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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Forestry Workers and their Communities

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Gordon Hak, *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934–1974* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 2007)

William P. Jones, *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2005)

Richard A. Rajala, *Up-Coast: Forests and Industry on British Columbia's North Coast, 1870–2005* (Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2006)

UNTIL THE DEVELOPMENT of the chainsaw and the intensive mechanization of the lumber industry during World War II, rank-and-file workers dominated the labour force in the woods and mills of the North Pacific slope and the American South. Those workers produced good profits for the owners of capital and were able in many instances to extract a modest living for themselves. From the histories that have been written about the turbulent life in many timber communities, it is clear that workers were not passive in the face of arbitrary decisions made by logging and sawmill bosses. Those who worked in the woods and mills of British Columbia, the American Northwest, and the great pineries of the American South struggled – often against great odds and under demanding circumstances – to gain a fair share of the wealth they produced. While mill owners, resident managers, and their allies in the business community usually controlled local politics, I argued in *Hard Times in Paradise: Coos Bay, Oregon* (2006) that their working-class constituents frequently tempered decisions and helped forge a political culture that embraced some of the hopes and aspirations of common people.

Although the industries and work life covered in these three books span different corners of the North American continent and different moments in time, there are interesting parallels between industrial life in the towns and woods of these disparate regions. From British Columbia's lumber towns to

the African American-dominated forest communities on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, skilled and less-skilled workers always outnumbered middle management and professional classes. Boom-and-bust production cycles, seasonal employment, and the industry's unrelenting efforts to force labour to bear the burden of the instabilities of capitalism were constant points of reckoning for resident working-class populations. In each of those settings, "working stiffs" sold their labour for daily wages or piecework production.

There existed a different dynamic, however, between the lumber communities in the American Southeast and those on the North Pacific slope. The explosive economic growth of British Columbia, Oregon, Washington, and Idaho in the 20th century gave a particular cast to the region's labour history. The story of the greater Pacific Northwest – with its uneven development, far-flung extractive economies, turbulent community histories, and highly mobile populations – serves as a prototype for modern capitalism. Until well into the 20th century, the absence of capital, a spare but expanding infrastructure, and distance from world markets were regional liabilities. Like the South, British Columbia and the American Northwest remained in a dependent relationship to the more powerful capital markets in eastern North America until the onset of World War II. Those conditions produced inequality, class antagonisms, and shaped sometimes volatile labour relations in the two regions.

Gordon Hak's *Capital and Labour in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1934–1974* is an account of the highly productive forest industries that have sustained British Columbia's economy for more than a century. His study is a critique of mass production, large corporations, and their accompanying bureaucratic structures during the "Fordist age," the great period of timber production from the 1930s to the 1970s. Those were the years when large unions across every major industrial sector in North America reached accords with corporations to assure stability in labour-management relations. "Unions, by maintaining high wages and a disciplined workforce," Hak argues, "contributed to this stability." (5) Governments in the United States and Canada cooperated in providing the necessary social support in the form of insurance systems and unemployment assistance. In the process of accommodating themselves to the Fordist model, unions ceded considerable ground to corporations who were turning out an impressive array of profitable goods for a hot consumer market.

With the emergence of new productive relations in the 1970s, however, governments ceded influence in the marketplace to a more competitive economic environment, which had the effect of diminishing social support services for workers. With the end of the Fordist regime, North Pacific slope loggers and mill workers confronted other structural changes during the 1970s and early 1980s – a severe downturn in the American construction industry, technological advances in the mills and woods, and rising unemployment. "A depression and a recession," Gordon Hak writes, "were bookends for the period from 1934 to 1974." (3) British Columbia's forest industry employment plunged from 9.1

per cent of the provincial workforce in 1970 to 5 per cent in the 1990s. In the post-Fordist years, therefore, corporate agendas presented labour with a new and threatening reality that included widespread attacks on unions and worker benefits.

Capital and Labour tells a complex story of corporations, unions, and distant markets to explain a critical period in the development and evolution of British Columbia's forest products industry. As the centerpiece of the provincial economy for much of the 20th century, the industry's workers persistently encountered new technologies, new management strategies to speed production, and the elimination of old and the creation of new occupations. The one constant driving these changes from the 1930s through the 1970s, however, was the presence of big corporations such as MacMillan Bloedel, British Columbia's largest operator. With 90 per cent of the province's forests in Crown ownership, the big corporate conglomerates dominated leasing and licensing arrangements, gaining access to vast acreages of old-growth timber.

But the world of Crown timber licenses, seemingly compliant unions, and efficiently functioning bureaucracies was less orderly and considerably more chaotic than the Fordist model suggests. *Capital and Labour* is a nuanced story, with the author suggesting that British Columbia's forest policymakers pursued an independent course during the Fordist years, using small operators in the Interior as leverage against MacMillan Bloedel and its corporate cohorts. Arguments for policymaking autonomy in capitalist nation states, however, are fraught with problems, and in British Columbia's case, there is no persuasive evidence that small operators served as a political counterbalance to the large coastal corporations. Despite the author's claims to the contrary, provincial forest policy continued to favour the needs of large operators, focusing primarily on the revenue needs of the state and ignoring a growing reforestation backlog and a looming environmental crisis.

If large and small companies differed over the leasing and licensing system, they were in full agreement that organized labour posed a threat to industrial peace. As late as 1941, in the face of union organizing successes in the lumber industry in Washington and Oregon, the chairman of the B.C. Loggers' Association could boast that another year had passed "with our members running their own business without Union regulation or Union permission." (74) Labour shortages during World War II, a thriving economy, and union victories in other industries soon led to worker organization in pulp and paper mills and the successes of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) in sawmill and woods operations. In many instances, IWA organizers succeeded in the face of strident company opposition and government support for the forest products industries. At the end of the war, however, the IWA dominated union organizing in the coastal districts, and by the mid-1950s it represented most of the region's labour force. In the interior, with its many small, poorly capitalized, and seasonal operations, the IWA was less successful.

Gordon Hak points to well-known problems between and within unions

in British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon lumber camps and mill towns – the ongoing struggle to exclude known or suspected communists from leadership positions. Often the most progressive and assertive of union members, communists were very influential in the industrial unions, especially the IWA. Communists and their sympathizers, who led the organizational drives of the 1930s, eventually pulled out of the IWA – in a celebrated split in 1948 – and formed a new union. When the latter failed, communists lost influence with the province's lumber workers in the midst of the furor over the Cold War. The IWA also fought jurisdictional battles with the conservative Lumber and Sawmill Workers Union, an American Federation of Labour (AFL) affiliate. Despite those tensions, the industrial and craft unions often cooperated in labour disputes, refusing to cross picket lines in the case of strike actions.

While Hak has authored a solid and largely persuasive narrative, *Capital and Labour* is not without stylistic flaws, including numerous passive voice constructions, lengthy and occasionally ponderous sentence structures, repetition, and inattentive proofreading. The author also makes no mention of First Nations people and their struggles to reclaim Aboriginal lands. More perplexing, however, is the author's curious but brief pandering to "the labyrinth of discourse," in which he confusingly argues that "discourses of liberal capitalism… . persuasively explained the world and were instantiated in institutions and practices." (11) What follows is a discussion of "dominant discourse," "capitalist discourse," "provocative discourses," "competing discourses," "environmental discourse," "alternative discourses," and other disconcerting uses of the term. (12) Readers will be pleased to know that the remainder of the text is bereft of such literary artistry.

The subject of Richard Rajala's book, *Up-Coast: Forests and Industry on British Columbia's North Coast, 1870–2005,* is British Columbia's middle and north coast forest industries and the relationship between the province's human communities and the forest environment. The author pays special attention to integrating social and environmental history with the emergence of First Nations as significant players in provincial politics. Taking advantage of the government's habit of making generous long-term leases of Crown forests to large corporations, BC politicians pursued policies that treated public lands as a form of private property, ignoring for more than a century the protests of First Nations people. Up-coast forests, including those on the Queen Charlotte Islands, faced other liabilities – low percentages of high-grade timber, high railroad rates, and waterborne cost disadvantages in shipping to East Coast markets. In addition, provincial decision-makers developed policies that favoured the largest corporations to the detriment of sustaining local economies. British Columbia governments, Rajala contends, pursued programs "based on the naïve assumption that healthy corporations would inevitably produce healthy communities." (15) In the end, this misplaced faith brought great harm to middle and north coast settlements.

Adding to the up-coast districts' difficulties were large companies like Pacific

Mills that ruthlessly cut wages and pushed its contractors to the margins during the Great Depression and other market downturns. The middle and north coast forest industries, in brief, never achieved the kind of stability that might have provided modest living standards for workers, a kind of trade-off for their plunder of the region's forests. Instead, provincial policymakers optimistically adopted the mantra of sustained yield, assuming that all would be well and turning a blind eye to Aboriginal land claims. With its reach for wood fiber extending across the expansive waterborne region, Pacific Mills and its large paper-manufacturing facilities at Ocean Falls emerged as the dominant force in the up-coast economy during and after World War I. The company employed some 400 loggers in its own camps and contracted with numerous hand loggers, whose status was similar to that of southern sharecroppers, dependent on Pacific Mills for start-up capital at the front end of the season and a market for their production at the close of their summer's work.

A prototypical, isolated company town with an always difficult climate, Ocean Falls offered the advantages of stability – family houses, duplexes, educational accommodations, churches, and playground and educational facilities. Like other towns of its kind, Ocean Falls also practiced occupational and racial segregation, with skilled papermakers living in larger homes alongside supervisory personnel. Asian workers lived separately in their own "Japtown." While Pacific Mills succeeded in maintaining a cadre of skilled employees, single workers, coming and going, passed through the community with great regularity. Despite obvious improvements in the standard of living, Ocean Falls remained a feudal settlement. Pacific Mills owned the land and all the buildings in the town and controlled transportation to and from the community. As early as 1916, the *B.C. Federationist* observed: "Everything belongs to the company. The worker lands on a company wharf, eats at a company hash house, sleeps in a company bunkhouse, buys his booze at a company bar, and his 'terbacker' and overalls at a company store. If he dares to kick, he is escorted from the company premises by a company constable." (74–75)

Up-Coast is a study in the impermanence of a capitalistic/natural resource enterprise. Exhaustively researched, the book is more about business successes and failures, myriad small companies, receiverships, and ownership changes than a story about labour. Rajala, a well-known forest industry and labour historian, portrays British Columbia's First Nations as major players in his project. The province's tragic inequity in forest law and practice, he writes, "rests on the separation of First Nations from their land without benefit of a treaty." (15) As was true in the other Canadian provinces and in the United States, Native people usually were among the first to feel the brunt of declining opportunities in logging and fishing. By the early 21st century, however, British Columbia governments began to involve First Nations more fully in up-coast forest industry decision-making. In the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement of 2001, First Nations people won tentative timber rights and assurances that

mid-coast watersheds would have protected status and henceforth would be subject to ecosystem management practices.

Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing for more than two decades, British Columbia's north coast was partner to larger problems in the forest products industry that extended all along the North Pacific slope. Plant closures, increasing automation (especially in the mills), fluctuating markets, rising unemployment, and troubled communities together left a legacy of social discord throughout the region. Newly emergent social values that prized landscapes for their amenities – and in British Columbia, the increasing assertiveness of First Nations in pursuing land claims in the courts – further muddied life in timber-dependent communities. First Nations also placed escalating pressure on the BC Forest Service, once preeminent in shaping provincial policy. A severe recession from 1975–76, declining timber revenues, and the Peter Pearse Commission report of 1976 all added to British Columbia's political turmoil.

Although First Nations groups along the middle and north coast achieved some degree of equity through the courts and changes in provincial forest policy, the industrial structure of the up-coast districts began to come apart early in the 21st century. The big Skeena Cellulose mill at Prince Rupert closed, companies continued to convert to harvesting second-growth timber and to export raw logs, and automation in the woods and mills added to the unemployment rolls. Fearful that the Haida would place restrictions on cutting rights to its recently acquired lands from MacMillan Bloedel, Weyerhaeuser sold its coastal forests to Brascan in February 2005, ending its brief appearance on the British Columbia coast. But the most significant symbol for the region's unraveling, Rajala argues, was the demise of Skeena Cellulose, the "postwar linchpin of north-coast forestry," (231) and the failure of provincial officials to save the company and provide jobs for its approximately 2000 employees.

Rajala agrees with historian Kenneth Coates that improving and sustaining the future of British Columbia's north coast economy depends on treaty settlements with First Nations people. Treaties and the federal funds they would bring to the region have the potential to contribute to locally controlled economic development and to lessen the north coast's dependence on multinational corporations. The hole card in this hand – and one fraught with great emotion – is the significant opposition to *any* settlement of Aboriginal land claims. The closing of the modest and uneven period of postwar prosperity, Rajala contends, underscores the weaknesses in British Columbia's "faith in large-scale resource extraction under business-government cooperation, technocratic management, and technological sophistication." (244) As the long 20th century wound to a close, little wealth remained in Swanson Bay, Ocean Falls, Prince Rupert, and other mill towns. For up-coast people to succeed, Rajala concludes, would require that they possess the tools to control their own destiny.

If the greater Northwest, with its burgeoning population growth and pro-

ductivity records, was imagined as a success story, what happened in the American South was its antithesis, its shortcomings emblazoned in Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. With its deeply tragic sense of the past and its institutionalized sins, much of the 20th-century South, especially its rural areas, was entrenched in grinding poverty, its agricultural sectors languishing in a kind of hand-labour torpor. At the onset of the 20th century, the states and provinces on the North Pacific slope were more thoroughly integrated in global capitalist markets than the states of the old Confederacy. Between 1880 and the onset of World War II, the South stood apart, different in its cultural, social, and economic worlds, from the rest of the United States. In its politics, economic relations, and class structure, the region was also a thoroughly racialized place. As historian Gavin Wright remarked in *Old South, New South*[1], "the South was the largest and most cohesive region standing inside the country but outside the country's economic mainstream."

In a call for greater clarity on the question of southern economic development and labour relations following the Civil War, Jonathan Weiner characterized the region's sharecropping economy as a persisting legacy of bound labour that lasted well into the 20th century. The South, he said, perpetuated a system of unfree labour through a variety of debt-peonage schemes whereby a tenant's debt could be transferred from one landlord to the next, thus preserving a repressive system. Those regional trappings of involuntary servitude, Weiner argued, "extended well beyond debt peonage" to embrace southern culture, its social traditions, and the region's legal structure which imposed additional restrictions on a free-labour market. The Old South's repressive labour economy clearly distinguished it from the more classical capitalism of the North and West.

Explanation of the comparative differences in the structural realities of the South and the North Pacific slope, therefore, rests in culture, economics, and legal structures – in the history of nation-states, modes of production, landholding patterns, labour systems, relations of class, caste, and race, and the institutional barriers to capitalist innovation. All of those elements are present in William P. Jones's *The Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South,* a story of labour and capital that is far different from similar work relationships in the mist-shrouded forests of the greater Pacific Northwest. The vast sweep of the "piney woods" in the American Southeast extended from the Carolinas through Georgia and westward into east Texas. To add greater importance to this account of the southern pineries at the turn of the 20th century, the North American lumber industry was in the midst of explosive growth, with much of its expansion occurring in the Southeast.

1. Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War* (New York 1986).

Lumber production soared along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts between 1870 and 1910. Furthermore, unlike the great timbered region of the North Pacific slope where Caucasians dominated the workforce – with sizable numbers of Indians/First Nations and Japanese men employed in some districts – more African American men worked in the southern pineries than any other ethnic or racial group. In contradistinction to writers such as Howard Odum, Zora Heale Hurston, and others, who described "black southerners as essentially incompatible with modernity," author William Jones places African Americans "at the center of the story of modernization in the South." (2) Blacks who worked as wage labourers in the woods and lumber mills of the South, who established family and community relationships in the region, helped define southern industrialization. African American males, he points out, made up approximately 60 per cent of all lumber-related employment between 1890 and 1930. While some were convict labourers, southern lumbermen also resorted to debt peonage to secure a reliable labour force.

To flesh out the substance of his narrative, Jones uses oral histories to good advantage, finding in many instances that the experiences of African Americans in the lumber industry strengthened families and led to stable community living for many. Because memory is untrustworthy, the author uses census and archival data to confirm anecdotal evidence in oral histories. He also urges readers to be aware of "the racist terror, forced labour, and political disenfranchisement that form the background against which *The Tribe of Black Ulysses* must be understood." (6–7) There are other surprises in this book. Because black and white wage labourers became part of the lumber industry workforce on relatively equal terms, the author finds considerable cooperation between the two groups by the 1930s and 1940s. Beginning as mostly seasonal employees early in the 20th century, African Americans began to view lumber work as their main source of income after World War I. Living in what can essentially be described as proletarian settlements, blacks established a semblance of stability in communities that, with the passing decades, would eventually challenge white supremacy.

By the onset of the Great Depression, black men and women who had made the transition from failing agricultural sectors to logging camps and sawmill towns enjoyed wage-earning opportunities formerly denied to them. Jones argues that lumber industry employment made it possible for some black southerners to better "negotiate the difficulties created by a changing rural economy following World War I." (58) In the absence of opportunities to become landowners, black men earned wages sufficient in many cases to support a spouse and children. Freed from agricultural labour, children increasingly found it possible to attend school. Although they lived in rather conventional patriarchal settings, some African American women were also able to establish a degree of economic independence through informal service work.

The new lumber industry communities also helped to shape an emerging African American cultural world of sports, entertainment, and other forms of

leisure activity. Drawing upon the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Jones observes that this new culture reflected profound elements of American popular culture during the 1920s. The story of working-class leisure in those sawmill towns "demonstrates the futility of distinguishing between rural African American culture and some white, northern, or commercial 'mainstream.'" (87) The new world of leisure that developed included elements of national popular culture representing, therefore, an interracial discourse and negotiation involving white and black workers. Although they were denied the political franchise, Jones writes, barrelhouse music, baseball games, and swing music provided opportunities for blacks to participate in a common public dialogue with whites. Blacks living in sawmill towns, in brief, were not wanderlust, culturally isolated people, but dynamic participants in forging a new and unique culture of leisure.

Race, however, still shaped all aspects of African American life in the mills and woods operations along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Wage discrimination was a fundamental reckoning for black lumber industry workers following World War I. With regional wage scales already lower than anywhere else in the nation – and excluded from good-paying craft positions in the industry from the beginning – blacks continued to face discrimination from white-dominated unions through the 1920s and 1930s. The results were dramatic wage differentials between the West and the South, and for the South, between black and white workers. Concentrated in low-paying lumber industry jobs, African American workers experienced severe hardship and discrimination from both regional and occupational pay differentials.

Slowly but imperceptibly, the initiatives of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal administration contributed to a heightened sense of black activism, a slow move toward interracial unionism, and attacks on the racism inherent in conservative unions such as the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, which claimed to represent all workers in the southern lumber industry. An opponent of industrial unions, the southern Carpenters and Joiners strove to preserve labour market segregation and thereby to condemn black workers to low-paying, unskilled positions. First the National Industrial Recovery Act, and later the National Labour Relations Act in 1935, expanded opportunities for both black and white workers. The new laws allowed workers to choose their own representatives, broadened their union rights, and threatened the ability of craft unions to discriminate against less-skilled workers.

John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers, Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and David Dubinsky of the Ladies Garment Workers unions then led the break from the AFL to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935. A group of black activists, the Young Turks, who believed in the potential for interracial cooperation, saw the CIO as a vehicle to promote better wages and improved working conditions for blacks. Despite its many shortcomings and racial biases during the late 1930s, Jones points out that the CIO "showed more willingness to include African

Americans as partners and not simply beneficiaries of radical activism." (150) During World War II and immediately following the cessation of hostilities, organized black lumber workers played a significant part in providing momentum to interracial organizing in the South.

Members of the Southern Pine Association, long the most powerful industrial trade association in the South, became incensed during the war when "their" black employees left lumber work to take jobs in the defense plants of the North and West. One lumberman even complained that black workers had raised the standard of living in the South. Another whined about "outsiders" and "government agencies" meddling in business affairs and "creating discord and disrupting the otherwise pleasant relationships existing between employer and employees." (156) But at the same time, the labour shortage at home provided an ideal opportunity for a limited interracial militancy and modest union organizing successes between 1941 and 1943.

The Southern Pine Association and its member companies, as would be expected, fought the AFL and CIO unions at every advance made on behalf of workers. Whether they were members of biracial or exclusively black unions, the formerly excluded African American workers showed a propensity for proletarian politics, with a growing interest for civil rights in the workplace. In the end, automation, mill closures, and a downturn in the lumber economy limited opportunities for young black men to pursue the path forged by their elders. Deindustrialization in the southern lumber industry, the author concludes, was especially hurtful in the rural South, where thousands of African Americans had toiled as wage earners in a once booming economy of cutting and milling lumber. In the newly emerging postwar South, their skills were no longer needed. Federal policies that once assured them a fair wage for a fair day's work were also shifting in the direction of defense-related aerospace and electronics jobs, positions opened mostly to white college graduates. The deindustrialization of old ways of life left young blacks with few alternatives, especially with the emergence of increasingly conservative federal Congresses by the late 1970s.

There is a larger message in the three books under review in this essay, one embedded firmly in the capitalist ethos and all that it entails. Explanations for the transformation of British Columbia's forest industries and the literal revolution that has taken place in Atlantic and Gulf coast wood-fiber production reflect the changing world of capitalist productive relations in one of North America's vital natural resource industries. Historian Martin Sklar put the issue succinctly in *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890−1916*[2]. Capitalism is much more than simple economics: "[It is] a system of social relations expressed in characteristic class structures,... patterns of authority, and relations of power." Capitalism, he observed, "is property rela-

2. Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890−1916: The Market, The Law and Politics* (New York 1988).

tions; it is class relations; it is a sociopolitical mode of control over economics and over a broad field of social behavior." (2, 6)

What happened in the timber-dependent communities on the North Pacific slope and in the pineries of the Southeast mirrored the continual restructuring, the ever-expanding boundaries and constantly changing parameters of capitalist enterprises. In that turbulent world, British Columbia workers and their counterparts in the American Southeast fought to earn decent wages and to protect themselves from economic downturns. The stories in these three books suggest, however, that workers were less successful in contending against decisions made in distant financial centres and their systems of authority and control.