Labor Studies Association will be held at the Ramada Plaza Hotel in San Francisco, 29 April-1 May 1999. The theme of the 1999 Conference is "Labor and the Cold War: A Fifty-Year Retrospective."

The conference will mark the 50th anniversary of the CIO's expulsion of the unions accused of following the Communist Party line, and the southwest Labor Studies Association especially invites proposals for panels and papers dealing with the experience of organized labour and workers during the Cold War and with the long-term significance of those experiences.

The association welcomes papers and panels dealing with: communism and anti-communism in unions; screening of maritime workers; unions and foreign policy; the role of ideology in the labour movement; labour economics; labour and gender; labour and race; labour and the right; education; health and safety; and other topics dealing with labour, politics and working-class mobilization.

Submit proposals by 1 December 1998 to Bill Issel, Department of History, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA 94132; e-mail: bi@sfsu.edu

The conference program and registration information will be mailed to members of the Southwest Labor Studies Association and will be posted on-line on H-Labor, H-California, and H-West.