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Prospects in the 1980s

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CRITIQUES

Labour and Working-Class History in Canada:

Prospects in the 1980s

Gregory S. Kealey

THE MOMENT FOR critical evaluations of the labour and working-class history of the 1960s and 1970s has arrived. This has been signalled in the British context by the controversy that has emerged from the confrontation of Althusserian structuralism and Thompsonian "culturalist" or "socialist-humanist" history.[1] In the United States the discussion has been less heated, but a number of significant general assessments of social history have appeared recently, as well as a more specific consideration of the work of Herbert Gutman arising from the publication of his collected essays.[2] More controversy will no doubt soon follow owing to the recent publication of essay collections by two other prominent historians of the American working class, David Montgomery and David Brody.[3] In Canada the argument about the nature of working-class

[1] See, among many others, E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978); Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London 1980); John Clarke, Chas. Critcher and Richard Johnson, *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London 1979); and Bryan Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto 1981). Although I will use "culturalist" throughout this essay, this should not be read as an acceptance of the term. Based on Althusserian premises, the term itself has only descriptive utility. For a further critique, see: Keith Neild and John Seed, "Theoretical Poverty or the Poverty of Theory: British Marxist Historiography and the Althusserians," *Economy and Society*, 8 (1979), 383-416.

[2] Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York 1976) and its major reviews: David Montgomery, "Gutman's Nineteenth-Century America," *Labor History*, 19 (1978), 416-29; David Brody, "The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of an American Working Class," *Labor History*, 20 (1979), 111-26; and Melvyn Dubofsky, "The 'New' Labor History: Achievements and Failures," *Reviews in American History*, 5 (1977), 249-54. More recent contributions are: David Montgomery, "To Study the People: The American Working Class," *Labor History*, 21 (1980), 485-512 and Robert Ozanne, "Trends in American Labor History," *Labor History*, 21 (1980), 513-21. Finally, the more general works are: James Henretta, "Social History as Lived and Written," *American Historical Review*, 84 (1979), 1293-1322 and Michael Frisch, "American Urban History as an Example of Recent Historiography," *History and Theory*, 18 (1979), 350-77.

[3] David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York 1979) and David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York 1980).

Gregory S. Kealey, "Labour and Working-Class History in Canada: Prospects in the 1980s," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 67-94.

history is just beginning. This essay and the following contribution by David Bercuson will undoubtedly provide fuel for the fire,[4] smouldering since the publication of Terry Morley's uninformed attack on the so-called "new" labour history and Bryan Palmer's response to Morley which went far beyond the original and assessed recent work in the field.[5] Recent reviews of Palmer's own book suggest that non-Marxist Canadian labour historians have risen to Palmer's critique.[6] Ken McNaught's forthcoming *Canadian Historical Review* article, "E.P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan," a review essay on writings on labour and the left in the 1970s, will make only too clear the eminently political nature of the emerging debate.[7]

In addition to helping fan the flames of debate, this essay is intended as an assessment of critical problems which have emerged in the collective work of Canadian historians of the working class, both Marxists and non-Marxists alike. Before proceeding to that discussion, it might be useful to clarify what a number of us have said in the past decade on a number of the issues addressed in the subsequent essay.

In our first collective statement, drafted by Russell Hann, we set out our conception of working-class history and provided Canadian researchers with a preliminary guide to available materials which would allow the reconstruction of Canadian history along the lines we were promoting. In rereading that "Introduction," I find that there is surprisingly little that any of us would modify. Indeed, in pausing "along the road to a more complete picture of the forgotten causes, the failed efforts, the obsolete skills, and the private strengths of the largely unknown men and women whose history is essential to an understanding of the world in which we live," I think it fair to assess the last decade as one of significant progress in our self-appointed task.[8]

[4] Both essays were delivered at the McGill Conference, "Class and Culture: Dimensions of Canada's Labour Past," 7-8 March 1980. I have revised my remarks, which were prepared for oral delivery on that occasion, extensively. In the process I have deleted a consideration of the development of the field in the last 10 years.

[5] Terry Morley, "Canada and the Romantic Left," *Queen's Quarterly*, 86 (1979), 110-19 and Bryan D. Palmer, "Working-Class Canada: Recent Historical Writing," *Queen's Quarterly*, 86 (1979), 594-616.

[6] The reviews I have in mind here are David Bercuson in the *American Historical Review;* Ken McNaught in the *Journal of American History;* Christopher Armstrong in *Ontario History;* and Robert Cuff in *Business History Review*. More favourable views are Terry Copp in *Queen's Quarterly;* Frank Watt in *Labour/Le Travailleur;* and Bill Freeman in *Our Generation*.

[7] My thanks to Professor McNaught for risking my wrath and showing his critical essay to me in pre-publication form.

[8] Russell Hann, Gregory S. Kealey, Linda Kealey, Peter Warrian, comps., *Primary Sources in Canadian Working Class History, 1860-1930* (Kitchener 1973). For an extended discussion of how such sources can be used, see Russell Hann and Gregory S. Kealey, "Documenting Working-Class History: North American Traditions and New Approaches," *Archivaria*, 4 (1977), 92-114. I would like to emphasize here the collective nature of the work that I have been associated with in the last ten years. The individualistic bias of North American scholarship and the nature of the rewards system

A few years after *Primary Sources*, in the polemical introduction to *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, we asked rhetorically, "What is the new social history?" Having noted that it included many fields other than working-class history, we limited ourselves to a discussion of that area:

> The major contribution of the "new" history has been to redefine "labour history" as "working class history." Thus labour history ceases to be simply a category of political economy, a problem of industrial relations, a canon of saintly working class leaders, a chronicle of union locals or a chronology of militant strike actions. Instead it becomes part of the history of society. Workers are no longer seen as isolated figures engaged only in trade unions, strikes, and radical politics; instead they are studied in a totality that includes their cultural backgrounds and social relations, as well as their institutional memberships and economic and political behaviour. In addition they must be seen neither as a class in complete social segregation nor as an undifferentiated mass. A class exists only in relation to another class and the new social history studies these relationships. Moreover, the working class is a variegated grouping.

Again, although we might not still say this in precisely the same way, it should be evident that the totality of the historical project never excluded the study of unions and labour politics *per se*. Nor did it ever call for a history simply "written from the bottom up," since it always placed the relationship between classes at the centre of the story. In the conclusion of that introductory essay we suggested the need for studies of the material conditions of Canadian workers, of demographic processes, of social and geographic mobility, of the role of women at work and in the home, of religion, of forms of popular expression, and repeated our "need to know more about the pattern of trade unionism in the country, about the role of strikes and violence, and about working-class politics both radical and conventional."[9]

Two years later in a lengthy review essay I reiterated this position, although I also emphasized with renewed vigour the need for quantitative studies, for material on women and the family, and on working-class politics at the local level. In the conclusion to this essay I argued that "a class analysis" would "transcend the refreshing and liberating pluralism of the 1960s call for attention to region, ethnicity, and class." I added that, of course, class in Canadian historical writing had to incorporate ethnicity and place.[10] While calling for a new synthetic overview based on class analysis, it was never my intention to imply that such an achievement would complete the writing of Canadian history. The absurdity of such a claim is self-evident.

I have summarized previous arguments here to clarify what I and others have said in the past decade about working-class studies in Canada. That much

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within which we all function has too often obscured this fact. The work of the last decade was conceived collectively and much of it has been executed co-operatively.

[9] Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto 1976), 7-8, 11.

[10] Gregory S. Kealey, "The Working Class in Recent Historical Writing," *Acadiensis*, 7 (1978), 133-35.

of this has been misunderstood has become only too apparent of late.

But let us now move beyond what we have said in the past. If there have been significant achievements in the 1970s, it is equally clear that there have been pressing problems. Let us begin to confront some of these difficulties in the writing of Canadian working-class history. Focussing on periodization, region, ethnicity, and culture, in what follows I will address some of the issues currently facing the field.

I. Periodization

HISTORY IS BY DEFINITION pre-eminently concerned with time. Yet periodization has received almost no attention from Canadian historians of the working class. Instead, labour history has all too often adopted the obscure benchmarks of an antiquated national political history. In 1976 we tentatively suggested a new periodization based on Canadian economic development.[11] The economic context established the parameters of life for Canadian workers. Although capitalist throughout the period in which we are interested, this economic structure was never static; it developed, changed, and grew. Thus the context in which Canadian workers lived, worked, and struggled also changed.

There were four major periods of Canadian working-class history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. First is a period before 1850 about which we have until recently known very little. This period, which I have previously described as pre-industrial capitalism, can also be described as a period of primitive accumulation. In this period labour continued to be exploited in the staples trades and in the growing towns and cities of British North America. These new urban areas witnessed the rapid spread of wage-employment and the beginnings of a subdivision of labour in the old forms of handicraft production.[12] With this growing division of labour came the first trade unions and the first strikes.

The second period, which has been studied far more extensively, covered the years from the 1850s to the 1890s and included Canada's industrial revolution. During this time workers actively participated in the destruction of the old colonial system and helped to build a new nation oriented to American trade and increasingly to industrial development behind protective tariffs and a boosterish promotional climate. These new economic directions also led to Confederation and the creation of a national economic entity out of the previ-

[11] Kealey, *Essays*, 8-10.

[12] On primitive accumulation, see Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal 1979), 6-12. For stimulating and suggestive discussions of this early period see H.C. Pentland, *Labour and the Development of Industrial Capitalism in Canada* (Toronto 1981, forthcoming) and T. Ruddel, "Colonial Capital and Labour: Principles and Practices in the Quebec District, 1760-1840," unpublished paper delivered at the McGill Conference on Class and Culture, March 1980.

ously disparate British American colonies. The inspiration for this creation came from Toronto and Montreal capitalists and their British allies who saw a brave future in the economic exploitation of the west and the integration into a national system of the eastern colonies. It should be added, however, that the east had its share of industrial capitalist visionaries as well, although they were less powerful in their local bailiwicks than their central Canadian counterparts.

The first 25 years of the nation's existence were troubled ones, but beneath the pessimism associated with population loss and economic recession a steady industrial growth was achieved which especially accelerated during the early 1880s after the inauguration of the National Policy tariffs.[13] The CPR was not the only economic achievement of these years as rapid growth took place in both consumer goods and producer goods segments of the new manufacturing sector. Moreover, while the CPR tied the slowly developing west into the new state, the completion of the Intercolonial also integrated the east into the new national economy.

In these years central Canadian workers actively built craft unions, city centrals, and took the first steps toward broader central organization. The realities of the continental labour market, however, dictated the creation of strong bi-national ties to American craft unions long before the creation of equivalent British American bodies. During the 1880s central Canadian workers created an ongoing central organization, the Trades and Labour Congress (TLC), but tangible eastern and western participation developed very slowly. In that same decade came the remarkable rise of the Knights of Labor, the first workers' movement in North America to envision and to attempt the organization of the working class in its entirety, transcending divisions of skill, sex, race, and ethnicity. Initially a huge success in central Canada and the still sparsely settled west, the Knights left the east virtually untouched. In the Maritimes, however, the Provincial Workmen's Association showed important similarities to the Knights of Labor.

During these years competitive capitalism was at its height. Despite recent capitalist rhetoric, the state played an active role in economic development. Laissez faire was a myth that applied only in the social realm of government activity. Canadian tariff policy was only one example where the models of German and American industrial development helped offset the ideological claims of Manchester liberalism. The state was a particularly active partner in Canadian industrial development, as to some degree was the working class itself which found itself embracing a "producer ideology," especially in the 1860s and 1870s.[14] Placing a high premium on industrial development as the necessary price for employment and national success, this producer ideology

[13] Among others see Duncan M. McDougall, "Canadian Manufactured Commodity Output, 1870-1915," *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 4 (1971), 21-36 and the earlier G.W. Bertram, "Economic Growth in Canadian Industry, 1870-1915," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 29 (1963), 159-84.

[14] On "producer ideology," see Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, ch. 4 and Gregory S.

proved incapable of withstanding the pressure of class conflict as it emerged in the 1870s and especially in the 1880s. Moreover, producer ideology with its underlying notion of class harmony also faltered in the face of an increasing awareness that capital benefitted from protection in manufactures, while workers suffered from free trade in labour. Canadian immigration policy, which became organized labour's *bête noire* in the 1880s, functioned in the service of capital accumulation by providing a cheap labour force. This labour reserve proved useful for capital as a source of strikebreakers in emergencies or, in normal times, as a simple labour surplus which helped reduce the scope for worker's demands.

The particular importance of the free trade in labour became more evident in the subsequent third period of capitalist development in Canada from the 1890s to the 1920s. Monopoly capitalism replaced the older form of competitive capitalism in those decades and consciously created a national labour market to match the new national product market. In addition, capitalists recruited labour from a vast international pool and extended the concentration and centralization of capital which had begun to emerge in the 1890s. At the workplace they turned to scientific management and other managerial innovations to wrest control of the production process away from skilled labour. And, overseeing all of these developments, capital had a more mature partner — a state which was willing to conciliate and to moderate between capital and labour through new agencies such as the Department of Labour and new legislation such as the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act.[15] If these allegedly neutral activities failed, then capital's partner was also willing to play a harsher role. Staggering demonstrations of force, unprecedented in the nineteenth century, were used to intimidate workers in the coal fields of Nova Scotia and British Columbia and in industrial centres such as Winnipeg and Sydney.[16]

An understanding of working-class history in Canada must seriously face the differences which confronted the working-class movement as capital changed its nineteenth-century face into its modern twentieth-century countenance. For too long Canadian history has viewed this transformation in only quantitative terms. The rapid growth of the Canadian industrial economy and the arrival of American capital have been appreciated, but the complete revision of the "rules" under which capital and labour operated has been underestimated. Capital in its new phase did not play according to the old rules and it

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Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980), ch. 8-9.

[15] Paul Craven, *'An Impartial Umpire' Industrial Relations and the Canadian State 1900-1911* (Toronto 1980).

[16] For an excellent overview of this period in the Maritimes see Ian McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914," unpublished paper, Dalhousie University, 1980. See also Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Craftsman: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6 (1980), 7-48, for a fine discussion of the encounter of skilled workers with monopoly capital.

took the labour movement some time to learn the nature of the new contest. Moreover, workers faced an entirely new set of problems created by the vast resources that capital now had in its service. These ranged from the ability to recruit labour internationally with the active support of the Canadian government to the state's increasing willingness to support capital in its struggles with labour by providing military aid. Labour faced a new enemy and the proven nineteenth-century tactics of class struggle had to be modified accordingly. The new strategies were evident in the level of class conflict which prevailed in Canadian society throughout these years; that they failed was also quite evident by the 1920s. The strength of capital had been too great. Moreover, labour's ability to resist in a concerted, country-wide fashion was weakened by the relatively late national consolidation of the labour movement itself. Institutionally the TLC only became nation-wide at the turn of the century and even this centralization led to the loss of certain national and Quebec unions, as well as the remnants of the Knights of Labor.

Many contemporary Canadian historians draw implicitly and perhaps even unconsciously on their understanding of workers in the twentieth century for their insights into those of the previous century. Yet this borrowing can be quite damaging in the colouration it lends their views. The Canadian working class in the second half of the nineteenth century was not the same working class that these historians study in the twentieth century, nor, as Bryan Palmer has pointed out, are the sources even the same. Immigration patterns, for example, made for a different ethnic mix. The Irish were perhaps the most "foreign" element present, with the exception of the Chinese who prefigured later patterns in the nineteenth century. Even the Irish, however, were far removed from the vastly more variegated and exotic mix of southern and eastern Europeans which capital assembled in Canada in the first decades of the twentieth century. Concern for the ethnic divisions within the working class then is important and valid, but the extent of the difficulty was quantitatively (and consciously) transformed by capital in its monopoly phase.

Equally it can be argued that the ever-increasing division of labour in twentieth-century factories, which destroyed old skills, created in the wake of that destruction a labour force honeycombed with divisions more complex than the older skilled-unskilled distinction which had a centuries-long pedigree. The working class reduced to a universal proletariat, the fantasy of vulgar critics of Marx, does not exist in the factories of early monopoly capitalism any more than it did in the workshops of the nineteenth century. The point is a simple one. The periodization suggested here is one of sufficient importance that, when crossing the divide from one period to another, we should as historians be conscious of entering a territory foreign in its customs, language, and experience. Too often these boundaries have been ignored by those in search of easy and often self-serving generalizations.

Having successfully defeated labour in major conflicts after World War I in Winnipeg and in Cape Breton, capital proceeded throughout the 1920s to reign

in a freer fashion than had been previously possible. A defeated labour movement retreated to reconsider its strategies and for a time found itself in a tight defensive box. All this of course changed during the depression which untrammelled capitalism had created. Out of this major crisis and the class conflict it engendered, grew yet a fourth stage of capitalist development which saw the creation and elaboration of a welfare state as its major symbol. About this stage of Canadian capitalist and working-class development we still know relatively little, although much current work is now pointing us towards a better understanding of this period. The establishment and later sophistication of a different structure of legal constraints surrounding the entire realm of class relations was one major innovation of this period. The creation of a new administrative system of labour law entrenched in federal and provincial labour boards once again transformed industrial relations and provided both capital and labour with another set of new rules intended to regulate and delimit their struggles.[17]

Thus I suggest the following periodization of Canadian working-class development: pre-industrial capitalism to 1850; industrial capitalism, 1850 to the mid-1890s; monopoly capitalism, 1890s to 1929; and crisis and reconstruction, 1930 to the present. Whether a new and distinct stage of development is now emerging remains to be seen. Parts of this periodization are at best tentative, but I offer it as a framework which might provide increased precision to our future discussion.

II. Region

NONE CAN DENY the importance of regional differences for an understanding of Canadian working-class history. Yet the increasing emphasis placed on "region" as the crucial variable which explains sundry problems of Canadian development seems increasingly misplaced. As William Westfall has recently argued, the term "region" lacks any precision or theoretical vigour. Moreover, in popular use it confuses a number of distinct notions employed by geographers who are increasingly critical of its explanatory value. Westfall has also suggested the curious inversion by which the regional interpretation simply stands the old nationalist history on its head by placing the emphasis on and attributing positive value to "the regional end of the continuum."[18] In comple-

[17] Laurel Sefton MacDowell, "The Formation of the Canadian Industrial Relations System During World War II," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 175-96 and also her "Remember Kirkland Lake," Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1979. For a helpful discussion of American capitalist development see Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The US Experience* (London 1979) and for a useful commentary on Aglietta see Mike Davis, "Fordism in Crisis," *Review*, 2 (1978), 207-69. Suggestive Canadian work on this period is included in Leo Panitch, ed., *The Canadian State* (Toronto 1977), although one wishes on occasion in reading this collection for less "theorization" and more empirical analysis.

[18] William Westfall, "On the Concept of Region in Canadian History and Literature," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 15, 2 (Summer 1980), 3-15.

mentary articles Garth Stevenson and David Alexander unearth some of the curious ideological roots of regionalism and draw out its continentalist implications.[19] Region then is a concept which demands careful consideration.

Monopoly capital did not create a national labour market in Canada until the turn of the century. Before that period we must return to the regions for our understanding of working-class development. Too often in the past our generalizations have been drawn from the central Canadian experience which has been assumed to apply nationally. In the nineteenth century there was not one Canadian working class but many. Preliminary work on industrialization in the Maritimes, mainly focussing on Saint John and Halifax, suggest a reasonably congruent, if smaller-scale, picture of the early stages of industrial-capitalist development.[20] Later the National Policy tariffs created a hot-house environment in which Maritime industry, especially textile production, rapidly expanded.[21] As we have already noted the working-class movement in the Maritimes maintained a considerable degree of independence in this early period, although a number of major international craft unions were present from the 1860s. The major independent development was the Provincial Workmens' Association which survived a number of fierce wars with the United Mine Workers of America well into the twentieth century, although by the end it had become little more than a company union.[22] The major development for Maritime workers, however, was the beginnings of monopoly capitalism. With the creation of a national labour market and with a rapidly increasing centralization and concentration of capital, Maritime industrial workers were faced with an economic climate that even before World War I showed hints of its *underdeveloped future.*[23] *The years after the war established that fact, which*

[19] Garth Stevenson, "Canadian Regionalism in Comparative Perspective" and David Alexander, "New Notions of Happiness: Nationalism, Regionalism, and Atlantic Canada," *ibid.*, 16-28, 29-42.

[20] Richard Rice, "The History of Organized Labour in Saint John, N.B., 1813-1898," M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1968; Robert Babcock, "Economic Development in Portland, (Maine) and Saint John, N.B. During the Age of Iron and Steam, 1850-1914," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 9 (1979), 3-37; T.W. Acheson, "The Great Merchant and Economic Development in Saint John, 1820-1850," *Acadiensis*, 8 (1979), 3-27; Larry McCann, "Staples and the New Industrialism in the Growth of Post-Confederation Halifax," *Acadiensis*, 8 (1979), 47-79; Ian McKay, "The Working Class of Metropolitan Halifax," honours B.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1975.

[21] Peter DeLottinville, "The St. Croix Cotton Manufacturing Company and its Influence on the St. Croix Community, 1880-1892," M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979.

[22] Sharon M. Reilly, "The Provincial Workmen's Association of Nova Scotia, 1879-1898," M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1979.

[23] Nolan Reilly, "The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919," *Acadiensis*, 9 (1980); David Frank, "The Cape Breton Coal Industry and the Rise and Fall of the British Empire Steel Corporation," *Acadiensis*, 7 (1977); Donald MacGillivray, "Henry Melville Whitney comes to Cape Breton: The Saga of a Gilded Age Entre-

remains today the constant cloud on the horizon of the Maritime working class whenever it engages in any form of self-assertion. The threat of shutdowns and the removal of capital from the region are the constant refrains under which all negotiation and even organization itself occur.[24]

Our understanding of the role of Maritime workers and their struggles within the framework first of industrialization and then of underdevelopment is a recent phenomenon. Western workers and the western regional economy have received far more attention from historians. Yet the focus of these discussions has been too greatly influenced by regional protest. Thus far too much of the region's economic history has focussed only on the staples of the Laurentian thesis, namely on wheat and resource extraction. We have been told relatively little about the development of the western cities and about their working classes (with the notable exception of Winnipeg). Moreover, all accounts have been influenced by a strong sense of western exceptionalism which increasingly seems more suggestive of the chauvinist attitudes of both the western working class of the period and of historians today. We have little firm basis for regional comparisons of any level of Canadian working-class activity but it does seem clear that the rather easy assumptions of a unique western working-class militancy have been overstated.[25]

Canadian social history to date has had a very local focus. Much of the work has had a community focus, illustrating the influence of Herbert Gutman and of the urban biography approach. Indeed most of the vibrancy in historical writing recently has come from the discovery of region and the rejection of the old national synthesis where the actors moved on stages limited to Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal. Yet this historiographic shift has not resulted in any more adventuresome analytical generalization. Canadian historians have come to believe everything was different everywhere — had different timings, elicited different responses, involved different protagonists. This celebration of region has fit very well with the general direction of Canadian political life in the last decade. Surely the time has come to begin to reflect on region in a critical way. All advanced capitalist countries are typified by regional variation and significant regional underdevelopment. To Marxists this notion will come as little surprise since it is a direct result of the concentration and centralization of capital which figures so prominently in capitalist development. Thus the

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preneur," *Acadiensis*, 9 (1979), 44-70; T.W. Acheson, "The National Policy and the Industrialization of the Maritimes, 1880-1910," *Acadiensis*, 1 (1972), 3-28.

[24] See David Frank and Greg Kealey, eds., "Report on Atlantic Canada," *Canadian Dimension*, 13, 2 (1978) and "Report on Sydney Steel," *Canadian Dimension*, 14, 4-5 (1980), 33-52.

[25] David Bercuson has been most guilty of this, although it is reflected in nearly all the western work. See especially, however, David Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier: 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (1977), 154-75. For a congruent critique of western economic history see W. Peter Ward, "Western Canada: Recent Historical Writing," *Queen's Quarterly*, 85 (1978), 271-88.

United States has its Appalachia and it also has its south — regions that figured prominently in the nation's history and especially in terms of working-class history, as Alan Dawley has recently argued.[26] Equally England has not only its Cornwall and Devon as well as Lancashire but also has its Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. So what is it about this country that so befuddles Canadian historians before the historical difficulties of considering Quebec, the Maritimes, and the west as well as Ontario? Those regions, of course, contain, even within them, considerable variation. For example, Ontario has its own eastern underdevelopment and it also has its own resource region in the north. What we need to reflect on then is what this regional variation has meant for Canadian workers. How has our particular experience of nation building and of uneven development affected the shape and behaviour of the Canadian working class? So far very little thought has been given to such questions. For too long the two solitudes, or more accurately the country's many solitudes, have separated those who work in labour history. Even if the country was to fracture on regional lines tomorrow, any historical understanding of the working class of the new nations would still need to consider carefully the previous regional relationships. Yet of these interactions we know next to nothing. There have been a few speculative attempts but to date they have been more adventuresome than fruitful.

What kind of analysis does this historiographical situation demand? A return to an old national history? No, of course not, but rather the consideration on a national scale of the particular class experiences of Canadian workers in local and regional contexts which adds up to something more than local and regional exceptionalism. After 1867 with the creation of a federal state and certainly after the 1890s with the rise of monopoly capital, business operated in a national (not to mention international) framework in Canada. To study workers only locally or even regionally will too often fail to recreate the adverse situations they faced. Monopoly capital possessed a limited local face at best as miners and textile workers knew from one end of the country to the other after their fierce encounters with distant, intransigent owners.

III. Ethnicity

IF REGION FOR HISTORIANS has been a major factor dividing Canadian workers, then ethnicity has been another. As was noted earlier, we need to be very specific about periodization in this discussion for immigration did not serve the same purposes across the entire span of Canadian history. Moreover any such analysis also must pay close attention to the immigrants themselves, to their backgrounds as well as to their Canadian experiences. This is one of the major areas which demands a cultural analysis. Indeed what has most ethnic history

[26] Alan Dawley, "E.P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans," *Radical History Review*, 19 (1978-1979), 33-59.

of the Canadian working class been if not a careful attempt to reconstruct the class and cultural backgrounds of the new Canadians? Here close attention is generally paid to the specificity of the immigrants' origins, the motivation or cause of the migration, and finally to the experience of the immigrants in their new home. In all cases a sense of culture is a strong part of that historical analysis.

The role the immigrants played in North America and their relationship to the larger working-class movement has been the subject of lengthy debates in the more developed American literature. Both this writing and the smaller Canadian literature should warn us against easy generalization. A number of sensitively drawn accounts have shown how ethnic culture could be utilized by immigrant workers to sustain and fuel resistance to exploitation. The image of the immigrant strikebreaker, while not totally fictional, should not be allowed to predominate over that other portrait of the violent, foreign revolutionist. Both images were nativist and xenophobic in origin, but each had some basis in reality. This qualification is not meant to diminish the significance of ethnicity and of the potentially divisive nature of ethnic heterogeneity to the Canadian working class. We must, however, on occasion remind ourselves that some of those ethnic workers also made important contributions to the Canadian working-class movement. We seem to manage to remember this when considering British immigrants who, in both their Scots and English guises, provided many leaders and theoreticians to the Canadian labour and socialist movement, but this was also true of many of the European immigrants whose experiences were often much wider than those of their Canadian counterparts. The linguistic limitations of even many of the Canadian historians who have shown interest in immigrant workers or the ethnic socialist movement have too often disguised this important fact.

We need to look at more than first generation immigrants to understand the impact of ethnic diversity on the working class. The literature on ethnicity and immigration, even in "multicultural" Canada, too often ignores ethnicity as an ongoing factor in historical analysis. No longer can we blame the melting-pot assumptions of the old immigration history, since we now formally celebrate our diverse ethnic heritages. Instead one might question the official ethnic interpreters of their history where middle class bias and, all too often, cold war assumptions have come to dominate the quasi-official version of the past. This past, which celebrates the achievements of each ethnic community, has little room in its pages for the embarrassments of working-class militancy and radical politics.

Thus we know little about the continuing inter-generational importance of ethnic identity to Canadian workers. In cases with which we are familiar, it could lend itself as easily to radicalism as it could to less active forms of response. Thus Irish Catholic working-class culture, despite the conservatism of much of the Irish Catholic hierarchy, sustained an identification with Irish nationalism that led it to significant sympathies with the Georgeite Single Tax

and with other forms of late nineteenth-century radical thought. This ideology coalesced around the Knights of Labor in which Irish Catholics were very prominent in leadership roles on both sides of the border. Irish activism occurred despite the short-lived official ban on membership stemming from the opposition of French Canadian bishops. A later and equally unlikely case emerges in the role of Scots in the Cape Breton labour movement where various facets of Scots culture — including religion itself — came to serve the unpredictable end of militant and red trade unionism.[27]

Ethnicity considered independent of class often obscures important issues. The Italian ethnic community, for example, contained thousands of itinerant labourers who worked on railway building and other forms of seasonal migrant labour. The community also contained "King" Cordasco and his equivalents.[28] Cordasco, perhaps the most extreme case, should remind us that there were important class divisions within the ethnic communities themselves and these determined much that occurred out of sight of the predominantly Anglo society. We know far too little about the internal structure of Canadian ethnic communities, especially about their occupational structures. Material stemming from reconstitution of the nineteenth-century social structure (data lacking for the twentieth century) suggests that the ethnic world was far more variegated than we had previously appreciated.[29] The likelihood of this being true for the twentieth century as well seems high. Here again class will prove more crucial than some ethnic historians have previously suggested.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that Canada enjoys a significant uniqueness in the western capitalist world as one of the few nations which allowed relatively easy access to its labour market for immigrants in the post-World War II period. Thus when we consider the impact of ethnicity in the Canadian working-class experience, we are discussing an ongoing process. For most industrial countries this is no longer true, unless we are analyzing the different cases of illegal immigration (as in the American southwest and California) or the case of "guest" workers (as in western Europe). Both speak to the reality of international labour markets but have different effects on the national labour movements of the host nations.

Ethnic workers then provide a significant challenge to Canadian labour historians. Much remains to be unearthed about these communities, for too

[27] In general see Donald Avery, *'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932* (Toronto 1979); for the Irish see: Kealey, *Toronto Workers*, ch. 10, 12, 14. David Frank, "Traditional Elements in Cape Breton Mining Society in the 1920s," paper presented at the McGill Class and Culture Conference, March 1980; see also Alan Seager, " 'A Forecast of the Parliament of Man': Aspects of the Alberta Miners Movement, 1905-1945," *ibid.*

[28] Robert E. Harney, "Montreal's King of Italian Labour: A Case Study of Padronism," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 4 (1979), 57-84.

[29] Gordon Darroch and Michael D. Ornstein, "Ethnicity and Occupational Structure in Canada in 1871: The Vertical Mosaic in Historical Perspective," *Canadian Historical Review*, 61 (1980), 305-33.

long ignored by Canadian scholarship. But, as in the case of region, we must not be interested solely in the solitary reconstructions. We must also ask how these communities fit together, or did not? How did they fit into the larger society? Here too periodization must always be remembered for the twentieth-century divide yawns large when we look at the demographic composition of the Canadian population. Finally, cultural analysis will be central to this project.

IV. Culture

THE WORD CULTURE has been described by Raymond Williams as "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." After a useful description of the word's etymology and of its development in non-English language contexts (especially German), Williams concludes:

> In general it is the range and overlap of meanings that is significant. The complex of senses indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence. Within this complex argument there are fundamentally opposed as well as effectively overlapping positions; there are also, understandably, many unresolved questions and confused answers. . . . The complexity, that is to say, is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate.[30]

There can be little doubt that Williams' use of the term in his immensely influential *Culture and Society* (London 1958) bears some responsibility for its extended use in historical writing about the working class. Thus his most recent explanation of his choice is worth considering. In explaining why he adopted the term "in full consciousness of its accumulated semantic range, to denote a whole way of life." He argued:

> I suppose that I felt for all its difficulties culture more conveniently indicates a total human order than society as it has come to be used. . . . Historically culture was cultivation of something — it was an activity; whereas society can seem very static. I often liked the term for this reason.[31]

The debate on the utility of the term in historical writing concerning the working class has become a bitter one. Much of the virulence is generated in the English context by serious political and theoretical differences within Marxism. The irony in the North American context is that the structuralist Marxist attacks on so-called "culturalist" interpretations appear to be partially congruent with anti-Marxist critics. There may well be a double irony here: first, each side would immediately disavow the other if aware of the other's existence; secondly, one wonders if there is not an underlying ideological connection somewhere in these two apparently different modes of thought.

[30] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London 1976), 76-82. See also the discussion in his *Marxism and Literature* (London 1977), 11-20.
[31] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London 1979), 154-55.

My commentary here will proceed on two levels. A simple discussion of the "culturalist" contribution to recent historical writing as evidence that the tradition already has been surprisingly fruitful will be followed by a brief consideration of the debates in English Marxism about culture and their pale reflection in Canada.

The major contribution of "culturalist" interpretations in English language historical writing has come in two related areas: the study of slavery and the study of the working class. In the United States the explosion of historical interest in the question of slavery that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s led to a profusion of studies of slavery which increasingly argued and eventually proved that the answer to age-old questions about the slave experience lay in the careful reconstruction of the slaves' world. There is not space here to trace this literature through its development but there can be little doubt that work in this vein represented a coming of age of American social history and for the first time moved American historians into world prominence. Obviously the key works in this genre — and, equally obviously, not compatible views — were Eugene Genovese's *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York 1974) and Herbert Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York 1976). Both worked in an explicitly "culturalist" vein, although again it should be noted that the differences in approach and argument outweighed their simple commonality which is of interest here. Pursuing similar themes, Lawrence Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York 1977) was another notable addition to this literature. All this pathbreaking work demonstrated the rewards of a cultural analysis.

A cultural approach in American work on labour history also generated a significant breakthrough. Most notably associated with Herbert Gutman, this work has greatly enriched the study of the American working class. Studies by Gutman and others influenced by his work have helped to transform the writing of working-class history in the United States. The work has not lacked critics. Other major American historians of the working class have each commented at length on the Gutman corpus. David Brody, Melvyn Dubofsky, and David Montgomery all have passed considered and lengthy judgements on Gutman's achievements and limitations. Dubofsky and Montgomery worried especially about the failure to consider the political and economic context which helped defeat the struggles that Gutman so sensitively describes. Only partially a question of context, they also called for more attention to the hegemony that capital successfully established in this period in American history, despite the courageous struggles of American workers and their allies. Montgomery in addition argued that Gutman was overemphasizing the ethnic composition of the American working class, forgetting the native American workers who grew up in the industrial context of post Civil War America and who provided much of the leadership to the trade-union movement. Finally, Montgomery also correctly criticized Gutman's too easy adoption of language associated with

American sociology of the modernization school. Brody, on the other hand, called much of the project into question by arguing that subtly Gutman had shifted the Thompsonian focus on class *and* culture into a focus solely on culture. Brody further suggested that the extremely fragmented nature of the American working class prevented the use of an abstraction such as working-class culture. Indeed, reflecting the important work of David Montgomery and of Harry Braverman, Brody called instead for a return to the workplace as the potential synthesizing locus for discussions of the American working class.[32]

Despite their criticisms, all three major assessments of Gutman's work accorded it the importance that it deserves.[33] None questioned the advantages of the cultural approach, although Brody could see no synthesis deriving from it in the American context.

If we return to England we find the roots of "culturalism" in the work of Edward Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) has probably been the most influential piece of historical writing in the English language published since 1960, if not since the war. The later work of Thompson — both the essays and *Whigs and Hunters* on the eighteenth century and the publication of his revised *William Morris* on the nineteenth — has been equally influential.[34] I will not engage in an analysis of this work here. Bryan Palmer's forthcoming book, *The Making of E.P. Thompson*, takes these questions up at length. For our purposes, Thompson's influence is our concern and this has been amply evident in the mass of historical work that has appeared on

[32] Montgomery, *Workers' Control;* Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1974). See also the later Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago 1979) and Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York 1979). For the critiques of Gutman, see note 2 above.

[33] Gutman's influence can be seen in numerous recent studies. In Canada see Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict* and Kealey, *Toronto Workers*. In the United States among others see: Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass. 1976); Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Workers Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana, Ill. 1978); John T. Cumbler, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in Two Industrial Cities, 1880-1930* (Westport, Ct. 1979); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York 1979); and in the articles in Milton Cantor and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Class, Sex and the Woman Worker* (Westport, Ct. 1977) and Milton Cantor, ed., *American Working-Class Culture: Explorations in American Labor and Social History* (Westport, Ct. 1979).

[34] Edward Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (London 1975); "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century," *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136; "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History*, 8 (1974), 382-405; "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?," *Social History*, 3 (1978), 133-65. On the nineteenth century, *William Morris — Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, rev. ed. 1977).

the British working class in the 1960s and 1970s. All of this work is richer for its encounter with Thompson; not all neo-Thompsonians, however, agree completely with his findings or method. The work is too extensive to comment on, but in passing one might mention the valuable work of *History Workshop*, both in its original form as a series of pamphlets, (written by "first-time historians" as Raphael Samuel identified the authors) and later in valuable ongoing collections of essays edited by Samuel and in the journal *History Workshop* where much of the current debate about Marxist historical writing can be found.[35] Of equal importance has been the debate on the labour aristocracy, pro and con, including the works of John Foster, Robert Gray, Geoffrey Crossick, and, for a later period, James Hinton, and the series of critiques that followed.[36] All of this work, even at its most critical of Thompson, provides evidence of the impact his corpus has had on the writing of working-class history in England.

In both England and North America, however, the "culturalist" work has been subjected to considerable criticism recently. These critiques are difficult to elaborate because both the source and the target vary enormously. The critiques stem in the English context primarily from other Marxist scholars and are aimed primarily at Thompson, while in North America the critics are most often anti-Marxists attacking works which have associated themselves with Thompson's method. Despite this considerable difficulty I will try to discuss a number of these criticisms. These include charges of romanticism and voluntarism, of an inadequate definition of class, of the misuse of disciplines such as anthropology, of the importation of "foreign" models, of a failure to situate working-class culture in its larger social and political context, and of

[35] In addition to *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist Historians*, 1 (1976) -, see Raphael Samuel, ed., *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers* (London 1976) and *Village Life and Labour* (London 1975). For a brief introduction see the "History Workshop 1-6," a series in *New Statesman*, 15 February-21 March 1980, especially Raphael Samuel, "History Workshop 1: Truth is Partisan," *New Statesman*, 15 February 1980. Finally see Samuel's "History Workshop Methods," *History Workshop*, 9 (1980), 162-76.

[36] A very useful summary of this work is E.J. Hobsbawm, "The Aristocracy of Labour Reconsidered," in Michael Flinn, ed., *Proceedings of the 7th International Congress on Economic History* (Edinburgh 1979), 457-66. The works mentioned in the text are John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London 1974); Robert Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (London 1976); Geoffrey Crossick, "The Labour Aristocracy and Its Values: A study of Mid-Victorian Kentish London," *Victorian Studies*, 19 (1976), 301-28; and James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards Movement* (London 1973). Part of the debate is evident in: H.F. Moorhouse, "The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy," *Social History*, 3 (1978), 61-82; the response by Alistair Reid, "Politics and Economics in the Formation of the British Working Class," *ibid.*, 347-61; and the final exchange, H.F. Moorhouse, "History, Sociology and the Quiescence of the British Working Class," *ibid.*, 4 (1979), 481-90; and Reid, "Response," *ibid.*, 491-93. Finally, see the useful overview, J. Field, "British Historians and the Concept of Labour Aristocracy," *Radical History Review*, 19 (1979).

inadequate "theorization." We will be most interested here in the critiques which have the strongest resonance in Canada.

The charge of romanticism has been bandied about more than any other. Often signifying nothing more than political disagreement concerning the revolutionary potentialities of the working class, in this guise it is rather easily dismissed as ideological. In a slightly more sophisticated form it emerges as a critique of Thompson's admiration for the early nineteenth-century romantic critique of industrial capitalism represented in the works of Blake, Wordsworth, and later of William Morris. Thompson has successfully answered these charges and here, even Perry Anderson, his most persistent critic, now gives much ground.[37] The reconsideration of romanticism might also be usefully associated with the reassessment of utopianism currently under way. Most evident in the utopian's ongoing concern about questions of sexuality and the sexual division of labour, there is clearly much of value in this tradition as well.[38] In both romantic and utopian thought, the realization that other forms of social organization had existed in the past provided the tradition with the ability to dream of an alternative future. For those steeped in these traditions the social relations of industrial capitalism were neither natural nor foreordained. The nineteenth-century working-class movement was richer for the insights of the romantic critique and for its contact with the utopians; the easy and often snide attacks on such traditions from those who share in the "insight" of twentieth-century "common sense" or even in the scientific surety of certain forms of Marxism represent the famous condescension of posterity that Thompson has so often polemicized against.[39]

The charge that some of Thompson's followers concentrate too much on non-material elements of working-class life perhaps has some merit. There can be little doubt that certain forms of social history have wandered far from the Marxist insights in which Thompson's work is always based. In some of this work the economy is barely present. Interestingly, however, the so-called new social history has been far more guilty of this than working-class history, where the focus on work itself most often pre-empts extreme versions of this difficulty.[40] This has also been true of some American work which tries to blend

[37] Anderson, *Arguments*, 157-75.

[38] Barbara Taylor, "History Workshop 4: Lords of Creation," *New Statesman*, 7 March 1980, and her "The Men are as Bad as their Masters . . . : Socialism, Feminism, and Sexual Antagonism in the London Tailoring Trade in the Early 1830s," *Feminist Studies*, 5 (1979), 7-40. The former is reprinted in *Radical America*, 14, 4 (July-August 1980), 41-46.

[39] Kealey and Palmer, *"Dreaming of What Might Be": The Knights of Labor in Ontario* (New York, forthcoming) argues this position at length.

[40] For a lively critique along these lines see Tony Judt, "A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians," *History Workshop*, 7 (1979), 55-94. The journals under fire in this piece suggest the focus of the critique. *Annales: Économiques-Sociétés-Civilisations; Comparative Studies in Society and History; Journal of Interdisciplinary History;* and *Journal of Social History*. Judt adds, unfairly to my mind, *Past*

new social history and working-class history approaches.[41] Nevertheless some of the new working-class history certainly has not resolved the tangible difficulties of trying to blend structural and cultural arguments. This difficulty, however, should not lead to a blind retreat from the cultural into the structural, but rather to increased efforts to maintain the interface between the two aspects. As for the non-question of which is a "more materialist" approach, I will certainly stand with scholars such as Thompson and Williams who have argued persuasively for the materiality of culture itself.[42]

Thompson's definition of class has recently drawn the fire of some very heavy British artillery. Both G.A. Cohen and Perry Anderson expend considerable effort to restore the notion of "class-in-itself," which they claim Thompson had dropped by equating class with relationships and with consciousness and by denying it any static existence.[43] There is not space to review the philosophical arguments here or even to do justice to Thompson's later considerations of this question.[44] I would simply echo the fact that class does have an "objective" side and call attention to Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of the question in his "Class Consciousness in History."[45] The point that needs to be made, however, is that once we have asserted that class does have an objective side and have established the broad objective parameters of the

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and Present "occasionally," 90n3. A similar attack, albeit broader in its selections of targets, was E.F. and E.D. Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (1976), 205-21. Another Judt attack is "The Rules of the Game," *The Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), 181-91. Not surprisingly these attacks have evoked a series of responses from some of the victims in "Problems in Social History: A Symposium," *Theory and Society*, 9 (1980), 667-81. These range from the outrageous (Edward Shorter, 670-4) to the considered (David Levine, 677-8, and Charles Tilly, 679-81). Another type of response has been forthcoming in two recent defences of "modernization." See Raymond Grew, "More on Modernization," *Journal of Social History*, 14 (1980), 179-87, and Peter Stearns, "Modernization and Social History: Some Suggestions, and a Muted Cheer," *ibid.*, 189-209.

[41] See, for example, Susan E. Hirsch, *The Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Crafts in Newark, 1800-1860* (Philadelphia 1978) and Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton-Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana, Ill. 1978).

[42] Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, *passim*.

[43] Anderson, *Arguments*, 39-43; G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton 1978), 73-77. I would suggest readers see the following before following Anderson in regarding Cohen's reading as definitive: Walter L. Adamson, "Review Essay," *History and Theory*, 19 (1980), 186-204; Andrew Levine and Erik Olin Wright, "Rationality and Class Struggle," *New Left Review*, 123 (1980), 47-68; and Paul Breines, "Toward an Uncertain Marxism: A Review Essay," *Radical History Review*, 22 (1979-80), 100-16.

[44] See Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society" and his "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History," *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 247-66.

[45] E.J. Hobsbawm, "Class and Class Consciousness in History," in I. Meszaros, ed., *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (London 1971).

period, we then, as historians, proceed to Thompson's terrain. We do so because the questions which most interest us as historians of the working class are precisely the questions of how that class behaves and how its behaviour changes and develops over time. Much of this is the territory of the "subjective," "Class-for-itself," or the failure of the working class to develop such, is almost by definition what working-class history concerns itself with.

The importation of methods from other disciplines and of materials from other nation states are also critical refrains often heard about Thompson-influenced working-class history. The first is a legitimate concern and one that demands careful scrutiny. Like history itself all disciplines have their own historical developments and their own debates. Too often the naive historian shopping for an organizing framework or an analytic device will enlist a concept or even a method fraught with difficulties of which he or she remains unaware. The historian's relationship to the social sciences is an important one and other disciplines must not be regarded as forbidden gardens which can be raided surreptitiously for tasty treats after dark. Historians know only too well how they regard other disciplines which use history in this way. We should come to recognize that this particular maze has two entrances.[46]

Much the same can be said of the insights of other national histories. In the Canadian context in which the working class is being recruited from abroad, obviously we must know the territory from which workers drew their initial experiences and much of the framework of their lives, but we also must observe this passage as a process in which the material and ideological surroundings of the new home also played a role. All of this seems only too apparent but sometimes the obvious demands reiteration in the face of critiques such as Michael Katz's which claims that certain "labour historians" are engaged in "making the North American working class fit a British model." John Weaver has raised a similar question elsewhere.[47] These critics, espe-

[46] The best discussion of this problem I know is Gareth Stedman Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 (1976), 295-305. But see also E.P. Thompson on sociology: "On History, Sociology, and Historical Relevance," *British Journal of Sociology*, 27 (1976), 387-402; and on anthropology: "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Midland History*, 1 (1972), 42-55 and "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History." A fine specific critique of unreflective borrowing is Gareth Stedman Jones, "Class Expression Versus Social Control? A Critique of Recent Trends in the Social History of 'Leisure'," *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), 163-70. For a defence of social control, however, see H.F. Moorhouse, "History, Sociology and the Quiescence of the British Working Class." An ill-tempered critique is Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History."

[47] Michael B. Katz, Michael J. Doucet and Mark Stern, "Migration and the Social Order in Erie County, New York, 1855," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 7 (1978), 700; John Weaver, "Urban Canada: Recent Historical Writing," *Queen's Quarterly*, 86 (1979), 75-97. See for a better-humoured, albeit similar, argument: John H. O'Rourke, Jr. and Michael S. Cross, "To the Dartmouth Station: A Worker's Eye View of Labour History," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 1 (1976), 193-208, esp. 194-95.

cially Katz, know little of the working-class world they are considering. One scholar who should know, however, David Bercuson, has made a similar charge, accusing "modern 'working-class' historians' " of paying "due obeisance to E.P. Thompson, the guru" and of "shoehorning their subjects into a Thompsonian mould regardless of any violence done to history in the process."[48] The curious virulence of this attack aside, it does seem incumbent upon those of us who utilize the insights of British (or any other country's) social history to demonstrate convincingly that they apply to the Canadian context.

Another difficult question sometimes raised about notions of working-class culture is its relationship to the dominant culture of the society.[49] This problem is most often raised in the context of suggesting that the working class shared in the values of the capitalist society or, in its less vulgar form, that workers at least had a shared institutional life with other classes. These mediating institutions such as the church, education, fraternal societies, and the temperance movement, are then usually taken as proof that there was no separate working-class culture. Interestingly it has been the work on the labour aristocracy debate in England that has pushed these questions furthest. There the question has not focussed on whether there was a separate working-class culture. Instead it has been a debate about the role of the upper stratum of the working class within the entire class and within the larger society. The findings in those discussions, however, bear directly on the question at hand. E.J. Hobsbawm, a proponent of the labour aristocracy theory, has summarized recent discussions as concluding that the entire concept of "respectability" and all that it suggested "did not imply a simple ideological 'embourgeoisement' of the artisans." Instead it is clear that artisans understood themselves to be "part of the 'working classes' or even the 'working class' and in some senses spokesmen for all of it." Moreover, the artisans' version of "respectability" was not identical to that of the middle class especially in its dependence on collective institutions including, of course, unions. When the labour aristocrats' way of life came under attack from the innovations of monopoly capital at the turn of the century, they moved politically to the left both in their trade-union practice with the innovations of revolutionary industrial unionism but also in their political practice where Lib-Labism found itself on the wane.[50]

These findings conform very well to similar studies of late nineteenth-century Hamilton and Toronto skilled workers where moulders and printers, for example, played dominant roles in the trade union movement and in labour politics. Moreover, these same skilled workers were among the most active members of fraternal organizations, the temperance movement, and in some

[48] David Bercuson, "Recent Publications in Canadian Labour History," *History and Social Science Teacher*, 14 (Spring 1979), 180.
[49] Tom Traves, "Class and Culture: Dimensions of Canada's Labour Past," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6 (1980), 171-77.
[50] Hobsbawm, "Aristocracy of Labour Reconsidered," 461-64.

cases even the churches. The weight of the evidence from these case studies suggests that, while many of these institutions were intra-class in nature, workers perceived and used them in a distinctive fashion which did not conflict with their overall self-identification as working class.[51] In the years after their position was challenged by the arrival of monopoly capitalism, they continued to provide leadership to the working-class movement. The striking presence, for example, of machinists and other metal trades workers all over Canada in the vanguard of revolutionary unionism during and after World War I stemmed from their encounter with the new way of life and work dictated by monopoly capital.[52]

In general then the notion that Canadian workers were deeply implicated in the capitalist system, which so often parades as a given, appears increasingly for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at least to be one of those conventional wisdoms which now demands demonstration not easy acceptance. We have much evidence of other working-class assumptions and behaviour; where is the proof of workers' acquiescence?

We do know, of course, that they were defeated, but that is a different question. The confusion of these questions, however, lies at the root of much of this debate. In the British context, Thompson's most reflective critics, Johnson and Anderson, are not calling for the jettisoning of culture as a conceptual device. Instead they seek a more variegated use of culture which incorporates splits within the working-class world.[53] The peculiar notion that culture is only useful as a device if there is total working-class unanimity and solidarity on all questions apparently is derived from David Brody's critique of Gutman.[54] It appears to be particularly attractive to some Canadian labour historians who, after studying the working class in its most militant stages (Bercuson: Winnipeg and the OBU; McCormack: western radicalism; Abella: The CIO drive),[55] now seem fascinated with questions concerning the failure of those movements. (Interestingly all have moved towards ethnicity as a crucial variable for further study.)

Another approach to the problem of the failure of the working-class movement to overthrow capitalism is to look to the internal stratification of the class.

[51] Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict;* Kealey, *Toronto Workers;* Wayne Roberts, "Studies in the Toronto Labour Movement, 1896-1914," Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1978.

[52] Montgomery, *Workers' Control, passim.*

[53] Johnson, "Culture and the Historians," 67-71, his "Histories of Culture," 74-77, and his "Three Problematics," 234-47. For Anderson see *Arguments, passim* and also his recognizable role in Williams, *Politics and Letters,* esp. 113-56, 324-58.

[54] Brody, "The Old Labour History and the New," esp. 123-26.

[55] David Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg* (Montreal 1974) and *Fools and Wise Men* (Toronto 1978); A. Ross McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto 1977); Irving Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956* (Toronto 1973).

This Marxist explanation sometimes bases itself in some version of the labour aristocracy thesis which now ranges from the classic notion of an upper strata of the working class being bought off for a time by the higher rewards of imperialism through more recent versions which look to authority in the workplace and to the powerful hold of bourgeois hegemony. Other versions of this explanation overtly jettison the labour aristocracy and instead simply call our attention to the stratification of the working class and to craft exclusivism as variables militating against united working-class action. In Canadian work, articles by Ian McKay and Craig Heron have rasied these questions in studies of Halifax bakers in the second half of the nineteenth century and of Hamilton metal trades workers in the early twentieth century.[56] In both cases their findings have been posed extremely tentatively.

Those of us who have worked on the late nineteenth century have not studied a working class which possessed an articulate revolutionary option. Equally struggles of the magnitude of Winnipeg or the early twentieth-century coal battles in Nova Scotia and British Columbia were not present. Yet what has emerged from this work has been an image of a class surprisingly united — one in which divisions of ethnicity, skill, religion, and even sex were recognized, debated, and for a few years in the 1880s, at least, were overcome.[57] Yet these achievements were admittedly brief and they were dissipated in the 1890s. A militant working-class movement re-emerged in the first 20 years of the new century, one which, as a world-wide phenomenon, possessed revolutionary industrial unionism as its cutting edge.[58] These dramatic conflicts, culminating in the events of 1919, were defeated by the combined forces of capital and the state. For the ensuing decade the trade-union movement was weaker than it had been since the 1890s or perhaps, arguably, since the 1860s. Yet in the 1930s the Canadian working class again entered the theatre of class struggle on a national scale. Surely given this history it is possible to speak historically of a Canadian working class. Indeed it is now necessary to locate class conflict and class struggle at the centre of modern Canadian history.[59] The complexity and heterogeneity of the Canadian working-class experience does not deny the existence of a working class. It may have limited that class's effectiveness in specific struggles with capital; moreover, it may have prevented it at times from mounting significant challenges to capital's hegemony; it has never, however, eliminated the class tensions that arise between the

[56] Craig Heron, "The Crisis of the Craftsman: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6 (1980), 7-48 and Ian McKay, "Capital and Labour in the Halifax Baking and Confectionery Industry during the Last Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978), 63-108. See also the British material listed in n. 36, above.

[57] On the Knights' experience see Kealey and Palmer, *"Dreaming."*

[58] Larry Peterson, "The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900-1925," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (1981).

[59] For the distinction between class conflict and class struggle, see Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 134-6.

working-class's attempts to make capitalism less oppressive and capital's own needs. And this is precisely the utility of cultural analysis. Recognizing that the "degree of homogeneity and distinctiveness of class cultures is historically very variable,"[60] it directs our attention precisely to the terrain of analysis which is crucial in our examination of working-class history. It does not of necessity demand a militant, united, battling working class, although often that is what it finds. Indeed it must explain the elements of working-class life that hinder the emergence of stronger resistance to capitalist hegemony.[61]

The last charge against the "culturalists," inadequate "theorization," calls forth another obvious point; namely the structuralist critique which calls for a return to a "scientific" Marxism surely must not be confused with the anti-Marxist, North American critics of Thompson and of writers influenced by him. The North American critics, deeply enmeshed in positivistic historical traditions extremely suspicious of "theory," will certainly not embrace Perry Anderson's confident dismissal of Thompson's assertion that history cannot be "anything more than proximate." Anderson instead declares: "Exact and positive knowledge has never been beyond the powers of history: its vocation, as with its sister disciplines, is to extend it." Even his more cautious afterthought that "the process, as Lenin noted, will always be asymptotic to its object," will hardly satisfy those for whom a "scientific history" smacks of earlier and unhappier days of vulgar Marxist inquiry.[62] Moreover, the debate which has swirled about Richard Johnson's recent criticisms of Thompson suggests the same difficulties. Johnson's position that "Culturalism, preferring 'authenticity' to 'theory,' renders its own theoretical project guilty, surreptitious and only

[60] Richard Johnson, "Historians of Culture/Theories of Ideology: Notes on an Impasse," in Michèle Barrett, Philip Corrigan, Annette Kuhn, and Janet Wolff, eds., *Ideology and Cultural Production* (New York 1979), 76.

[61] Perceptive readers will no doubt recognize that I am on the verge of introducing yet another foreign-sounding word and another foreign thinker here. To spare Canadian historians this infliction, I will only suggest that they read Raymond Williams' discussion of Gramsci's conception of hegemony. See Williams, *Keywords*, 117-18 and *Marxism and Literature*, 108-14. Let me note, however, the following: "[Hegemony] has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own. We have then to add to the concept of hegemony the concepts of counter-hegemony and alternative hegemony, which are real and persistent elements of practice," *ibid.*, 112-13. A useful discussion of the relationship of "hegemony" as an analytic device in writing working-class history is: Geoff Eley and Keith Neild, "Why does social history ignore politics?," *Social History*, 5 (1980), 249-71.

[62] Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 262; Anderson, *Arguments*, 12-13. Although not a major point, it's worth pointing out that Anderson renders this quotation incorrectly, substituting "approximate" for "proximate." This alters the meaning slightly since "proximate" conveys a sense of "nearest" compared to "approximate's" "near but not exactly." Given the closeness of Anderson's reading and argument, this is a disconcerting error. For a fine critique of developments of this kind in contemporary Marxism, see Russell Jacoby, "What is Conformist Marxism?," *Telos*, 45 (1980), 19-43.

partly explicit" and his further attack on its "embargo on abstractions" can hardly reassure those who find theory and theoretical language distasteful.[63] Or is there yet another irony lurking here just below the surface? Could it be that positivistic history à la Ranke is not so far removed from the "science" of the structuralist Marxists?

Such theoretical niceties can not be pursued here, but it does seem important to suggest that the Canadian historian's general predilection to assume that theory lies outside the domain of history does not serve them well when they are asked to confront works which are situated in debates which have a wider theoretical currency.[64] In addition the failure to assess much of this work on its own political and social terrain seems strangely akin to the aforementioned criticisms made of Thompson's followers who supposedly import indiscriminately. Excellent work has been written recently on the British Marxist historical tradition and Canadian historians of the working class would benefit from a familiarity with the context from which so much influential material in the field stemmed.[65]

[63] Richard Johnson, "Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and Socialist-Humanist History," *History Workshop*, 6 (1978), 97. See for a fuller development of his ideas his "Three Problematics: Elements of a Theory of Working-Class Culture" in Clarke, Critcher and Johnson, eds., *Working Class Culture*, 201-37. The ensuing debate in *History Workshop* which followed Johnson's initial article is too lengthy to be reviewed here, but see Keith McClelland, "Some Comments on Richard Johnson," *History Workshop*, 7 (1979), 101-15; Gavin Williams, "In Defence of History," *ibid.*, 116-24; "Letters" of Tim Putnam, Robert Shenton, and Tim Mason, *ibid.*, 220-25; Simon Clarke, "Socialist Humanism and the Critique of Economism," *History Workshop*, 8 (1979), 138-56; Gregor McLennan, "Richard Johnson and his Critics: Towards a Constructive Debate," *ibid.*, 157-66; and "Letters" of Richard Johnson and Gareth Stedman Jones, *ibid.*, 196-202. On the North American distaste for theory see McNaught and Bercuson reviews of Palmer cited earlier. The most accessible (in language) of the Johnson commentaries is his "Historians of Culture/Theories of Ideology," 49-77. Here, for example, his criticism of structuralism is clearest. To my mind, one of the most substantive critiques of Thompson and culturalism, and one which I benefitted from having to confront, unfortunately is unpublished. See Ian McKay, "Towards a Materialist Approach to Canadian Labour History," Dalhousie University, 1980.

[64] For a useful discussion see Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," and for a fine example of how history does help formulate theory see Raphael Samuel's, "Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in Mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop*, 3 (1977), 6-72. I would argue, others would not, that Edward Thompson's work also serves this task well.

[65] See, for example, Thompson, *Poverty of Theory;* Anderson, *Arguments;* Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, esp. Parts I and V; Chas Critcher, "Sociology, Cultural Studies, and the Post-War Working Class" and Richard Johnson, "Culture and the Historians," in Clark, Critcher and Johnson, *Working Class Culture*, 13-40, 41-71; Raphael Samuel, "British Marxist Historians, 1880-1980: Part One," *New Left Review*, 120 (1980), 21-96; Eric Hobsbawm, "The Historians' Group of the Communist Party," in Maurice Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton* (London 1978), 21-47; Ralph Miliband, "John Saville: A Presentation," in David E.

V. By Way of Conclusion

WE HAVE MOVED rather far afield from the Canadian worker by now. The digression, however, is appropriate. The methods, theories, or if one prefers, simply the questions which historians of the working class pose, should be developed in an international dialogue. We gain little from a proud parochialism; we learn much from comparative discourse. The disagreements and debates that we discover elsewhere, however, especially in Britain, have an overt political colouration that is seldom addressed directly in North America. Here the ideology of objective scholarship and of professionalism are upheld as pillars of professorial pride. There seems little reason to continue this pretense. Canadian working-class history from its inception has borne the weight of conflicting ideological discourse. One stream of analysis has always been directly concerned in the attempt to mediate class conflict. Finding its political inspiration as well as its intellectual roots in the progressivism of John R. Commons and his institutional school of labour economics, Canadian scholars from the young W.L.M. King to Bryce Stewart to Harold Logan were actively involved in the world of mediation and conciliation. They also, especially Logan, found time to lay much of the groundwork in the field of labour history. This tradition entrenched itself in labour relations when that discipline emerged in Canada following World War II. Partially distinct from this first group were social democratic scholars such as Eugene Forsey and Stuart Jamieson, or later Ken McNaught, Desmond Morton, and Walter Young. In addition there was also a subterranean Marxist undercurrent represented by scholars such as Clare Pentland, Stanley Ryerson, and Charles Lipton.[65] What is important to note about this early scholarship is that it was all politically engaged. One might also suggest that the results of this scholarship were relatively thin at least if compared to the material produced in the United States ranging from Commons through Perlman to Taft, or in England by the Webbs, the Hammonds, and the Coles. This is of some significance for Canadian scholarship because the feebleness of previous analyses of the working-class experience leaves us little to build on and much room for embracing as new ideas which should have been repudiated long ago.

In the 1960s as labour history became a respectable academic pursuit, a new group of scholars emerged that was unshaped by the older left-wing political context and instead came out of a new university environment with a wider definition of the range of historical scholarship and a larger horizon of

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Martin and David Rubenstein, eds., *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays Presented to John Saville* (London 1979), 15-31; and Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson*.

[65] For a discussion of the early work see my "Looking Backward: Reflections on the Study of Class in Canada," Dalhousie University, 1979. An abridged version of this work will appear in 1981 in the *History and Social Science Teacher*.

academic possibility due to the rapid expansion of the academy. This group includes many of the scholars now most active in the field: Irving Abella, Don Avery, David Bercuson, and Ross McCormack. Proudly and professionally independent, their work is typified by its alleged distance from politics and the labour movement. Many of these historians would describe themselves as realists and some of them might even embrace pragmatism as a positive virtue — these values, of course, always being posed in contradiction to the "romantics."[67] Such scholars have made a significant contribution to the study of Canadian working-class history.

In the 1970s a subsequent set of Canadian scholars in working-class history emerged. This grouping, which obviously includes the author, was formed by a rather different set of experiences. Undergraduates in the late 1960s and in graduate schools in the early 1970s, many of these historians were active in the new left and influenced by the rebirth of Marxist scholarship. There is no question that these experiences colour their work as they have been the first to acknowledge. Their political identification has caused serious difficulties for the social-democratic scholars who to a large degree actively opposed the New Left, are still fighting the battles of the cold war, and whose knowledge of Marxism is limited to an equation that reads Marx equals Lenin equals Stalin. Their response has been predictable. The more significant assessment is that of the "realists." Although deeply suspicious of anything that smacks of commitment or ideology (and for some of them the two are easily equated), nevertheless they must evaluate the work on its own terms. After a period of caution that consideration appears to be now underway. Politics necessarily plays an important role in these discussions. The "realists" will respond proudly that they have no politics which affects their scholarship; that is, of course, a political statement in itself. For as E.H. Carr usefully warned in the mid-1950s, "To denounce ideologies in general is to set up an ideology of one's own." In a similar vein he also reminded us that "the most suspect historian is the one who makes the loudest professions of impartiality."[68]

These political questions, whether acknowledged or not, cannot be allowed to replace the canons of historical scholarship as understood by both sides. The issues which separate the younger historians of the working class[69] from the "realists" must be articulated, considered, and subjected to empirical test. Ideally, in the process both groups would learn from each other. Time will tell if that openness will prevail. Clearly neither group has a corner on historical

[67] This group has been described recently as "the first generation of labour historians." I have rejected this terminology since by ignoring pre-1960s scholars it tends to be somewhat confusing. The description of the two groups which are defined by the phrases first and second generation, however, I am in complete agreement with. See Bryan Palmer, "Working-Class Canada."

[68] E.H. Carr, *The New Society* (London 1956), 16, 103.

[69] I would gladly embrace the term "romantic" but I suspect some of my associates would not so I will refrain. Critics, however, are welcome to describe me as such.

talent or truth. Moreover, we do not learn only from those with whom we share an ideological and political identification.

The next few years will undoubtedly see many assessments of the working-class history which has been written to date. More important than such considerations, however, is the need to get on with the task before us, namely writing the history of Canadian workers and moving towards new views of the Canadian past which are built on such class analysis. Central to any such project will be the discussion of culture.

Ironically culture will be crucial to this ongoing work for the very reason that leads some critics to want to eliminate it. That the working class has suffered defeats and setbacks does not militate against a cultural argument. It does place the necessity of accounting for these on the historical agenda, for as John Saville has recently commented in discussing the British working class:

> It is, after all, a remarkable phenomenon that in the most proletarian country in the world, it was not until the closing years of the nineteenth century that an independent working class party was established; and an equally remarkable historical fact that it took two world wars and the most serious economic crisis that world capitalism has so far known before the party achieved a parliamentary majority.[70]

When we place the achievements and failures of the Canadian working class in this comparative arena, which also must include the United States, then perhaps the pessimistic conclusions reached continually by the "realist" historians, especially about the present, are not as obvious as they think. They certainly do not apply to all periods of the past.[71]

My thanks to Craig Heron, Linda Kealey, Ian McKay, Bryan Palmer, and Bruce Tucker for their critical comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

[70] John Saville, "The Radical Left Expects the Past to do its Duty," *Labor History*, 18 (1977), 266-74.

[71] For an interesting consideration of U.S. working-class history in this vein, see Mike Davis, "Why the U.S. Working Class Is Different," *New Left Review*, 123 (1980), 3-44, and his "The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party," *New Left Review*, 124 (1980), 43-84.