FORUM

W[H]ITHER LABOUR HISTORY

Regionalism, Class, and the Writing of BC History

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IS BC LABOUR HISTORY IN DECLINE? Certainly it is fashionable everywhere today to claim that labour history has had its day. Yet in Canada every regional journal and most wider journals, such as the *Canadian Historical Review* and *Histoire Sociale*, regularly publish articles in the field of labour history. And there is, of course, a first-class journal, *Labour/Le Travail*, that is devoted to labour and working-class history. As other fields complain about the lack of synthesizing works, Canadian labour history has produced three: Desmond Morton's *Working People*, now in its third edition; Craig Heron's *The Canadian Labour Movement*; and Bryan Palmer's *Working Class Experience*, now in its second edition.[1] In BC, we have a long tradition of producing book-length histories of the labour movement, starting with the work of Communist Party of Canada (CPC) writers William Bennett and Harold Griffin, through Paul Phillips's *No Power Greater*, to the work by former CPC member Jack Scott in the 1970s.[2] Articles, theses, and books on BC labour history make up a

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[1] Desmond Morton, *Working People*, third rev. ed. (Toronto: Summerhill 1990); Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: Lorimer 1989); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991*, second rev. ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1992).

[2] William Bennett, *Builders of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Broadway Printers 1937); Harold Griffin, *The People's Early Story* (Vancouver: Tribune 1958); Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour In British Columbia* (Vancouver: BC Federation of Labour, Boag Foundation 1967); Jack Scott, *Sweat and Struggle: Working Class Struggles in Canada* (Vancouver: New Star 1974); *Plunderbund and Proletariat: A History of the IWW in BC* (Vancouver: New Star 1975); and *Canadian Workers, American Unions* (Vancouver: New Star 1978).

large body of material, as is indicated by a sixty-page bibliography compiled by Simon Fraser University graduate students, while recent overviews of the history of BC, such as those by George Woodcock and Jean Barman, at least acknowledge the presence of labour.[3]

But I think it is fair to say that labour history has not become the dominant paradigm, or problematique, or way of conceptualizing the history of the province. In assessing the impact of labour history, we need to ask why BC historians, regardless of their respective specialities, have not incorporated the larger concerns and analyses of labour historians into their work. This, after all, was the promise of Canadian labour historians in the early 1980s; that is, that the writing of labour history would require all historians to think about periodization, politics, regionalism, ethnicity, and industrialization in very different ways. The real question to be explored, then, is: "Why haven't BC historians made more use of the ideas, the larger organizing concepts, put forward by labour historians?"[4]

To answer this question, we need to think about the historiography of BC labour history. The first mainstream writers to examine the subject here, as in other regions and countries, were the industrial relations experts. In the United States, it was John Commons and the Wisconsin school, Selig Perlman, and Philip Taft, while in Canada it was primarily Harold Logan. In BC, Stuart Jamieson's *Industrial Relations in Canada* and *Times of Trouble* stand out as exemplary books.[5] These writers often cast their work in the form of "the labour question" or "the labour problem." How can we explain the militancy of the 1960s? Jamieson asked. What were the particular abuses that caused workers to go on strike and turn to more radical politics? By understanding the grievances that had motivated workers in the past, and by understanding how an interventionist state had resolved these

[3] George Woodcock, *British Columbia: A History of the Province* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre 1990); Jean Barman, *The West beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, rev. ed. (University of Toronto Press 1996). To obtain copies of the labour bibliography, contact the author.

[4] BC is hardly alone in this, of course. Nowhere has labour history or its concerns and categories of analysis become the chief framework for examining a region. My concern here, however, is to examine British Columbia's historiography. It may be that some of my remarks are more widely applicable.

[5] Harold Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan 1948); Stuart Jamieson, *Industrial Relations in Canada* (New York: Cornell University Press 1957); Stuart Jamieson, *Times of Trouble: Labour Unrest and Industrial Conflict in Canada, 1900-66* (Ottawa Privy Council Office 1968). Jamieson's work is richer and more nuanced than these comments might suggest, and he has published other material that does not readily fit under this rubric. However, I think it is fair to say that these two books do fit the category of industrial relations.

problems while maintaining a capitalist economy, industrial relations experts hoped to rub salve on today's sore spots. Implicit in this history was a kind of Whig analysis that saw unions and socialists as point dogs for reform. They had their place and were worthy of study precisely because we could learn how to reduce their impact on society, politics, and the economy.

Social democrats also wrote early labour history, and they, too, used a revised Whiggery in order to understand the patterns of the past. Seeking to explain the relative success of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and the New Democratic Party (NDP) in BC, they painted labour's struggles as a prelude to the real battle — the creation of a social democratic government. Dorothy Steeves's biography of Ernest Winch, *The Compassionate Rebel*, fits into this category, as does R.A. Johnson's thesis on the Socialist Party of Canada (SPC), "No Compromise — No Political Trading"; Walter Young's *Anatomy of a Party*; and, to some degree, Paul Phillips's *No Power Greater*.[6] All of this early labour history was written by those who had a professional interest in approaching the subject in a limited and presentist way. On the one hand, there were those who wanted to draw specific lessons about maintaining industrial peace; on the other hand, there was a group of politicos who looked to the past to explain and historicize their efforts in the present. For both camps, class consciousness and class conflict were seen as problems to be solved rather than as areas to be understood.

This was typical of labour history everywhere in this period, roughly from the late 1950s to the early 1970s.[7] Labour history was rarely written by academic historians. They examined the topic only when unions and socialists forced themselves onto the front pages (e.g., the Winnipeg General Strike or the election of James Hawthornthwaite by the miners of Nanaimo). What did capture the imagination of Canadian historians in this period was regional history, and historians at the University of British Columbia, under the

[6] Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada*, second ed. (Vancouver: J.J. Douglas 1977); R.A. Johnson, "'No Compromise — No Political Trading': The Marxian Socialist Tradition in British Columbia" (PhD thesis, Political Science, University of British Columbia 1976); Walter Young, *Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF, 1932-1961* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1969); Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in BC* (Vancouver: BC Federation of Labour, Boag Foundation, 1967).

[7] Obviously, the work of the CPC historians mentioned above does not fit into this category. Their work is significant, and it is very different from that of the scholars in each of the periods I examine. But it was often marginalized by the Cold War and had a minimal effect on the general trends of historiography, which is my focus here.

guidance of Margaret Ormsby, undertook to study the history of the province. All parts of the province's history were deemed to be of interest, including labour history. But labour history was always conducted on the model of regional history. This meant several things. First, it helped to establish Western exceptionalism as the chief explanation for BC's labour history. Once the region was privileged, once the province was assumed to require particular study and explanation, labour history became a matter of chronicling BC's unique past. In particular, this meant documenting labour radicalism and the emergence of a strong socialist party that evolved in response to the particular development of the province's resource economy and an underdeveloped industrial base. The best work in this area is probably Ross McCormack's *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries*, while David Bercuson's article on Western radicalism is the best short introduction to the theory of Western exceptionalism. His *Confrontation at Winnipeg* and *Fools and Wise Men* go beyond BC proper. In these works, we see the debt that Western exceptionalism owes to regional history. BC was unique, and therefore its labour movement was also unique — more radical, more militant, more Left-wing.[8]

This labour history, like the regional history from whence it came, spurred empirical studies that contributed much to our understanding of the province. That is the virtue of regional history, of course: it turns our attention to neglected areas. But this is also the vice of regional history. To put the matter plainly, Western exceptionalism, like regionalism, assumed what it needed to prove: that the region was, in fact, unique. And we know now that the claims of Western exceptionalism were greatly exaggerated. The West was never as radical as some of its champions insisted it was, while the East was never as conservative. While Bercuson argued that BC miners were radical because they worked in the most dangerous mines in the world, we now know that Nova Scotia's mines were equally dangerous. More important, perhaps, we know that there is no direct correlation between danger and radicalism. Robert McDonald has demonstrated that, if BC miners were radical, then workers in Vancouver — the largest single working-class population — were more like Eastern

[8] A. Ross McCormack, *Rebels, Reformers, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement, 1899-1919* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1977); David Bercuson, "Labour Radicalism and the Western Industrial Frontier, 1897-1919," *Canadian Historical Review* 57 (June 1977): 154-77; David Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1974); David Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson 1978).

labourers than fire-and-brimstone revolutionaries. The SPC had its greatest strength in BC, to be sure, but impossibilists made up only one faction of the party; members of other factions more closely resembled reformers. And Jeremy Mouat and John Belshaw have proven that even the fabled miners were more like trade unionists than Bolsheviks.[9]

Western exceptionalism points to the second problem with presenting labour history as regional history: too often it is fundamentally untheoretical. To the degree that it privileges the region and avoids comparative history, it fails to develop useful theories of historical causation. Instead, it tends to adopt simple explanations that are never tested by debate and argument and that, as a result, do not adapt and grow. If we, as historians, do not explicitly grapple with theory — defined simply as different ideas of historical explanation and causality — then we tend implicitly to adopt conventional wisdom without challenging its dominant ideas. We fall prey to a vulgar empiricism that is loaded with ideological assumptions and implications of which we are but dimly aware. Regional labour history fell into this trap. Positing an allegedly unique theory to explain allegedly unique conditions, Western exceptionalism was irrelevant to other historians; uninformed by (and of) other work, it had little to offer and left little room for creativity and analysis. Like the regional history from whence it came, it tended to be drums-and-trumpets history, great-man history, or "one-damn-thing-after-another" history.

Finally, Western exceptionalism was also, like the industrial relations school before it, essentially liberal history. That is, it saw capitalism and its institutions (such as the law and parliamentary democracy) as fundamentally good, or inevitable, or, what is worse, so ingrained in our thought as to be unnoticed and unremarkable. In the case of labour history, this meant that the Western exceptionalists tended to play down class and class conflict. This may sound odd, for weren't McCormack et al. writing about great strikes and protests? They were, of course, but always in order to demonstrate radicalism's

[9] Robert A.J. McDonald, "Working-Class Vancouver, 1886-1914: Urbanism and Class in British Columbia," *BC Studies* 69-70 (Spring-Summer 1986): 33-69. For the reformism of the SPC, see Allen Seager, "Socialists and Workers: The Western Canadian Coal Miners, 1900-21," *Labour/Le Travail* 16 (Fall 1985): 23-60; Mark Leier, *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star 1990); Jeremy Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia's Hard-Rock Miners, 1895-1903," *Canadian Historical Review* 81 (1990): 317-45; John Belshaw, "The British Collier in British Columbia: Another Archetype Reconsidered," *Labour/Le Travail* 34 (Fall 1994): 11-36.

futility — its birth from desperation rather than rational critique, its turning away from the "correct" path of moderation and consensus. Who made revolutions? Fools, according to Bercuson. Western exceptionalists did document the SPC, the OBU (One Big Union), an entire alphabet soup of organizations, but always within either the liberal framework established by regional historians or the reform framework established by the industrial relations school. Liberal pluralism, in which workers and capitalists had differences that were not, by definition, irreconcilable, was the dominant world view that was incorporated into and spread by Western exceptionalism. Labour was studied primarily to justify a moderate reformism; that is to say, the status quo of the period in which the work was conceived and written. The chief academic exception to this rule is to be found in the work of Keith Ralston, which always considers class and capitalism critically.[10]

These two related influences, regional history and liberal history, led BC labour history down a blind alley. It was a blind alley in several respects. First, the whole reason for doing regional labour history was to show that the region was unique. This meant that labour historians focused on radicalism. This focus, however, limited the amount of labour history that could be done. There were only so many radicals in the province, only so many SPC candidates, only so many violent strikes. Western exceptionalism implied that, with the uncovering of these limited episodes, labour history would soon run out of subjects. And, indeed, this is the point that Peter Ward makes in "Class and Race in BC," an article in which he demonstrates that only about 10 percent of BC's workers joined unions or voted for socialist or labour candidates. How much work could such a small population bear? Better to analyze race, which, by Ward's figuring, encompasses 100 percent of the population.[11]

Ward's article also points to another way in which BC labour history suffered from the taint of regionalism and liberalism. To the degree that BC labour history was rooted in regional history, it was outside the really exciting debates of the day. Just when labour history was becoming the most innovative and exciting field in British and North American history — inspired by the work of E.P. Thompson,

[10] See, for example, Keith Ralston "Patterns of Trade and Investment on the Pacific Coast, 1867-1892: The Case of the British Columbia Salmon Canning Industry," *BC Studies* 1 (Winter 1968-9): 37-45, and "The 1900 Strike of Fraser River Sockeye Fishermen" (MA thesis, Department of History, University of British Columbia 1965).

[11] W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 17-36.

Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, Eugene Genovese, Eric Hobsbawm, and others — the labour history of BC was largely immune to these new ideas and debates. The chief theoretical intervention of the period belonged to Ward, who cited Thompson to argue that class was class consciousness. But he misinterpreted Thompson. Ward, like other liberals and, ironically enough, like some Stalinists, took Thompson's statement to mean that the experience of class should lead to a particular kind of class consciousness and to particular forms of political activity. If such activity did not exist, there was no class consciousness and, thus, no class (at least not in any meaningful way). But, of course, Thompson insisted just the opposite; that is, that class was a daily experience, just as were race and gender, and that it was important to study the consciousness workers actually had rather than to look for an ideal, revolutionary consciousness. As evidence of the mis-use of Thompson, it is worth remembering that every example Ward used to show the importance of race as experience also applies to class. Class is not an intellectual process, as some liberals would insist. It is a daily, lived experience, as accessible and as plain as race and gender, even if workers do not articulate it with the precision of a sociologist or translate it into a vote for a socialist candidate.[12]

This was the fundamental concept put forward by the new labour historians or, as they preferred to be called, working-class historians. It was an idea that was to change completely the writing of labour history. But in BC no labour historians influenced by the new school were hired until 1980. This was true elsewhere in Canada, perhaps especially so in Ontario, where social democrats continued to reign. The difference was that, from 1979 on, new-school labour historians interested in Ontario and the Maritimes, and often trained in the US, were publishing books and articles. This was not the case in BC. As a consequence, anyone who might have been interested in the new social history, in history from below, in Marxist history, in the theories of Thompson and others, and in doing the kind of labour history that was at the forefront of controversy, discussions, and publishing in this period would have no reason to do work in or on BC. There was no

[12] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin 1968). See, in particular, the preface. For an elaboration of what Thompson meant by class as experience, see his "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" *Social History* 3 (May 1978): 133-65. For an elaboration of Thompson's theme, see Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso 1994), especially chap. 4; and Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), especially chaps. 2 and 3.

debate, no historiography, to attract students who were interested in the new work, and there was no good reason to come to a BC university to study labour history in the 1970s. The exciting work was being done elsewhere. As a result, there is a huge hole in BC historiography. Whatever the merits and drawbacks of the Thompsonian approach, the lack of BC labour historians who were working along such lines meant that historiography became truncated and marginalized, condemned to the dustbin of regional history. The emphasis on regional history, usually with an implicit, liberal analysis, was in part responsible for the paucity of BC labour history in the 1970s, for it had apparently answered all the questions it had set out to ask. The gap in the 1970s continued through the early 1980s and meant that BC labour history was playing catch-up with Central and Eastern Canada.[13]

As a result, BC labour history became the victim of bad timing. One reason historians were turning to the working class in the 1960s and 1970s was to explore the roots of their own political radicalism and activity. As the movement culture faded, so too did interest in the new labour history. By the time BC had a full-time labour historian of the new school, some of the interest in it had already passed. The relative success of the NDP in the 1960s and 1970s may also have hurt the writing of the new labour history. The social democrats, keen to woo the middle-class electorate, were not interested in class consciousness or working-class culture — either in the present or in the past. The party also drained energy and people from academia, for it appeared to offer a real alternative that seemed, for a time, worth supporting and more useful than university studies. With the decline of the economy in the late 1970s and 1980s, students became more interested in MBAs than in the TLC (Trades and Labour Congress). Demo-

[13] A very partial list of these historians, culled from the pages of *Labour/Le Travail*, might include Ruth Bleasdale, Bettina Bradbury, David Frank, Craig Heron, Greg Kealey, Linda Kealey, Ian McKay, Bryan Palmer, Joan Sangster, Allen Seager, and Veronica Strong-Boag. No doubt some might object to being placed on this list. If many are now doing regional history, their use of theory makes their work implicitly comparative. Most also tend to use the region as a case study rather than as an explanation. Why did BC lose the promising lead in labour history it had gained in the 1960s? The greater size of the academic community in the East was undoubtedly a factor. As the East had a larger pool from which to draw than did the West, the former trained more historians than did the latter and a critical mass was reached. Historically, there has been a greater migration of Canadian graduate students to the US from Ontario and the Maritimes than from BC. There has also been a greater interest in US historiography in Ontario and the Maritimes than there has been in BC. This may be especially true for labour history, where the influential US scholars Herbert Gutman and David Montgomery have done much of their research on the Eastern US and, like others (such as Melvyn Dubofsky), have primarily taught in Eastern universities.

graphics changed as well: at SFU in 1982, the average age of undergraduate students was twenty-seven; now it is twenty-two. One consequence of this is that there are fewer students with work experience and, thus, fewer for whom labour history and class analysis seem useful.

Now, these observations may help explain why labour history in BC has not been done better or produced in greater volume. But they don't necessarily explain why labour history has not significantly changed the writing of BC history. To answer this, we need to understand why radical labour historians thought that their work would change the way in which history was written. We need to be clear about what they set out to do. The best statement is perhaps the introduction to *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, in which Gregory Kealey and Peter Warrian insist that the new history meant that "labour history would become part of the history of society." They also made it clear that "a class exists only in relation to another class," and that it was this relationship that had to be studied. The point is, it was not labour history that they believed would change the field, but *Marxist* history. Labour history was only a subset, albeit the most important and lively one, of a larger Marxist project. The particular way in which surplus value was pumped out of subordinate classes, class conflict, class struggle: these were the ideas that Marxists thought would transform the writing of history, for these would become the important things to understand about history.[14]

So the real question becomes, "Why hasn't Marxism influenced the writing of BC history?" Let us first dispense with some of the commonly offered reasons for the failure of historians to utilize Marxism. The fall of the Soviet Union or the tearing down of the Berlin Wall has nothing to do with it. Historians have been avoiding Marxism for more than a century, and recent events have had little impact on this. The New Left, the new social history, and the new labour history were never much influenced by Moscow, and, in fact, most of these historians explicitly wrote against the old Left.

Another common argument relies on the observation that historians often look to the past to answer the questions of today. As Collingwood — or was it Butterfield? — put it, each generation writes its own history. Class, the argument goes, is no longer a reality for Canadians. It has been displaced by gender, race, and ethnicity.

[14] *Essays in Canadian Working Class History, Introduction.* 7-8. Gregory S. Kealey, Peter Warrian, eds. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976).

Therefore, to the degree that all historians are presentists, it is to be expected that class is no longer important. But, unfortunately for these liberals, and for workers, class has not disappeared. This is still a society where the vast majority of people must work for those who own the means of production. The workplace and workforce are certainly changing, but the shifts in occupations have not reduced the working class. In fact, with the decline in agricultural occupations, the proletarianization of some professions (notably teaching and nursing), and the steady movement of women into the workforce the number and percentage of people who work for wages has increased dramatically in the last fifty years. Class experience is more of a reality for Canadians now than it ever was. And it appears that things are getting worse for Canadian workers. The last fifteen years have seen a decline in real wages and an increase in working hours, while unionization rates have been falling since 1958. Between 100 and 200 workers are killed on the job each year in BC; the annual death toll across Canada is over 1,000. That is nearly double the murder rate. Clothes, cars, food, disease, violence, entertainment, vacations, speech, education, deference, expectations — all are tangible examples of class experience. There is even some strong evidence that class consciousness is more widespread than is commonly believed. In *The American Perception of Class*, Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon demonstrate, through surveys, samples, and polls, that even American workers define themselves in class terms. They *do* see the world through a lens of class; as the authors put it, US workers "do recognize divisions within their society, divisions based on the control of production." They differ from British workers — long held to be class conscious — only in their belief that things could not be changed. Pessimism, not a lack of class consciousness, is what makes US workers exceptional, they argue. If this is true of the US in the Reagan and Bush years, surely it is true in Canada, where unionization rates are about double US rates and where we have a political party that used to talk about socialism.[15]

So class, contrary to popular opinion, has not disappeared. What has disappeared is the ability of intellectuals to see and appreciate it. This became even more true as more intellectuals took up positions in the university and the independent scholar largely vanished. As a class, intellectuals and professors fit into the middle class, that group

[15] Reeve Vanneman and Lynn Weber Cannon, *The American Perception of Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1987), 17.

of people who are neither working class nor employing class. Because of our class privilege — which, admittedly, doesn't extend very far but still places us at a far remove from the working class in terms of income, prestige, control over the work place, and influence — it is difficult for us to see the class divisions in our society. Indeed, our own marginal existence in the middle class depends on these class distinctions, depends on the continued exploitation of the working class. Intellectuals working in liberal institutions are particularly susceptible to turning a blind eye to class, for the university replicates dominant values more than it challenges them. It is easier, more natural, and more comfortable for us to ignore the Marxist critique of capitalism than to incorporate it. It is easier for us to see and study other, less fundamental, divisions than class, such as gender and race.

Now that statement, that gender and race are less fundamental divisions than class, may require some expansion. I think Ellen Meiksins Wood put it well when she argued that "capitalism is uniquely indifferent to the social identities of the people it exploits," and it even "dilute[s] identities like gender or race, as [it] strives to absorb people into the labour market and to reduce them to interchangeable units of labour abstracted from any specific identity." Nothing about gender or racial equality threatens capital; indeed, it may well prefer a rough equality in this day and age. Of course, capital continues to discriminate against ethnic minorities and women, and it has always encouraged White men to shape their interests along racial and gender rather than class lines. But while it is often expedient for capital to make use of racial and gender divisions, it is not necessary. As Wood concludes, "if capital derives advantages from racism or sexism, it is not because of any structural tendency in capitalism towards racial inequality or gender oppression, but on the contrary because they disguise the structural realities of the capitalist system and because they divide the working class."[16] It *is* necessary for capitalism to maintain a rigid division between workers and owners. Without this structured difference, there is no capitalism, no distribution of wealth in an upward direction. Thus the academy, as the liberal institution of a capitalist state, may well be inclined to see gender and race as more worthy subjects than class, for they pose no threat to the social order in this day and age. Some proof of this may be in the readiness with which universities have created programs and departments of women's studies and Native studies. One looks in vain to find departments of

[16] Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, 266-7.

Marxist studies or of labour studies that operate very far outside of the industrial relations model. As the universities increasingly seek corporate dollars and are retooling to meet the demands of capital and business, this tendency becomes even more pronounced. To the degree that academics have led struggles for racial and gender equality, they can be justly applauded. But to the degree that these struggles reflect our own middle-class concerns and are predicated on maintaining class divisions, it is hardly surprising that Marxist history is disturbing and alien.[17]

So, in the words of one Marxist, what is to be done? I have no prescriptions. Nor would I suggest that we all start doing labour history with a Marxist edge. I wouldn't suggest it, not because it would be a bad idea, but because if life were just a matter of changing ideas, we would, as Marx wrote, be able to avoid drowning as soon as we could disabuse ourselves of the notion that air is necessary for life. Neither life nor the writing of history works that way. But I do think that Marxism will continue to be vital to understanding the past and the present, and I do have some tentative suggestions about how it might inform more of the writing of BC history.

First, and perhaps most important, it would allow and create real debate among historians. In fields where Marxism has been purged — and in those fields where it reigns alone — debate tends to be diminished. We tend to talk to and at each other, not with each other, especially as the writing of history becomes more and more specialized and subdivided. The introduction of Marxism to BC history would foster debate, research, and growth by forcing us to constantly re-evaluate our own assumptions and points of view. Surely uneasiness and uncertainty lead to better history than do smugness and consensus.[18]

Second, Marxist approaches to regional history would put BC history into debates in different fields. As a historian born in BC and studying the labour history of this province, I think it is vital that we

[17] It may be that one reason poststructuralism is so fashionable now is precisely because, in insisting on a variety of identities, on a multiplicity of narratives, it can dodge the priory divisions of capitalist society and allow the exploitation of workers to remain unexamined by the academy. For a brief critique of postmodern feminism, see Carol A. Stabile, "Postmodernism, Feminism, and Marx: Notes from the Abyss," *Monthly Review* 47 (July-August 1995): 89-107.

[18] Even if BC history were to become dominated by Marxist historians — an unlikely scenario, however desirable — we need not fear the cessation of debate. We might remember the old joke: How many Marxists does it take to go fishing? Fifty: one to hold the pole and forty-nine to find the correct line.

see our work as fitting into larger categories, such as labour history, political history, gender history, and the like, rather than primarily as regional history. To the degree that our work is cast only as regional studies, it is likely to be dismissed. Few BC historians subscribe to *Newfoundland Studies*, while few at Memorial University subscribe to *BC Studies*. By focusing on the region rather than on the larger issues, we risk turning our gaze inward and becoming less interesting, less creative, and more inclined to finding out more and more about less and less. Regional history is only useful and exciting when it treats a region as a case study, as a field of investigation in which theory can be applied, tested, and criticized. If regional studies do not take part in larger debates, if we attempt to create indigenous theory without reference to work that has already been done, we simply keep reinventing the wheel. Unfortunately, that means that, as we patiently chisel away at a rock, others go whizzing by on steel-belted radial tires. We improve our own work by taking advantage of, and criticizing, the theories and explanations of others. Adopting a Marxist approach to BC history is one way in which we can insert ourselves into larger debates and thus make others take the history of our region seriously.

An historical practice informed by Marxism would also help us look at traditional topics in a new light. European fur traders came to trade, but not on the same basis as the Native peoples. The trading ships were powered as much by capitalist property relations as they were by the winds, and to understand fur-trade relations, we need to understand the world system that brought the traders. Given that capitalism is driven by profit, it might be useful to ask, not "did Native peoples willingly engage in trade?" but "did they receive the full value of what they produced?" We might also begin to think about the effect on the balance of power created by pumping value out of the Native economy and into the capitalist one. In order for us to understand Native peoples and the post-fur-trade economy more fully, we must understand how certain forms of capital could be dependent on Native labour while other forms of capital sought to destroy it. The Marxist debates on the nature of free and unfree labour have much to offer us.

We need to understand capital and capitalism much better, and here again Marxism has asked the best questions and suggested answers to them. What drives merchant capital? How and why did it evolve into industrial capital? What did that evolution mean for British Columbia? How did it affect class formation and class relations? Capital is driven by the need to expand, the need for

technological change, the need to accumulate still greater profit, the need to create a working class, and the need to legitimate its rule. The history of these processes in BC needs to be explored in much greater detail. As Marx graphically pointed out, capitalism is constantly changing the world and itself. The capitalism of the 1870s was different from that of the 1890s, the 1910s, and so on to the present; and class relations, forces, conflicts, values, and institutions have changed with it. Without understanding this, we cannot begin to understand how and why BC has changed. Nor is capital monolithic: regional, industrial, and sectoral differences have different consequences that need to be explored so that we can formulate general explanations — theories — of historical causation and change. Marxism also reminds us that history is made by humans who are in specific class relations and conditions, and that these humans constantly struggle with each other, for classes are, by definition, in opposition to one another. Over time, the nature of this opposition changes substantially, as does the ability of workers to resist. This affects every aspect of society, from the shaping of laws to the creation of cultural norms. Explorations into each of these areas would help us understand what is unique about BC and what is not, what is cause and what is effect.[19]

In short, using Marxist ideas to study the history of BC would let us undertake the fundamental question of history, the question of power. It is true that many of those who have abandoned Marxism, or, increasingly, those to whom it remains a great unknown, pay lip service to studying power. Often using Michel Foucault as their model, they urge us to think of power as decentred, as something that is diffused throughout society, equally accessible to White and Native, employer and worker, man and woman.[20] This is something rather

[19] For an excellent example of a regional study that understands how larger forces and class relations shape the community, see Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland's Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1995). R.T. Naylor has undertaken some of these issues on a large scale in *Canada in the European Age, 1453-1919* (Vancouver: New Star 1987). See also William G. Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press 1994). His preface makes a compelling case for the need to understand capitalism in order to understand the West. For a wider study, one that examines world systems theory, see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso 1994).

[20] Of course many who use postmodernism pay attention to material reality and stop far short of arguing that all of us exercise power equally. See, for example, Tina Loo, *Making Law, Order, and Authority in British Columbia, 1821-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1994), especially pp. 3-13. Thus I disagree with Robin Fisher, who argues in his preface to the second edition of *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1992) that Loo's work ignores real power relations — quite the contrary. I would argue, however, that the general trajectory of postmodernist political theory

different from the useful claim, pioneered by Marxists, that all oppressed and marginal groups have fought back with the tools they have had at hand. In its most exaggerated form, it is nothing more than a return to liberal pluralism and the idea that all groups in society are roughly equal. In the real world of class relations and class power, this is rather like arguing that the important thing to know about Las Vegas is not that the vast majority of people lose their money so casinos may prosper but that a tiny handful of gamblers make money. Marxism, with its insistence that material relations give some people more economic and political clout than others, is essential to understanding power in society. Only in this way can we begin to answer the fundamental issue of history, the question, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese put it twenty years ago, of who rides whom and how.[21]

Some may ask why we should bother with the ideas of an unsuccessful nineteenth-century philosopher. The response is that the study of Marx is important because most of today's historians remain pre-Marxists. To those who cheerfully insist we need to go beyond Marxism, it can only be replied that there will be plenty of time to be post-Marxists once we are in a post-capitalist world. In the meantime, without the tool of Marxism, our work will always be in danger of slipping into apologetics. For if we, as intellectuals, are not actively critical of our society, then we are in the position of tacitly supporting it. And if we do not bother to criticize our society and thus help make it better, who will?

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is towards liberalism rather than Marxism. For Marxist critiques of postmodernism, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language in the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1990); Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, chaps. 8 and 9; and Ellen Meiksins Wood, "What Is the 'Postmodern' Agenda?" *Monthly Review* 47 (July-August 1995): 1-12.

[21] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History," *Social History* 10 (1976); reprinted in *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Forms of Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983).

CLASS AND THE WRITING OF HISTORY: *Beyond BC*

BRYAN D. PALMER

It is to stir you up not to be content with a little that I am here tonight," the great English Marxist William Morris thundered at audiences in his lectures on socialism in the 1880s.[1] This, too, is what I want to do in responding to Mark Leier's provocation to produce labour history, ground it in a Marxist interpretive framework, and utilize it to refashion our understanding, not just of regions such as British Columbia, but also of nations and global developments.

I expect much comment will focus on a few of Mark's blunter formulations. Writing of class, he notes that "it is easier for us to see and study other, less fundamental, divisions in society, such as gender and race." He adds later, for good measure, that gender and race "pose no threat to the social order in this day and age." Such pronouncements are going to get him into trouble.

Nothing is more deeply rooted as "progressive" conventional wisdom at the current Foucauldian moment than that "we" have transcended all hierarchies of significance. Totalizing systems of thought that privilege "master categories" such as class, or that trace inequality to the structures of a system of exploitation and oppression such as capitalism, are suspect — the hangover of an age of high modernism in which a vulgar Marxism blinded us to a discursive, kaleidoscopic plurality of powers that defy reductionist simplicities. This leaves explanation of causality and origins, as well as appreciation of sources of social transformation (all of which have been key concerns of historical materialism for 150 years), reeling in the interpretive and practical chaos of poststructuralism's refusals. As Aijaz Ahmad, in an unrivalled statement of theoretical clarity, argues:

> Foucault's philosophical position and narrative structure tend not only to reinforce the impossibility of stable belonging and subject position but also to bestow upon the world a profound cage-like quality, with a bleak sense of human entrapment in Discourses of Power which are at once discrete and overlapping . . . But there appears to be none that can be traced to an origin or a purpose or an interest. This history

[1] E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon 1977), 806.

> without systematic origins, human subjects, or collective sites is . . . not open to chance, only to narrativization.[2]

Advocates of Foucault may well disagree with such an assessment, but they have failed to produce histories that address historical agency in ways that can suggest possibilities of social transformation. Mark's ruminations on class, Marxism, and regional history clash directly and unambiguously with this theoretical revisionist orthodoxy, articulations of which virtually never engage with the challenges of materialist criticism.[3]

Mark is to be congratulated for telling those of us who are Marxists and labour historians that we must not give up the battle for ideas and understandings. Others have chosen different polemical paths, crossing swords with the crankily mainstream demand that social history's insignificance and banality be reversed by a return to the "good old historiographic days," when books were books because they dealt with subjects prime-ministerial. Such pronouncements could leave us thinking that all is well in the now diversified and increasingly inclusive practice of historical production.[4]

Yet Marxists and labour historians easily fool themselves. As Mark Leier understands, and is willing to say, a poststructural historiography is being built, and, for all of the primarily rhetorical mention of class as part of the trilogy of subject identities to be studied, labour is being marginalized and sidestepped while Marxism, as a guide to analyzing historical process, is often dismissed and trivialized. This may not be obvious yet in British Columbia, but it will come.

The aggressive and arrogant tone of this dismissal was perhaps first evident in the programmatic statement issued by the authors of the

[2] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso 1992), 130-1.

[3] For poststructuralist statements that avoid engagement with materialist criticisms, see Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," *Canadian Historical Review* 76 (September 1995): 354-76; Cecilia Morgan, "The Use of Theory in Teaching Women's History," in *Teaching Women's History: Challenges and Solutions*, ed. Bettina Bradbury (Athabasca, AB: Athabasca University 1995), 157-68.

[4] For the cranky, see Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian History* 26 (Winter 1991/92): 5-17; Christopher Moore, "The Organized Man [Jack Granatstein]," *Beaver* (April-May 1991): 57-60; Jack Granatstein, "Dr. Jack Granatstein: Address to Convocation," *Memorial Gazette*, 4 November 1993, 5. Replies include Gregory S. Kealey, "Class in English-Canadian Historical Writing: Neither Privatizing, Nor Sundering," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27 (Summer 1992): 123-9; Veronica Strong-Boag, "Contested Space: The Politics of Canadian Memory," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5 (1994): 3-18. For my own, somewhat different, response, see Bryan D. Palmer, "On Second Thoughts: Canadian Controversies," *History Today* 44 (November 1994): 44-9.

"Introduction" to *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (1992). "We are more interested in showing that generalizations about universal oppression or about glorious resistance erase the complexity of women's (and men's) lived experiences," they proclaim, adding: "The problem is disguised rather than solved by historians who merely juxtapose descriptions of domination with examples of resistance, a tendency evident in the writings of some working-class historians." Secure in the knowledge that "power . . . is not the exclusive domain of those who are 'powerful,'" the *Gender Conflicts* writers reject "the tired dichotomy of top-down domination versus bottom-up resistance." Obviously comfortable in a language of analytic superiority, these historians have no trouble deprecating those who "merely" offer mundane "descriptions" or "examples" — those who base their studies on the "universal" or the "glorious" in order to structure history along "moral" lines of opposition. They create a caricatured version of the historiography of labour, ignoring work that does not fit their own reductionist binary model of Marxist working-class history (purist proletarian versus bad bourgeoisie).[5] In the process, class struggle is theoretically denied as worthy of consideration, unless, of course, its "narrative" is managed in a particular way.[6]

A few years later, Karen Dubinsky, one of the authors of the "Introduction" to *Gender Conflicts*, offered a statement on feminist pedagogy that said little, if anything, substantive about class, while yet invoking the latter in a title that proclaimed the need to integrate

[5] Quotes are from Karen Dubinsky et al., "Introduction," in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1992). The only source cited by Dubinsky et al. is Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 1979). While some of my text might be subject to this kind of critique, other parts of my argument, such as that contained in the chapter on producer ideology, clearly are not. And my subsequent writings certainly address issues of a "non-heroic" sort. See, especially, Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star 1986), "'What the Hell': Or Some Comments on Class Formation and Cultural Reproduction," in *Popular Cultures and Political Practices*, ed. Richard D. Gruneau (Toronto: Garamond 1988), or even "Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," *Labour/Le Travail* 3 (1978): 5-62. Note differences between the 1983 and 1992 editions of my synthesis of Canadian labour history, *Working-Class Experience* — differences that are a product of the developing writing in this area. Obviously, the *Gender Conflicts* "Introduction" could not cite the 1992 edition, but one would have thought that the field's growth could have been addressed.

[6] Again, Ahmad makes an appropriate comment: "Power, which is wielded by none and *cannot* be resisted because there is nothing outside the fabrication of Power — perhaps *ought not* to be resisted, because it is not only repressive but also profoundly productive" (Ahmad, *In Theory*, 131). Consider Joy Parr's depiction of class conflict in 1940s Paris, Ontario, in light of this statement (Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1990], 96-119).

various identities. In the final paragraph, class and labour history are touched on in an odd way:

> I will end with an unresolved rant on class, the topic no one seems to want to talk about any more. I'm frustrated and at a loss. I am toying with the idea of total capitulation, of advocating that we shelve labour history and labour studies in general from the university curriculum, at least for a while, maybe till after the recession. I have seen student after student open their minds to new and tolerant ways of thinking, about gender, sexuality, and race, only to shut down completely when the words "working class" or, worse still, "trade union" are mentioned. The reasons for these refusals are many and complicated, and relate to both current economic realities as well as existing historiography. How are we to convince students in, say, St. Catharines, that the victories won by the United Auto Workers in the 1940s are worthy of attention and investigation, when their own automobile manufacturing industry is collapsing around them and their dads, brothers, and uncles are losing their jobs . . . Students — especially those with one foot still in the working class — are so freaked out by the economy that all of labour history gets filtered through the pessimistic lens of the present and I have yet to figure out how to make this an empowering, rather than despairing, learning experience.

This is a curious conclusion: "when the going gets tough stop talking." Economism takes on new meanings when the injuries of class, no longer hidden, are taken as a justification for avoiding discussion of capitalism's destructive capacities, burying the already submerged history of working-class struggle in comfortable silence. When resistance becomes a suspect subject, shelve its history. Labour's history and meaning are then reduced to jobs and their gender-specific wage-earners (dads, husbands, brothers) — a strangely narrowed understanding of class and one that feminism has battled diligently to challenge.[7]

Class has become an uncomfortable analytic category. It hurts rather than massages contemporary sensibilities, currently scaffolded on the important values of diversity and multiculturalism.[8] Lacking the attractions of "empowerment," class carries with it the residue of

[7] Karen Dubinsky, "Integrating, Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality," in Bradbury, *Teaching Women's History*, 93-4. This should be read alongside Dubinsky, "Who is Listening? Teaching Labour History to People Who Don't Want to Learn (or, Cry Me a River, White Boy)," *Labour/Le Travail* 31 (Spring 1993): 287-92.

[8] For a dissident statement on multiculturalism, see Russell Jacoby, "The Myth of Multiculturalism," *New Left Review* 208 (November-December 1994), 121-6.

Marxist economism, essentialism, and the problematic politics of trade unions and labour militancy, most often to an audience that has stopped thinking about these phenomena but knows they can be scapegoated as "problems." Class has also long troubled others for different reasons. Peter Ward's conventional liberal pluralist hostility to class analysis, for instance, surfaced in a call to explore race in the history of British Columbia. And if his account shares little with Kay Anderson's exploration of Vancouver's Chinatown as a social construction that was as much a metaphor for othered difference as it was a spatial entity, they both privilege race over class while suppressing the agency of those British Columbians who were categorized, constructed, and coerced in the process of "race"-making.[9] An older, thoroughly mainstream and conceptually empiricist set of literatures can thus be read alongside more recent studies that are defined, in part, by their reliance on theories that promise a break from convention while reproducing some of the silences of the bourgeois epoch. This is especially the case in recent "readings" of race, gender, nation, and colonialism, where the brutalities of class exploitation and racial imperialist aggression often fade from view in an (ironically) cleansing fixation on the transgressive or the representational.[10]

So Mark Leier has put his finger on a problem, what Ellen Wood dubbed, more than ten years ago, "the retreat from class."[11] Leier addresses this analytic and political trajectory in many ways, but his reflection focuses on regional historiography and on a comparative evaluation of the role of Marxist understandings of class and labour history in other Canadian regions. He assumes that class analysis has been particularly stunted in British Columbia, and he offers an explanation for this historiographic shortcoming. My disagreements with him centre on these points.

First, I do not see British Columbia's historiography as either more or less insulated from class than that of other Canadian regions or of Canada as a whole. Things are simply not much better elsewhere, including "distant" shores such as England — historically, the "priv-

[9] W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980): 17-36; Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press 1991).

[10] Consider Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge 1995) and contrast it with the articulation of theory in Ahmad, *In Theory*, 35-6. In the Canadian case, note how class disappears in Cecilia Morgan's "'Of Slender Frame and Delicate Appearance': The Placing of Laura Secord in the Narratives of Loyalist History," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 5 (1994): 195-212.

[11] Ellen Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New "True" Socialism* (London: Verso 1986).

ileged" home of the class-focused British Marxist historians, where Marxism, labour history, and class analysis have come under sustained attack of late. Mark is right to be sceptical of the assumed hard-and-fast uniqueness of BC history, but why does he then stress the peculiarly negative climate of the province's labour history? Prior to 1970, more attention was probably paid to workers on the West Coast than to workers in any other Canadian region. British Columbia graduate programs were neither more nor less inviting for prospective labour historians than were those offered anywhere else in the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which is why so many of us opted for the United States or England.

Second, I am suspicious of "sociological" arguments that contend that the class status of the university-employed academic prohibits him/her from appreciating labour history's importance or from adopting a Marxist approach to class formation. The exceptions don't so much prove the rule as qualify it beyond recognition. This is not to say that intellectuals are not subject to pressures. However, in contrast to Mark, I would suggest that Canadian and British Columbian historians have moved away from class, not because being determines consciousness in some crudely mechanistic way, but because the serious treatment of Marxism and the commitment to develop working-class history, weakly ensconced in Canadian universities, have been sustained only in times of a generalized Leftist upsurge. The current moment does not provide a great deal of support for class-based politics and theory, and what remains of the ostensible Left in universities has largely opted for non-Marxist, non-class analysis. To stress the narrow, class inevitability of such a process is to allow those older apostate academics to escape their intellectual and political responsibilities and to let younger, emerging dissidents continue a largely unopposed drift away from Marxism, labour history, and class analysis.[12]

Third, Mark overestimates the theoretical sophistication of Canadian Marxism. His assertion that the Thompsonian gains of the 1970s changed "completely the writing of labour history" is not all that evident in current scholarship, not, at least, to my eye. And it is perhaps too complacent and uncritical, my own enthusiasms for Thompson

[12] The question of intellectuals is a highly difficult one. See, for instance, Bruce Robbins, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (New York: Verso 1993); Richard Rorty, "Reply to Andrew Ross," *Dissent* (Spring 1992): 263-7; Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Pantheon 1994); George Ross, "'Intellectuals Against the Left': The Case of France," *Socialist Register* 1990 (New York: Monthly Review 1991), 201-27.

notwithstanding. Mark is too easily pleased, content with a little when, as a Marxist, he should be demanding more theory from a Canadian labour and social history that has followed the mainstream of Canadian historiography into a narrow, dissertation-like immersion in the particular — a constriction of content justified, rather than destabilized, by the current hedonistic revelry in a type of "theory" that consciously avoids privileging the pluralities of power and refuses the very concept of a totalizing system of governance and subordination. We all need be wary of those bearing the gift of undue, self-serving praise.[13]

Let me conclude. The process of undermining Marxism, displacing class analysis, and avoiding the history of workers has proceeded apace over the last decade. Leier is right on this. Critics may assail his lack of "sophistication" and misunderstanding of the current poststructurally inclined project — a favoured tactic of the challenged "theorist." Many of these Canadian "theorists" have not so much mastered poststructuralism's extensive thought as they have opted for its fashionable appropriation. Ignorant of Marx and the rich diversity, traditions, and legacies of the socialist project, and being the product of their own deeply anti-Marxist culture, they banter banal dismissals of economism and essentialism without having the least grounding in the challenging theoretical system they are jettisoning. Learned in the art of theoretical name-dropping, they allude to Foucault and Joan Scott with ease, content to accept blithely that everything is a discursive process awaiting our deconstruction. Counter arguments and footnote-packed essays drawn from this grab-bag will not change the extent to which Leier has addressed a significant problem. That said, I won't let him be content with so little, especially when such a stand can easily be chastized as complacent.

First, there is no need to understate the importance of race and gender, even as one holds to the fundamental meaning of class as a divide that cuts through other identities and eventually orders them in terms of a politics of challenge and opposition. If, abstractly, Mark and I might agree that bourgeois ideology could indeed accommodate a program of equality with respect to peoples of colour, women, and oppressed gender and sexual identities, it is not adequate merely to

[13] A minor intellectual punch-up has recently erupted within circles of Canadian feminist historiography, as one feminist had the temerity to remind a close-knit group advocating the superiority of gender over women's history that perhaps its claims to theoretical superiority were overstated. This did not go over well. For the opening statement, see Joan Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies: Re-Assessing Gender History and Women's History in Canada" *left history* (Spring-Summer 1995): 109-22.

leave this issue on the philosophical table. Practically, it must be conceded that capitalism cannot dispense with the special oppressions it has nurtured for centuries — oppressions that lie at the base of such material forces (in terms of both production and reproduction) as family and empire. Mark is too ready to let this matter slide.

Second, while it is true that Marxism as theory and method, and class as an analytic category, are handled cavalierly by those drawn smugly to poststructuralism, it is best if those of us committed to Marxism and class do not reproduce this uncritical self-referentiality. We should never dismiss hostile frameworks out of hand if there is some hope either that they can provide insights useful to the project of human emancipation or that their advocates can be drawn to the analytic attractions of historical materialism. This is strikingly evident in the case of poststructuralism, which is a heterogeneous body of theory with an ambivalent, if ultimately antagonistic, relation to Marxism.[14] Again, Mark is too easily contented and avoids a more rigorous, widely read, and potentially profitable engagement with selected components and writings of poststructuralism. He relies on useful polemical and synthetic statements and does not grapple with what varieties of poststructuralist thought might possibly teach labour historians and Marxists.

In short, we cannot *react* against the project of poststructuralist pluralism by countering it with awkward ultimatums that accentuate unnecessarily the separation of class from other categories of identity and that proclaim Marxism's hard-edged superiority over contending theories. There is no need for this. In the end, it is our practice as historians and dissidents that will matter. If those of us who believe in the centrality of class address historical processes such as gender and race with the seriousness and subtlety of which we know the Marxist method is capable, then we lose nothing and perhaps stand to convince some on the sidelines that historical materialism presents opportunities that a poststructuralism governed by pluralism and analytic nihilism does not. Moreover, as class conflict comes to figure increasingly in the politics of capitalism and of its oppressed and exploited masses (which, as the 1990s proceed, it gives every

[14] Consider, for instance, the strengths and weaknesses of Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (London: Routledge 1994) as considered in two critical commentaries: Mariana Valverde, "Deconstructive Marxism," *Labour/Le Travail* 36 (Fall 1996), 329-40; and Aijaz Ahmad, "Reconciling Derrida: 'Spectres of Marx' and Deconstructive Politics," *New Left Review* 208 (November-December 1994), 88-106. Ahmad's piece, which is unfairly caricatured in Valverde's essay, is an exemplary statement.

indication of doing), and as our interpretive voices are heard within such movements of resistance as well as in other non-class-based oppositional circles, many who have embraced postmodern "theory" may indeed find themselves reaching back to examples of socialist struggle and thought. They will grasp what so many who have gravitated to poststructuralism have obviously missed, and that is, as one critical theorist of world revolution succinctly states: "Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones."[15]

MOVING BEYOND TIRED "TRUTHS":*
Or, Let's Not Fight the Old Battles

VERONICA STRONG-BOAG

Reading Mark Leier's piece is like making a visit back in time. Here's a good man with a good cause, and god knows we certainly need more of the former in the academy and in the world at large. He grumbles, and his grumbling is a useful reminder, that we need to pay a great deal more attention to class relations and the realities of class power in British Columbia. Marxism continues, he insists, to offer important insights into why and how resources are inequitably distributed in society. And of course he's right. The problem is that in this instance he's at least half, maybe a bit more, wrong too.

Fortunately, a much more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of class and material relations is emerging. In almost every field of study and in all media forms, scholarship is exploring the interaction of, inter alia, class, gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, disability, and age.[1] Drawing on the early insights of Marxist materialism, new work is demonstrating that class is simultaneously raced, gendered, and sexualized.[2] Contributions such as *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (1990) by Dorothy Smith; *Sundogs* (1992) by Lee Maracle; the *BC*

* My thanks to Gillian Creese, whose wise counsel on an earlier draft curbed my tendency towards black humour.

[15] Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder 1973), 178.

[1] One useful introduction to some of these issues in contemporary Canada is Les Samuelson, ed., *Power and Resistance: Critical Thinking about Canadian Social Issues* (Halifax: Fernwood 1994).

[2] For a useful introduction to the efforts to "gender class" and "class gender" see Roberta Hamilton and Michèle Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (Montreal: Book Centre Inc., 1986).

Studies special issue, "Women's History and Gender Studies," edited by Annalee Golz and Lynne Marks;[3] and *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women* (1992), edited by Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag[4] have begun to document the interconnectedness and, ultimately, the inseparability of different forms of oppression. If his footnotes are any guide, Dr Leier seems to have been looking in all the wrong places for reasons to be optimistic about the future of BC and Canadian history.

In the first issue of an important new journal, aptly titled *Race, Sex & Class*, the American scholar of Black and Women's Studies, Patricia Hill Collins, sums up recent insights:

> We must shift our discourse away from additive analyses of oppression. Such approaches are typically based on two key premises. First, they depend on either/or, dichotomous thinking. Persons, things and ideas are conceptualized in terms of their opposites . . . Either/or, dichotomous thinking is especially troublesome when applied to theories of oppression because every individual must be classified as being either oppressed or not oppressed. The both/and position of simultaneously being oppressed and oppressor becomes conceptually impossible.
>
> A second premise of additive analyses of oppression is that these dichotomous differences must be ranked . . . Race, class and gender may all structure a situation but may not be equally visible and/or important in people's self-definitions . . . This recognition that one category may have salience over another for a given time and place does not minimize the theoretical importance of assuming that race, class and gender as categories of analysis structure all relationships.[5]

This growing awareness of the multiplicity, simultaneity, and fluidity of human identities and relationships does not imply a meaningless relativity. That version of postmodernism has no appeal for feminist scholars who understand that power has many faces.

Why are Marxist theorists and much BC labour history having so much difficulty moving beyond conventions that privilege only one part of human reality? They certainly started out with many of the

[3] Issue 105-106 (Spring-Summer 1995).

[4] See also my chapter on BC society in the twentieth century in Hugh Johnson, ed., *The Pacific Province* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre 1996).

[5] "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection," *Race, Sex & Class* 1 (Fall 1993): 27-9.

right ideas and intentions. A closer look at "W[h]ither Labour History?" suggests some of the problems. Beyond its limited reading, the most obvious answer seems to be the stubborn refusal to explore new terrain or to admit the limits of once radical theory. A theory must do far more than simply claim priority as "the dominant paradigm, or problematique, or way of conceptualizing the history of the province." It must outline an analytical framework that is ultimately more inclusive than is that of its rivals. Ironically enough, in view of its attacks on the under-theorized nature of much BC writing, the Marxism of this piece is "fundamentally untheoretical" with respect to, inter alia, gender, sexuality, and race. It, too, "avoids comparative history, it fails to develop useful theories of historical causation. Instead, it tends to adopt simple explanations that are never tested by debate and argument and that, as a result, do not adapt and grow. Rather, the piece delivers a "vulgar" imperialism that refuses the logic of its own conclusion: that "class . . . is a daily, lived experience, as accessible and as plain as race and gender."

The reality measures that Dr Leier employs with respect to class are not singular. It isn't only folks from the working class who get killed on the job. Women from every class are maimed and die each year at the hands of men, many of whom are husbands and lovers. Asian teenagers don't have to be on the picket line to have special reasons to fear the cops. Paraplegics know that easy expressions of sympathy do not save them from poverty and humiliation. Gay men quickly learn the special dangers of public spaces. More Native than non-Native infants never see their second year, let alone a university classroom. Such facts are every bit as fundamental and as oppressive as anything conferred by class alone.

Dr Leier also grumbles about audiences', especially students', indifference to his message. Perhaps younger students are not as sensitive as they should be to the meaning of class. There is no doubt that many harbour what may be unrealistic hopes of upward mobility. In general, however, recent high-school graduates are quick to ignore "over-thirties," or anyone else, who offer Marxist or other panaceas that ignore the contradictions of daily life. In their scepticism, they are not so different from the older and non-mainstream women and men who still have much to teach us about the relationships of power in and out of classrooms.

Dr Leier would have readers believe that perspectives on power that address race and gender in particular find favour because they're really not radical after all. But only the unobservant could conclude that

"gender and race" "pose no threat to the social order in this day and age." If nothing else, and there is much else, the current antagonism to anything that resembles the inclusive university,[6] in BC and elsewhere, should be instructive.

Dated explanatory models that leave out substantial parts of human life badly need revisiting. We need improved theories and practices that better represent who we are and might be. There is much work to be done. As the Canadian writer, May Yee, puts it so well:

> We have all been colonized and divided. It is now up to us to decolonize our minds, ourselves, and our communities, and come together to work against the powerful forces of imperialism and patriarchy to which we have subjected personally all our lives, and collectively, as nations and peoples, for centuries. This means finding our true voice, however tentative, painful or angry that may be, sharing our experiences and analyzing them in the context of the historical, economic and social reality we all live in. We must write of our struggles to overcome the multiple forces of history, society and culture which press on us, often in the attempt to silence us. Our identity and strength grow out of sharing the struggle to fight that which has tried to dehumanize us, and find the common ground we share as women, as Chinese, as Asian, as de-colonizing peoples, as workers, as humans.[7]

To put it still another way, as the American writer Audre Lorde so memorably explained, "the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships."[8] Let's not fight old battles about ranking oppression and debating radical credentials. Far more important challenges abound.

[6] See, for example, The Chilly Collective, eds., *Breaking Anonymity: The Chilly Climate for Women Faculty* (Waterloo: University of Waterloo Press 1995); Stephen Richer and Lorna Weir, *Beyond Political Correctness: Toward the Inclusive University* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995).

[7] May Yee, "Finding the Way Home Through Issues of Gender, Race and Class," in *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics*, ed. Himani Bannerji (Toronto: Sister Vision 1993), 37.

[8] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Women: Images and Realities — A Multicultural Anthology*, ed. A. Kesselman, L.D. McNair, and N. Schniedewind (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield 1995), 271.

"THE WEST IS A MESSY PLACE"

ROBERT A.J. MCDONALD

In "W[h]ither Labour History?" Mark Leier laments the sad state of historical writing about working people in the Pacific Province. In particular, he asks why labour history "has not become the dominant paradigm . . . or way of conceptualizing the history of the province." Why has labour history "not significantly changed the writing of BC history?" The explanation, he suggests, is twofold. Labour history in Canada and the United States from the 1950s to the 1970s was undertaken by industrial relations experts interested in the efficient operation of North American capitalism and by politically motivated scholars who supported the cause of social democracy.[1] Here, then, is one of Leier's themes: the "liberal" orientation of historical writing about labour tied scholarship to the existing economic and social system and precluded a more analytical perspective on labour's past.

In British Columbia a second factor proved decisive in limiting the influence and promise of labour history: regionalism. Written from a regional perspective, labour history in BC stressed the province's "unique past." The dominance of this regionalist perspective cut BC off from the transformation of labour history into working-class history under the influence of the theories of British historian E.P. Thompson — a process that reinvigorated labour history in Eastern Canada. By contrast, in BC radicalism and militancy were emphasized, often at the expense of the more typical experiences of working people. Young scholars of the 1970s and early 1980s had no reason to study labour and working-class history in British Columbia, suggests Leier; the historiography of the province had become "truncated and marginalized, condemned to the dustbin of regional history." These circumstances, in turn, explain the limited influence that labour history has had within the field of BC history to the present time.

What Leier really wants his readers to consider, however, is the question: "Why hasn't Marxism influenced the writing of BC history?" Marxism, he argues, is the instrument that can extricate labour

[1] The writing of labour history in BC to 1977 is similarly characterized in Stuart Jamieson et al., *Militancy in the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Vancouver: Institute of Industrial Relations, University of British Columbia 1977).

history from the historiographical "hole" into which the link with regionalism has dragged it. To be vital, writing about British Columbia must overcome the narrowing influence of particularism; it must fit into broad categories of enquiry such as labour history or gender history; it must connect with larger debates about the past. Marxist theory, he suggests, can provide the intellectual road map to guide scholars to essential questions about social relations and structures of power in capitalist British Columbia.

The role that "regionalism" should play in the writing of regional history is of fundamental importance to BC historians. Brian Dippie, an historian of the American West, has suggested that regional histories "are predicated on the assumption that there are meaningful differences between local and national developments."[2] But does it follow that, by constantly searching for differences, regional historians will present a picture of the past that is parochial and intellectually stagnant? Leier is correct in suggesting that too much of the historical literature on BC, including work in the field of BC labour history, privileges the particular over the general and ignores the extent to which British Columbia's history was simply a variant of larger patterns of historical development. As many of the newer scholars now entering the field of BC history are showing, issues such as race, gender, childhood, colonialism, and the meaning of "rural" in a highly urbanized province require a comparative method that links British Columbia to larger debates about the past. Leier may be overstating his case when he argues that "regional history is *only useful and exciting* [emphasis mine] when it treats the region as a case study, as a field of investigation in which theory can be applied, tested, and criticized," but he is on the right track. I would rephrase the statement to suggest that, if we want scholars outside of British Columbia to take our work seriously, then we must, when considering the influence of place, think comparatively and analytically.

I also agree in general with Leier's overview of the writing of labour history in BC from the 1950s to the 1970s, but I am less convinced that regionalism explains why cultural Marxists did not, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, come west to study working-class history. In that period the field of British Columbia history was underdeveloped and unattractive to most young scholars, not just those interested in labour history. Margaret Ormsby may have published *British Columbia: A*

[2] Brian W. Dippie, "American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives," in *Trails: Toward a New Western History*, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press 1991), 122.

History in 1958, but she continued to see herself as a Canadian rather than as a regional historian. Courses on the subject of British Columbia history emerged at provincial universities and colleges only in the 1970s. We tend to forget that today's lively interest in British Columbia's past is of fairly recent origin.

In addition, Leier links the paucity of labour history in BC to the lack of interest shown by Thompsonian Marxists in the province's development. He does not mention that Bryan Palmer, the country's most prominent Thompsonian, worked at Simon Fraser University for a period in the early 1980s. More significantly, cultural Marxists focused on skilled workers in the industrial heartland of Central and Maritime Canada, where numbers were greatest and institutions most fully developed. Young historians who sought to study the class culture of working people in Canada may have stayed in the East precisely because of a "regional" bias in their approach — a bias that emphasized the work-centred culture of skilled artisans rather than the histories of unskilled labourers. In other words, while I agree with Leier that regional historians tend to privilege the unique and the exceptional at the expense of the continuous and the general, he may be unfairly blaming BC "regionalism" for the failure of labour history to develop in Western Canada as it did in Eastern Canada.

More contentious is Leier's belief that salvation for the writing of BC labour history is to be found in Marxism. I admire his faith but remain unmoved by his reasoning. To begin with, he understates the influence of Marxism in scholarly writing about British Columbia. Five sociologists — Rolf Knight, Rennie Warburton, James Conley, Alicja Muszynski, and Gillian Creese — have produced a number of very fine historical studies of labour in BC, all of which have been grounded in Marxist theory.[3] Indeed, I view Conley's essay, "Rela-

[3] Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work: An Informal History of Native Labour in British Columbia, 1858-1930*, rev. ed. (Vancouver: New Star 1996); Rennie Warburton, "Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment," *BC Studies* 49 (Spring 1981): 79-85, and "Conclusion: Capitalist Social Relations in British Columbia," in *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers*, ed. Rennie Warburton and David Coburn (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1988), 263-85; James Conley, "Relations of Production and Collective Action in the Salmon Fishery, 1900-1925," in Warburton and Coburn, *Workers, Capital and the State*, 86-116; Alicja Muszynski, "Race and Gender: Structural Determinants in the Formation of British Columbia's Salmon Cannery Labour Force," in *Class, Gender, and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology*, ed. Gregory S. Kealey (St John's: Committee on Canadian Labour History 1988), 103-20; Gillian Creese, "Class, Ethnicity, and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880-1923," in Warburton and Coburn, *Workers, Capital, and the State*, 55-85, and "The Politics of Dependence: Women, Work, and Unemployment in the Vancouver Labour Movement Before World War II," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 13 (Winter-Spring 1988): 121-42.

tions of Production and Collective Action in the Salmon Fishery, 1900-1925," as a model of the theoretically informed and structurally based kind of analysis of capital-labour relations for which Leier is calling. Consideration of historical works by sociologists as well as historians suggests that writing about labour in BC has not been as untheoretical and "regional" as Leier would have us believe.

Leier's case for a Marxist approach to the writing of labour history could also be made in somewhat different terms than the ones he presents. Historian Alice Kessler-Harris has sharply criticized traditional approaches to the study of class that focus on the economic and cultural role of men while ignoring the place of women in formal and informal relations of production. "The tendency of labor (in the United States) to exclude women's activities from economic purpose — and therefore from a direct relationship to class and class formation — suggests the remarkably male terms in which class is still defined," she writes. The socially constructed meaning of masculinity and femininity are essential if we are to understand the roles that both men and women play in constructing class. To do this, she argues, "we have to lay siege to the central paradigm of labor history, namely that the male-centered workplace is the locus from which the identity, behavior, social relations and consciousness of working people ultimately emanates."[4] American labour history must get out of the workplace and into the home and family if it is to recapture a fuller sense of the history of working people. British Columbia labour history must do the same.

Fundamentally, however, my unease with Leier's suggestions for breathing new life into the field of BC labour history has less to do with the parts of his analysis than with his overall emphasis on Marxism. What makes BC history so much more exciting a field of intellectual inquiry today than it was fifteen years ago is precisely the willingness of many scholars to think comparatively and to make profitable use of theory. Both Foucault's notions of power and postmodern insights into the way we "see" the past have, of late, generated stimulating new perspectives about British Columbia's history and underlined the point that we should not restrict our understanding of "theory" to "Marxism." An example of this is the work being done on the subject of Native-European relations. While Knight's analysis of Aboriginal participation in the province's

[4] Alice Kessler-Harris, "Treating the Male as 'Other': Re-Defining the Parameters of Labor History," *Labor History* 34 (Spring-Summer 1993): 193-5.

capitalist labour market opened up a new way of thinking about the contact experience, it is only one perspective in a field now informed by a complex range of approaches and theories. This eclecticism may explain why, at the moment, Native history comes closest to dominating intellectual enquiry about British Columbia's past, and labour history does not.

The issue is not whether understanding how capitalism in British Columbia structured social relations and power is important: it is — a point that British sociologist Anthony Giddens made clear when noting that capitalist societies in the industrial era were intrinsically class societies.[5] British Columbia was and still is a capitalist society, and Marxist approaches to its study will greatly enhance our ability to understand it. But is a Marxist approach the only way to understand the lived experience of ordinary people, the bulk of whom would fall under the rubric of "labour"? The answer, I think, is no. One does not have to be a confirmed postmodernist to appreciate that people have multiple identities and that the class identity of ordinary people can have various meanings, depending on the context. This is especially so in a racially and ethnically plural society such as British Columbia. As American West historian Sarah Deutsch has written:

> The West is a messy place. The experience of both majority and minority groups occurred in the context of multiracial and multicultural dynamics. Any larger historical narrative of the region must partake of an interactive multifaceted model. It must allow the constant interaction and diversity within and between groups itself to become the story. By doing so, it builds a framework within which we can understand the continual tensions created by forces that simultaneously erode boundaries and re-create them.[6]

Deutsch is correct: Western societies, whether American or Canadian, have been and remain "messy." And messy problems, such as the complex and fluid relationships between class, ethnicity, race, and gender, often require creative, eclectic, and equally messy solutions. Deutsch's "interactive multifaceted model" of analysis may offer more hope for the future of British Columbia labour history than does the singular approach suggested by Leier.

[5] Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchison 1980), 20.

[6] Sarah Deutsch, "Landscape of Enclaves: Race Relations in the West, 1865-1990," in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, Jay Gitlin (New York: Norton 1992), 110-31.

RESPONSE TO PROFESSORS PALMER, STRONG-BOAG, AND MCDONALD

MARK LEIER

The objections of the three commentators, taken together, fall into two categories. First, they argue that my call to place class at the centre of BC historiography lacks nuance and subtlety. On this point all are agreed, although for different reasons and from widely different perspectives. Second, they contend that I have not presented a convincing argument as to *why* class has been largely ignored in BC. For reasons of space, I will confine my response to the first category. Perhaps the second can be taken up another time.

Let me start by agreeing that my call for placing class and class conflict in the forefront of BC history was plain and schematic. Bryan Palmer is right to suggest that I am too blunt in my focus on class and my analysis of race, gender, and poststructuralist theory. But there is, after all, a time to use an embroidery sharp and a time to use a marlin spike. The occasion of my opening article called for strenuous use of the latter.

Professor Palmer does acknowledge that I have put my finger on a real problem: the systematic downplaying of class and class conflict in the writing of history. This is not seen as a problem by Professors Strong-Boag and McDonald. Unlike Professor Palmer, both deny the primacy of class, arguing instead that we should see the interconnectedness of all forms of oppression and that history is too messy to fit into Marxism. My first response is that both have attributed to me arguments I did not make. They have launched an assault on a distorted and simplistic rendering of historical materialism to which no one subscribes. Neither explains why historical materialism — Marxism — cannot incorporate ideas of race and gender and other divisions. Instead, they simply deplore the crude Marxism they have invented as "old," "tired," "vulgar," and "singular." Let me be clear. I did not say we should ignore divisions and oppressions other than class. The issue here is not whether historians should pay attention to the various identities of historical actors. Of course they should. The issue here is not whether class is the only form of oppression. It is not. The real issue is whether class entails a different kind of oppression than do race, gender, and other identities. This is an issue neither author has engaged, short of simply issuing denials, and it is one I shall return to shortly.

But first, let us dispense with the notion that historians can and do deal with all forms of oppression and hierarchy in their work. In theory and practice, all historians make choices. Even to make lists of other differences and oppressions, as do Professors Strong-Boag and McDonald, is to ignore a host of other categories. Professor McDonald's list includes region; Professor Strong-Boag's, age and physical capability. One might also add religion, ethnicity, appearance, and handedness.[1] The issue is not whether we make choices but what those choices are. My argument was, and is, that increasingly class is left behind in favour of other categories.

To this argument, Professors Strong-Boag and McDonald both suggest that I need to catch up on my reading; the former suggests gender studies, the latter sociology. Their reading lists, however, seem to confirm rather than to challenge my point. The collections cited by Professor Strong-Boag illustrate how gender analysis is not often "classed," while the authors cited by Professor McDonald demonstrate that sociologists, and not historians, have applied Marxism to BC history.[2]

But why do I insist that class remain in the foreground? Certainly other divisions and oppressions exist in the societies we study. Why maintain that class is fundamental in ways that other divisions are not? I first need to define what is meant by fundamental. It does not mean "the sole source of oppression," as Professor Strong-Boag suggests. In this context, it means "that without which the society could not function as it does at present." It is obvious that capitalist societies cannot survive without class exploitation — that is their very basis. To claim that other oppressions are also fundamental, Professor Strong-Boag needs to show that capitalism could not survive the elimination of the injustices that she lists or that the inequalities she names are essential to the running of this society. Instead, she simply asserts that this is the case and that, therefore, class is no more important than is any other division.

[1] This last is not so flippant as it may appear. Some researchers have maintained that being left-handed (an identity I share) triples the risk of suicide and shortens one's lifespan by about the same time as does smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. See Stanley Coren, *The Left-Hander Syndrome: The Causes and Consequences of Left-Handedness* (New York: Macmillan 1992).

[2] It would, of course, be vulgar to make generalizations about Professor Strong-Boag's own treatment of class based on a so-called "Freudian slip" that appeared in the draft I received from her. She wrote: "It isn't only folks from the working class who get killed on the job." Of course it is. The number of bosses who die on the job is infinitesimal, and their deaths are rarely connected to the work process. I will let pass her quaint characterization of slaughtered workers as "folks."

Why do I think that class and class struggle are more fundamental than race or gender and other identities? One obvious argument is that class splits racial and gender identities and leads to tensions within these groups that cannot be resolved at the level of theory or practice. The different identities one may have — sex, race, ethnicity, age, nationality, religion — do not change one's class position. However, one's class position shapes how one experiences these different identities. When Peggy Witte becomes chief executive officer of Royal Oak or David Lam becomes lieutenant-governor of British Columbia, they may well still suffer from sexism and racism. But they do so in ways very different from Asian women who work in the sweatshops of Vancouver. Class determines the very nature of the sexism and racism one will experience; gender and race do not necessarily or automatically determine the nature of the class oppression one will experience. Furthermore, members of non-dominant identity groups may and do attain positions of class power without giving up their other identities. But class struggle pits members of these gender and racial categories against each other. Whatever solidarity female or Asian or disabled capitalists may feel towards those who share their particular identities, they still must distinguish between those workers and themselves both on the shop floor and on all political issues that do not correlate precisely with their non-class identities.

This is because the interests of classes are opposed to each other in ways that the interests of race and gender within a class are not. Capitalists and the middle class owe their privileged existence to the working class. Neither capitalists nor workers depend on racism and sexism for their existence. They have, as I argue in my opening article, profited on occasion from sexism and racism as well as from the distinction between skilled and unskilled. That many White working-class men and organizations have seen working-class women or members of other racial groups as the enemy tells us only that workers are sometimes deceived about where their real interests lie. But despite the well-documented subjective feelings of racial and gender antagonism, White working-class males have also learned that only by overcoming these divisions can they improve their positions as workers. In other words, racial and gender divisions within a class are obstacles to be overcome, however infrequently this happens in practice. In contrast, class divisions within racial and gender groups must be maintained if capitalism is to continue.

Class also remains more fundamental than do other divisions because it confers more power on the dominant group than do race or

gender when it is factored out. While it is true that White males hold more power than do women and non-Whites in this society, it is a mistake to argue that all Whites and all males hold this power over women and non-Whites equally. In fact, most White men have very little power or access to positions of power. It is, as Janice Naiman has noted, a mistake to see White men in power and then assume that their race and gender is the source of their power.[3] Certainly, White working-class men can and do oppress working-class women and non-Whites and even profit from their paid and unpaid labour. But their power over them is much less than is the power exerted by capital, and it is much less than is the power exerted by the relatively few women capitalists. This is not to say that we should ignore or justify the power of White working-class men over working-class women and non-Whites. It is to say that gender and race cannot be abstracted from class in the same way that class can be abstracted from gender.[4] Naiman also reminds us that men in power do not act primarily in the interests of their identities as White males. As an example, she suggests that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was not passed in the interests of men or Whites as categories, but in the interest of big business — a category consisting of some men and fewer, but some, women. This does not mean that gender and race do not structure power relations to some degree, but it does mean that it is not the case that White males "in structured positions of power are acting primarily *on behalf of* or *for the benefit of* all [White] males."[5] They act primarily on behalf of their class interests, and the benefits are shared, albeit unequally, by women of the same class. This, in turn, means that whatever the oppressions of race and gender, they do not constitute the same kind of power as does class.

Finally, I would argue that class is more fundamental than gender and race because class relations and class conflict tend to structure history more than do gender and race conflicts. This does not occur at the personal level, where we often see and feel the effects of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression more clearly than we do that of class. But at the level of society, it seems to me that class offers more — not, I hasten to add, complete — insight into historical change

[3] Janice Naiman, "Left Feminism and the Return to Class," *Monthly Review* 48 (June 1996): 23-4. Ralph Miliband, *Divided Societies: Class Struggle in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989), 103-5.

[4] Naiman, "Left Feminism," 24.

[5] Ralph Miliband, *Socialism for a Skeptical Age* (New York: Verso 1995), 22.

than do other categories of oppression. For example, much sexism and racism can be seen as stemming not from idealist notions or fear of "the other" but from the insecurity and alienation caused by an economic system built on exploitation and privilege. Furthermore, I would argue that changes in the structure of society often have more to do with class projects than with racial or gender ones. What do I mean by this? Only that we need to remember that capitalism, not racism or sexism, brought fur traders to British Columbia, where they then imposed an exploitative system that made use of racial and gender divisions. In the last analysis, the need of capital for cheap labour, not Asian labour, was responsible for the indentured immigration of Chinese workers. The massive transformation of women's role in the labour force and the concomitant changes in the family have less to do with women's desire for wage work than with the need of capital to drive down wages and to constantly revolutionize the work process. The creation in other countries of "surplus" labour that was forced to emigrate was due to economic forces; that is, to class and class conflict. No one would deny that the category of lower-paid work is gendered and raced historically, but we understand causation better if we see this as stemming from the historical needs of capital rather than from an essentialist sexism or racism. The proof of this? Whatever the dominant sexual and racial ideologies of the day have been, capital has always been quick to jettison them when they no longer served. Of course a woman's place is in the home, the Victorian capitalist would argue — until he needed a new skilled workforce for his mills or stores. Obviously Asian labour is inferior, he would maintain — until a cheaper labour force is needed. Shifts in ideology do not occur easily or instantly, but they do occur — and according to a timetable that suits capital.

But does any of this matter? Professor Strong-Boag argues that it does not, that we have more important work to do than to try to figure out who is prolier than thou. Professor McDonald would have us continue to potter around in the past, perhaps straightening a bit here and there, but leaving the essential clutter intact. I admit that their call for a popular front has some appeal; it has a reasonable, Canadian tone of agreeing to disagree, of tolerance, even of objectivity. But this apparent liberality is merely a way of attacking Marxism. For what distinguishes Marxism from other approaches to history is not the denial of a multiplicity of identities or a dogged insistence on a single cause, as Professors Strong-Boag and McDonald would have it. Rather, what distinguishes it is exactly what they deny it, and that is,

as Professor Palmer writes, its understanding that "class . . . cuts through other identities and eventually orders them in terms of a politics of challenge and opposition." So it is important to see how historians differ on questions of power, for how we choose to understand its sources is precisely the measure of how we differ. As for the relative explanatory power of Marxism, it seems to me that a historical materialism that takes into account race, gender, and region remains a more useful tool than does a liberalism that seeks, practically and theoretically, to privilege all other divisions over class.

This is especially true as we approach the twenty-first century. For the capitalist world now closely resembles that abstracted and predicated by Marx. Wealth in the world is increasingly concentrated and the gap between the rich and the poor grows every day. Globally, fewer people can escape wage labour while unemployment in industrial countries is rising. The service and financial sectors are expanding and manufacturing plants are underutilized. Wages and working conditions are under attack everywhere. The middle classes are more precarious and more likely to be proletarianized. Social democracy demonstrates its moral and political bankruptcy daily. Even in North America, from Chiapas to Decatur to Oshawa, workers' struggles are on the rise. Without a clear and, yes, nuanced understanding of class and class struggle we cannot hope to understand either the past or the world we live in. The question for historians remains: which side are you on?