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## Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith, eds., *Dissenting Traditions: Essays on Bryan D. Palmer, Marxism, and History* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2021)

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*d'histoire* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2021), that the wave metaphor is not without its uses.

Sangster's synthesis of feminist thought and activity in Canada ends on a decidedly ambivalent note. The author's discussion of the political and economic impact on women of advanced capitalism, neoliberalism, and the dismantling of the welfare state leaves little room for optimism. It is clear that she has mixed feelings about the potential and possibilities of what some have called the "third-wave" feminism of the 1990s and the turn of the 21st century. Sangster refuses the label "post-feminist" for our current age. Rather, she invites 21st century feminists to engage in Utopian thinking. While "utopian feminist impulses" can only help, it is not entirely clear what kind of future the author sees for feminism in what she calls "the nightmare of our current world." (371)

*Demanding Equality* is a book that is at once capacious in its scope and accessibly written. Very complete endnotes and a detailed index compensate for the lack of a bibliography. This book certainly could – and should – be used in classes on women's and gender history. Ideally, it would also be assigned to students taking courses in political history, the history of social movements, and the history of ideas. It will undoubtedly be useful for students enrolled in feminist studies classes who are familiar with insights forged in other disciplines but unaware of the deep roots and lengthy history of feminism in Canada – a history that, as the author demonstrates beyond a doubt, was dynamic, complex, and diverse long before the 1960s.

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Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith, eds., *Dissenting Traditions: Essays on Bryan D. Palmer, Marxism, and History* (Edmonton: AU Press, 2021)

BRYAN PALMER emerges in this *fest-schrift* as a historian of great insight, prescience, and a pronounced preference for polemic and heated debate. "Brought up in a house without books," Palmer became invested in the study of history not through the university lecture hall (he dropped out after his first year), but rather through his experiences amidst the 1960s New Left scene in New York City. (6–7) He eventually returned to Canada to finish his undergraduate degree before completing his doctoral work under the tutelage of Melvyn Dubofsky. He became a leading scholar of Canadian and American labour history (and, it should be added, an important figure in the making of this very journal). With 14 books, 50 journal articles, and nearly 80 graduate students to his credit, Palmer has certainly been prolific.

His approach, as summarized by Alvin Finkel, has been to look at the totality of the working-class experience, the dimensions of class conflict, and the contours of class resistance: "What were the circumstances of [working people's] lives in various periods, how did they assess those circumstances, and what did they do to try and change them?"(44) In answering those questions, Palmer developed a methodology that blended aspects of Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, and the New Left: "As a Marxist, [Palmer] has placed his main focus on class struggle, and as a Leninist, he has shone a spotlight on the vanguard of organizers for social change. As a product of the New Left, that spotlight has been a critical one that has assessed whether the leadership that has arisen at various points has been democratic, anti-authoritarian, and sought the full liberation of workers," or has simply

embraced “reformist change” or a “bureaucratic, authoritarian, ‘Stalinist’ vision of socialism.” (44)

Some essays here explore Palmer’s politics and his approach to history, some take Palmer’s approaches and attempt to apply them to new areas of research, and others take on various topics related to labour and radicalism. Through all this, three major motifs seem to emerge: the ironies of critique and convention, the relationship between polemic and history, and the importance of Palmer’s relentless search for useable, radical pasts.

Reading this volume as a relative outsider (and certainly a newcomer) to many of the key debates that defined Palmer’s life, it was almost impossible not to see something of a paradox in Palmer having led such a successful academic career premised on critiquing convention. Palmer has been involved in numerous historiographical skirmishes over the course of his career. The irony, of course, is that he probably does not get enough credit for those debates in which his view ultimately morphed into the current consensus (after all, the current consensus now just seems like common sense), and yet he remains a punching bag for those views that still seem out-of-step with the prevailing orthodoxy.

There are many disputes recounted here in which Palmer’s view now seems rather uncontroversial. Take, for instance, his early challenges to scholars who saw the proper focus of labour history as analyzing the “smart union leadership” of pragmatic, primarily 20th century, labour elites. (61) Palmer’s approach – starting from the bottom up, like many of his generation – was often criticized as “devoted to the obscure, the radical, and the cultural.” (51) But, despite the consternation it once elicited, Palmer’s insistence on tackling the totality of the working-class experience seems (today) standard practice. Similarly,

Palmer’s infamous tirades against the poststructuralist hyper-fascination with language and constructed meaning have lost much of their sting in an era in which few scholars still cling to these postmodern verities. Relative victory can be a somewhat ironic fate for a scholar whose approach is defined by constant criticism and debate.

To that end, a second motif woven throughout these essays is the struggle to reconcile polemic and history. For Palmer, there is no point in writing history without a commitment to critiquing established systems and inspiring social change. But, at the same time, many chapters here suggest that his pugnacious, polemical style often landed him in (perhaps unnecessary) hot water. Many contemporary scholars, for instance, interpreted Palmer’s *Descent into Discourse* (1990) solely through the prism of its most polemical taglines: “Much writing that appears under the designer label of poststructuralism/postmodernism is, quite bluntly, *crap*.” (138) Such sentiments opened Palmer up to endless critique, particularly from scholars of gender history.

Nevertheless, as these essayists insist, much of this critique was unfair, relying on a baseless caricature of his views. After all, Palmer’s point was not that language does not matter, it was that language is not “*all that matters*.” (63) Although *Dissenting Traditions* often lauds Palmer’s polemical style – as well as his criticisms of what he sees as the current tendency to avoid heated debate in the academy – the reality is that Palmer’s polemics probably played a sizeable role in opening him up to too much (seemingly unnecessary) vitriol and controversy.

Finally, these essays highlight how Palmer’s historical writings were driven by a desire to find useable, radical pasts and inspire social change. As Palmer described the aim of one of his many

monographs, he sought “to cultivate an appreciation of those rare moments when workers sustained a movement that thrived because it was able to forge an assertion of opposition that united political and cultural struggles with the demands of the workplace.” (195)

But here, I was left slightly disappointed. Considering the title, I was aching for more exploration of another paradox central to Palmer’s approach: namely, how does the historian of a “radical” persuasion write scholarship with the intent of inspiring meaningful change by analyzing pasts that are themselves often suffused with more quiescence (or reaction) than radicalism?

At times, *Dissenting Traditions* struggled with this tension. For instance, one essayist offered an extended broadside against an academy apparently stuffed with “liberal anti-Marxists,” excoriating scholars for “downplay[ing] cases of class radicalism and combativity, contending that workers wanted, as prominent historian Lizabeth Cohen maintained in her study of Chicago during the 1930s, ‘moral capitalism.’”(128) Similarly, we are reminded here of Palmer’s own (to this reviewer, particularly egregious) accusation that Michael Kazin had merely careerist intentions in posing arguments that the American protest tradition was often defined by those who saw themselves as “representatives of the American ‘people,’” rather “than as members of a class.” (137) “Kazin’s proclamation of the death of class,” Palmer fumed, “is little more than an advertisement for himself...aimed at promoting a politics of classlessness orchestrated by the new social movements and their often university-ensconced proponents.” (137)

I am frankly puzzled by this line of critique. Is the suggestion that the only way to write an inspiring labour history is to pretend that the 1930s Congress of Industrial Organizations never sought

anything less than the complete overthrow of capitalism and that republican ideals of the “people” versus the “interests” never dared enter the minds of working people?

Palmer (and others of his generation) scored a victory in one particularly noteworthy way: almost all the other young scholars I meet today share his dedication to fashioning scholarships that will help inspire a more just world. That alone represents a staggering transformation. The scholarship of critique has become, oddly, almost conventional. But I also worry that to the extent the project of writing “radical history” is premised on a particular reading of the sources – rather than an open-ended politics of justice and amelioration – it is a project that will struggle to recruit new converts.

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**Hélène Choquette, *Les Unions, qu’ossa donne?*, La bille bleue inc., 2021, 52 min.**

DANS LE CADRE du centenaire de la Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN : 1921–2021), le documentaire *Les unions, qu’ossa donne?* explore cent ans de luttes syndicales. Réalisé par Hélène Choquette, narré par Anne-Marie Cadieux et d’une durée d’environ une heure, il présente une facette importante de l’histoire des syndicats nationaux : les grèves importantes dans l’histoire sociale du Québec et qui ont fait avancer la cause syndicale et ouvrière. La pertinence et le message général du documentaire visent toutefois l’ensemble du mouvement syndical.

Le documentaire est soutenu par un sérieux corpus de photographies et d’enregistrements d’archives. L’ambiance sobre et noire dans laquelle ils sont présentés permet à l’auditoire de cerner la portée des luttes ouvrières et rappelle