

Ethnic Studies and Working-Class History

Bruno Ramirez

Volume 19, 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/l1t19art03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Ramirez, B. (1987). Ethnic Studies and Working-Class History. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 19, 45–48.

Ethnic Studies and Working-Class History

Bruno Ramirez

MY GOAL HERE IS to focus on the rather problematic relationship existing between ethnic studies and working-class history, addressing this question more as a practitioner than as an encyclopaedist. It is a difficult relationship which, when one reviews the past ten years of scholarly production, shows up in the quite limited cross-fertilization that has occurred between these two fields.

One of the reasons — perhaps the most obvious one — for this state of affairs is that both in Canada and in the United States, ethnic studies constitutes a new field of scholarly endeavour. As has been the case with other new fields emerging in recent years (for instance, black or women's studies), its matrix lies in a particular political and cultural conjuncture, one which has had a determining role in the conceptual direction the field has taken.

In Canada, ethnic studies has been to a large extent the child of the federal government's official multiculturalist policy. One is almost tempted to use the expression "studies from the top down" when referring to the sizeable financial and administrative resources the government has allocated in order to develop this field and render its results as publicly visible as possible.

Of course, this is not to say that before the government developed an interest in this area, the ethnic phenomenon was absent from the research agenda of Canadian social scientists. But most observers would agree about the stampede effect the government's promotional role produced among both established and ad hoc researchers. It was a stampede taking place on a rather dusty terrain, so the ensuing scenario was not exactly conducive to placid contemplation. Now that much of the dust has settled and the terrain has come to appear rather rocky, it is easier to start assessing the impact of ethnic studies on social and historical research.

The mandate of ethnic studies was rather simple: to make sense of the multi-ethnic character that Canadian society has taken, particularly in the wake of the massive post-war immigration movement. But in spite of the mandate's postulate concerning the enrichment that ethnocultural diversity contributes to Canadian society, the wave of ethnic studies that have emerged has been unable to escape a basic problem-solving orientation. Disciplines such as

Bruno Ramirez, "Ethnic Studies and Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring 1987), 45-48.

sociology, counselling psychology, social work, and educational sciences therefore have taken the driver's seat, and those aspects associated with the study of integrative processes have become the overarching concern of the field. In many ways, this is understandable, not only because problem-solving was one of the top priorities for the publicly-funded research, but also because those disciplines tend to be the most readily equipped to deal with essentially contemporary behavioural phenomena growing out of ethnocultural diversity and multi-ethnic coexistence (questionnaires, participant observation, and sophisticated statistical measurements). More importantly, the multicultural vision that inspired many of these studies was not sufficiently operative to enable researchers to distance themselves from theoretical problematics and conceptualizations derived from the assimilationist model.

If enquiries into the diverse behaviour of ethnic groups had to go beyond a mere *empirique de la différence*, if they had to be given a sense, this sense could only be teleological in character; and so assimilation (despite the revisions the concept underwent) was there to provide this sense.

This is not the place to go into a detailed critique of the assimilationist paradigm, but is important to stress the point that — at least in Canada's case — both political and methodological factors are paramount in explaining the ahistorical tendency that most ethnic studies have taken. This also accounts for the limited cross-fertilization with historical studies (let alone studies on the history of the working class).

The other point that needs to be made is that the particular preoccupations and the orientation which prevails in ethnic studies did not prevent a great deal of theoretical debate and controversy from emerging and spilling over into historical research. Historians working on the history of ethnic groups could not help but take notice of some of the conceptual nuances surrounding the ethnic phenomenon and its diverse manifestations, and in the best of cases these enlarged their own perspectives. This type of cross-fertilization has also had some negative effects, which are discussed further in this paper.

Much more pertinent to working-class history is the progress that has been made in two subfields that in principle should make ethnicity their central preoccupation: immigration history and migration studies. Despite their apparent close relationship, these two areas may be differentiated. The former is practically the exclusive domain of historians, whereas migration studies have emerged as a truly multidisciplinary field.

Immigration history has revived as a concern of mainstream social history in North America over the past fifteen years, after a period of "dark ages" characterized by neglect by the historical profession or by filiopietistic concerns. Thanks to the significant crop of studies which have appeared in recent years, there is today an unprecedented view into the social and cultural tapestry colouring the history of countries such as Canada and the United States. The use of both the quantitative and qualitative methods now prevalent in the "new social history," coupled with the adoption of a more sophisticated conceptual

framework, explain to a large extent the scholarly recognition that immigration history is increasingly receiving.

Of course, most immigration historians are only partially concerned with the history of the working class, including the immigrant working class. The task of identifying a given immigrant population group, whether at the local, regional, or national level, of following its movements from the country of origin to that of immigration (and often back), of reconstituting the group's residential and institutional articulation within the space of the host society, of penetrating the internal organization of the group, and tracing the multifarious economic strategies pursued by its members, all these and other tasks translate into an extremely complex research agenda.

Singling out the working-class component of one such population group and treating it both as members of a given ethnocultural collectivity and as part of a multinational working class in a specific productive-capitalist context, is an enterprise into which only few historians have ventured. Those who have done so (for example, Daniel Walkowitz on French Canadian and Irish workers in Troy and Cohoes; Tamara Hareven on French Canadian workers in Manchester, New Hampshire; Bodnar on Slavic workers in Johnstown; Gary Gerstle on French Canadians in Woonsocket) have not only grounded questions of class and ethnicity that had been largely a matter for speculation into historical reality; they have also shown how urgent is the need to develop analytical tools enabling us "to deal with ethnicity without ignoring the dimension of class" (as David Montgomery called for in his 1980 *Labor History* article).

But even if not directly concerned with the working class, the new vintage of immigration history is enhancing our knowledge of the social and cultural universe in which immigrant workers, as well as non-immigrant workers, operated. Themes that may sound old-fashioned and melodramatic today, such as the struggle for acceptance, are producing important new insights into the functioning of what anthropologists call "mechanisms of exclusion." These range from nativism in all its manifestations to immigration policy as a capitalist strategy, and these insights are also extremely relevant for an adequate historical reading of the political culture of national labour movements.

These studies, moreover, have dealt a final blow to what one may call "the uprooted syndrome." No respectable work of immigration history today can afford to ignore the precise socio-economic and cultural universe that immigrants left behind, but to which they continued to be linked psychologically in the host society. The truncated scenario that prevailed for so long, one in which the North American starting line of an economic race that one day would turn immigrant workers into middle-class ethnics was marked at the point of entry, has been left behind. Today that scenario is being replaced by one that exhibits essential elements of continuity which are crucial to understanding ethnicity in its historical manifestations. These elements of continuity should then enable us to deal with discontinuities in a sound historical manner, and not as an arbitrary physical and geographical demarcation line that the assimilationist

approaches tended to take for granted. This is where migration studies have proved so important to immigration historians. Partly because the migration process in all its temporal and spatial dimension is their central concern, and partly because they tend to focus on contemporary or recent migrations (involving more complete and richer data bases), these studies have made us much more sensitive to aspects such as the selective process occurring in the societies of departure (who left and who remained behind and why), the different patterns migrations could follow, the importance of emigration networks, and emigration as a terrain for individual and group strategy.

Thus, as our knowledge of the migration phenomenon and of the processes of insertion into the host societies becomes deeper and more sophisticated, it becomes apparent how simplistic was the issue so fiercely debated by labour historians: *whether the behaviour of immigrant workers was primarily informed by class consciousness or ethnic consciousness.*

It is a problem that, in a very important sense, betrays a teleological perspective not very different from the one that has plagued assimilationist approaches. In the latter, the behaviour of immigrants was observed and measured against a fixed notion of socio-cultural change, one in which the "social time" through which the assimilative process is supposed to occur was viewed as uniform and tied to a fixed time table. In the former case, the behaviour of immigrant workers has too often been read through notions of workers' militance, activism, organization — notions that presuppose a view of socio-political transformation that in its uniformity and fixedness can be as ambiguous as the concept of "Americanization."

Now that the complexity of the migration process is being revealed, now that it is more likely to be viewed as a terrain mobilizing the immigrants' material, cultural, and psychological resources and as a process that has relativized concepts as basic as that of "time," "space," "value," and "the good life," we are in a better position to raise the question of social consciousness, and in such a way as to avoid the "either-or syndrome."

This process of clarification cannot go very far, however, unless the category "ethnicity" is rescued from the state of confusion and ambiguity in which it finds itself, particularly in historical analysis. The prevailing tendency to view ethnicity as synonymous with "national origin" has clearly shown its limitation. It may have facilitated the acquisition of statistical measurements, and it certainly has reinforced the propensity to treat it as an ontological category, one inevitably elevated to the role of independent variable. Very seldom has ethnicity been treated as a historical process, in order to capture its concrete manifestations within that complex and multidimensional scenario that is the historical past. Perhaps its elusiveness as a dynamic and transforming element is due to a failure to link it properly to the historicity of social and cultural processes and to an inability to apply to it a truly dialectical analysis in order to perceive it and account for it. Here, I think, lies the most urgent task for immigration and labour historians, and on this terrain their critical interaction cannot but produce exciting results.