

Sex and Class Revisited

“CAPTIOUS, INTEMPERATE, AND CONFUSING” is how Carl Berger summed up the long-standing debate in Canadian labour history. He was undoubtedly right, but it must be admitted that the vituperation lent a zest to what otherwise might have been a dullish field. One almost regrets to read that “in the 1990s these ideological and interpretive battles have diminished”. Still, all is not lost, for a number of new collections of old and new articles revisit the old battlegrounds. If authors republish their old works or allow them to be republished, they presumably are not just indulging in nostalgia but want them to be read.

David J. Bercuson and David Bright, eds., *Canadian Labour History: Selected Readings*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Copp Clark Longman, 1994), which includes the quotation concerning the growing peace of the 1990s (pp. 4-5), is structured to evoke the clash of opinions. The editor’s own article on 1919, for instance, is set up to contrast with one by Greg Kealey, and a classic exchange of opinions between Daniel Drache and Bryan Palmer dating from the mid-1980s forms the overview section of the volume. Kealey’s retrospective of his own work, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), contains some of his choice pieces on 19th-century Canada: Orangemen, printers and the Knights of Labour in Canada (based on the book he wrote with Bryan D. Palmer), as well as several historiographical pieces on Canadian working-class history, all of which managed to evoke some harsh criticism in their time. David Frank and Gregory S. Kealey, eds., *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada: A Reader* (St. John’s, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1995) includes a number of contributions which have a decided ideological punch. Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1998), which examines the most controversial of subjects, differs from the four other books under review here as it attempts to pour oil on troubled waters by having a fresh look at each of the regions. Although the introductory remarks by the editors of these volumes all suggest a lessening of the conflict among historians, one looks in vain for any sign of mea culpa or regrets about youthful enthusiasm. Perhaps, as Craig Heron remarks in *Canadian Labour History*, “things have become a lot more complex” (p. 2), but one suspects an improvement in manners rather than a change of heart.

One matter that has complicated things, however, is the women’s question. In fact, Anne Forrest, in a final overview in Linda Briskin and Patricia McDermott, eds., *Women Challenging Unions: Feminism, Democracy, and Militancy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993) chides not only the old writers, but also Heron, Kealey and Palmer for being “stubbornly silent about lives and experiences of women as workers and trade unionists” (p. 326). But the silence is now broken. Editors confess sins of omission. Every article in *The Workers’ Revolt* acknowledges that the refusal to take women seriously weakened the working class, and labour history anthologies now contain articles on women.

Turning first to the historical articles, D.A. Muise’s contribution in *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada* examines three communities in Nova Scotia between 1871 and 1921, and Bettina Bradbury’s piece in *Canadian Labour History* studies two of the poorest wards in Montreal between 1861 and 1881. With detailed statistics, both reveal, as Muise phrases it, “the gendered dimension of class

W.M. Dick, “Sex and Class Revisited”, *Acadiensis*, XXIX, 2 (Spring 2000), pp. 156-169.

formation” (p. 166) and the undervaluing of women’s place in industry. Both show the enormous differentiation in wages between men and women during the brief periods in which women usually worked outside the home (usually before marriage and after children were grown up), and both demonstrate their reliance on taking in home work and providing for lodgers. These results are hardly surprising, but both authors illustrate their effects with interesting details. Muise shows that sexual discrimination in wages was found even among children doing exactly the same work and that in the one instance where wages of males and females were equal, the males turned out to be exclusively Acadians. Bradbury brings out the appalling situation of the surprisingly large number of widows with young children; they were unquestionably family breadwinners but still unable to make a decent living.

Yet, while these authors rightly focus on the pernicious denial of women’s right to work, they are reluctant to recognize the family as something valued by the working class. Bradbury is sensitive to the need for labour in the home when every task required time and work — heating the house, boiling water, doing laundry and shopping on a daily basis because of the lack of refrigeration — but she is not prepared to draw the conclusion that women saw this as their role. Like Muise, she is more interested in how “patriarchy” denied women’s right to live as individuals. Other writers join the chorus. In his contribution to *Canadian Labour History*, Bryan Palmer characterizes “the patriarchal structure and content of the working-class family” as something picked up from the bourgeoisie (p. 69). James Naylor, discussing Ontario in 1919 in *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada*, laments that men’s “hopes of a wage sufficient to support their families had never been questioned as a social model” (p. 163). Does Naylor seriously think the family wage should have been questioned? Are these views of the past gained from “listening to history” as Palmer recommends, or are they an expression of today’s concerns? I think the latter.

In studying French-Canadian workers in New England’s textile industry, Tamara Hareven gives a contrasting view. She points out the discontinuous nature of women’s paid work, which was usually undertaken either before marriage and in its early stages or after children were grown up. But she treats this as a positive development, suiting women’s life cycle and, by adding to their family’s income, providing the means of comfort.¹ On the other hand, Lynn Hollen Lees, in her work on family budgets of English industrial workers in 1890, shows that where women’s work was unavailable, family life among the unskilled really suffered.²

On the subject of “patriarchy” let me offer another picture, one that recognizes that the women who ran households were the bankers, the dispensers of cash, the decision makers. All wage earners in the family, including the main breadwinner, handed over pay packets to the women, who budgeted, paid the rent, bought clothes, dealt with officialdom, including schools, and made decisions on children’s education and careers. Pocket money, even the husband’s, was negotiated beforehand and any

1 Tamara Hareven, “Family Time and Industrial Time”, *Family and Kin in Industrial Communities, 1700-1930* (New York, 1977), pp. 196-202.

2 Lynn Hollen Lees, “Getting and Spending: The Family Budgets of English Industrial Workers in 1890”, in John Merriman, ed., *Consciousness and Class Experience in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York, 1980), pp. 169-86.

aberrations in arrangements carefully noted and adjusted. Men were good only for bringing in a family income and were otherwise without responsibility. Their social life was centred not on the home, but on the pub, to which women were not admitted. Women's recreation consisted of visiting other women and discussing their families. Admittedly, I did not obtain this knowledge from listening to history, but from a lecture in a class in "Social Relations in Education" given at Edinburgh University to students in the B.Ed. Programme in 1958. It was intended as a guide to the Scottish working-class family structure for prospective teachers, who were assumed to be middle class, though most probably came from working-class families. Students were both shocked and amused by the lecture and it was much discussed both outside class and in tutorials; most agreed it rang true. I do not recall the system being given a name, but it seems to me that "matriarchy" would not be out of place. Scottish working-class culture changed rapidly during the 1960s, but I believe "matriarchy" of this kind probably existed before industrialization; there are echoes of it in Robert Burns's poetry. Whether the description is applicable to the Canadian experience I do not know, but I do know that there were an awful lot of working-class Scots in 19th-century Canada.

These reflections have no bearing on the present. Family life has changed and careers are now open to women; besides, labour-saving devices pervade the home and must be paid for. Nevertheless, old attitudes survive and working women continue to face difficulties. The contemporary studies of women's work in these collections are concerned with women's problems. The article by M. Patricia Connelly and Martha MacDonald in *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada* shows how state policy intended to help male fishery workers may have an adverse effect on women's work. It is a study of unintended consequences arising from not hearing women's voices. Anne Forrest claims they are not heard at all in industrial relations textbooks. Her contribution to *Women Challenging Unions* seeks to change this situation. The editors of this volume clearly intend to undermine the "notion of the generic worker with a homogeneous and self-evident set of interests" and replace it with a "recognition of the multiplicity and variety of workers with often contradictory interests arising out of the intersecting realities of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, language, and region" (p. 13). None of the contributors are historians.

The first section of *Women Challenging Unions* is devoted to women's strikes, which bring to women the exhilaration of active participation in a movement for the first time. Thus, McDermott brings together the memories of women who conducted the strike at Eaton's during the winter of 1984-85, and Patricia Baker writes on the recollections of two pairs of women who adopted different and contrasting methods to organize bank employees in Nova Scotia and British Columbia. Memorable experiences they undoubtedly were, but the strikes failed and unionism retreated nonetheless. Can it be that women in banking and retail are not convinced they want unions? Rebecca Coulter, on the other hand, traces the effect of the "illegal" strike by Alberta nurses in 1988. Since then nurses' unions have become the most militant in the country. One wonders, however, whether the nurses' success in organization owes more to the Canadian Medical Association as an example than to traditional unions.

Part II of *Women Challenging Unions* is concerned with women working within union bureaucracies, and all five articles in this section recognize the problems they face in organizations dominated by men. Carl Cuneo explores the difficulties women

face in leadership positions in dealing, for example, with the rituals of the old boys. Jane Stinson and Penni Richmond also point out the problems of long and awkward hours for women with children participating in bargaining sessions. Pamela Sugiman turns to a union with a long history of women members, the Canadian Auto Workers and finds little difference in how they are treated. In the only article in this collection dealing specifically with racial issues, Ronnie Leah looks at the additional problems black women face with union work. Briskin, in her own contribution to the section, sees the need to achieve a balance between separate organization for women and a consolidated union movement.

The third section of *Women Challenging Unions* examines how unions deal with women and women's issues. For a start, Judy White seeks to understand why unionism has traditionally been weak among women employees. Pradeep Kumar shows how agonizingly slow unions have been in taking up women's issues — issues which often have been addressed by legislation in any case. Judy Fudge examines legal facets of the issue and shows how labour relations boards, wittingly or not, have adopted policies which affect women workers adversely. For instance, their preference for small bargaining units, which tend to suit traditional unions, offers nothing to large numbers of women who work at home. This is made clearer by Armine Yalnizyan's study of female home workers in the clothing trades, whom traditional unions avoid trying to organize since that would legitimize work in the home. Pat Armstrong also shows how traditional rules denying union membership to those holding management positions can adversely affect women. In nursing and other caregiving jobs, special skills give the right to make decisions and give orders to other workers; these "managers" nevertheless need the union. Karen Messing and Donna Mergler, in an article restricted to Quebec but of general interest, take up questions of women's health and the role of unions. These questions include matters such as pregnant women working in unsafe environments and obtaining better working conditions in jobs traditionally associated with women. More controversial, however, are issues such as changing the size of tools in jobs not traditionally done by women.

While most of this work is sound and thought-provoking, a few parts make one sit up a bit. Jane Stinson and Penni Richmond, for instance, in their enthusiasm for women's causes, criticize traditional (AFL-CIO) unions for their concentration on monetary issues to the exclusion of everything else. As the American labour historian David Brody has pointed out, however, unions in the United States were much better at pursuing general aims like civil rights and welfare than protecting their own interests.³ After criticizing the concentration on money, moreover, it seems illogical to complain that "for many union staff work is not just any job but a vocation" (p. 145). Stinson and Richmond rightly advocate dialogue with other women's organizations, but it is surely not self evident that unions should take up abortion rights as one of their causes. Pursuing the idea of "wage fairness", Rosemary Warskett insists that all distinctions between men and women are socially constructed. Helen Fisher, the author of *The First Sex: The Natural Talents of Women and How They Will Change the World*, does not go that far.⁴

3 David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1993), p. 216.

4 Helen Fisher discussed this subject in a dialogue with David Gergen on PBS NewsHour, 16 August 1999.

One final point. In spite of criticism of male-dominated unions and talk of building bridges to other women's organizations, none of the writers in this volume even hint that anything might be gained by an approach to the increasing number of women in management; class still dominates gender, and working men and women must work together. But reading these essays makes one thing clear: if women have their way, union men will have to abandon a great deal of the cultural baggage about work and manhood that long sustained the labour movement.

While the women's question has certainly complicated things, the old question of class conflict is the predominant issue in these volumes. The exchange between Daniel Drache and Bryan Palmer in *Canadian Labour History* is the best place to begin. Drache's main argument is perfectly straightforward. He argues that any kind of working-class unity capable of challenging the established order at any time in Canadian history was unlikely because of the fragmentation of labour markets. Those who worked in the production of staples, either in the East in pre-1880 period or in the West later, had nothing in common with the artisans and labourers in manufacturing and construction in central Canada. This fragmentation was intensified, moreover, by colonial policies aimed at subduing the French-speaking population in Quebec, which in turn created both emigration and Québécois nationalism. It must be said that Drache's article contains dubious factual claims and periodization, giving Palmer an easy task in attacking it. Moreover, the author suggests that a failure of will on the part of western resource workers prevented them from destroying the American-style business unionists of the East and creating a new purely Canadian movement. This seems at odds with the main message of the article. Nevertheless, Drache's emphasis on fragmentation of labour markets is widely accepted. Even the title of Bercuson's own contribution to the volume, "Labour's Civil War", reflects the theme. A. Gordon Darroch and Michael Ornstein's piece, "Ethnicity and Class Transitions over a Decade, Ontario 1861-71", shows the relative ease with which former workers could obtain land for farming and how ethnicity made little difference in the process. This is not quite the same as fragmentation, but it reveals the fluid nature of the working class. One wonders, however, what statistics for the next decade would reveal.

In his reply, Palmer does not deny fragmentation so much as declare it irrelevant. The working class, as a creation of the capitalist mode of production, exists as an objective fact, but this does not mean that a uniform proletariat is constantly gathering its resources for an assault on the system. That would be a "vulgar Marxist" fallacy. Nevertheless, if historians "listen to history", to the voices of small people whose recordings survive in multivarious sources that the sensitive historian can penetrate, they can hear the voice of challenge and resistance to domination. These voices may be small and disparate, even isolated, but they are the stuff of history. After Marx himself, the master practitioner of this kind of history was the late Edward P. Thompson. His revelation of the moral economy of the community in the form of food riots and other forms of collective resistance was the best-known example.⁵ David Montgomery made a similar argument in a session celebrating his work at the 1999

5 Edward P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd", *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76-136.

meeting of the Organization of American Historians in Toronto; for him, history was the record of resistance to the hegemony of oppressors, whatever form it takes. But sporadic resistance is not the whole story. Under the right circumstances, the oppressed join together in a “movement culture” and the resistance reaches national significance. To quote Marx, “the working class in itself becomes a class for itself”. These are the great crisis moments in history and, according to Palmer, there are three such points in Canadian history: in the 1880s, around 1919, and in the aftermath of the Second World War. Nevertheless, these moments pass and the working class disintegrates. As Palmer puts it, “classes as structural entities exist in capitalism and as social and cultural expressions are made, unmade and remade in particular historical periods” (p. 53).

At this point, it is important to add what Greg Kealey has to say on theory in his retrospective. Kealey, in fact, denies there is any teleology in historical materialism. Instead, he claims a middle ground between the teleologies of left and right, between communists and social democrats, each trusting in their own inevitable success, the one in communist revolution, the other in triumphal social democracy (pp. 151-2). The collapse of communism in Russia and the current assault on social democracy provide grist for Kealey’s mill. At any rate, Palmer and Kealey share a non-teleological Marxism: history shows the working class continuously making, unmaking and remaking itself, with no particular ending. There is some argument about what the theory is to be called. For a time, followers of Thompson were referred to as “culturalists”. Palmer, however, rejects the term as too restrictive. Their purview includes politics, trade unions and other institutions in addition to working-class culture. He prefers the term “historical materialism” to describe their approach, the term used by Marx himself (p. 68).

Put in such terms, these are modest claims — perhaps too modest. Does anyone seriously deny that class and class conflict are important themes in history, and at times dominant ones? Some aspects of the theory, however, are problematic. Kealey and Palmer take great pains to stress that they are concerned with the “totality” of the working-class experience. But is this really so? It all depends, of course, on what is meant by “class”, on whether one is talking about a group of people defined by objective factors, or a group of people who feel conscious of themselves as a class. Marx thought that the one must eventually become the other and pave the way for the revolution, but teleology is no longer part of the package. In the good old days when Thompson was riding high, no conference was complete without someone reminding the audience that class was a feeling not a thing; class was not to be reified. But if we are only interested in the working class as defined by consciousness, we are dealing in tautology. “I am only interested in those who feel class conscious, and look how class conscious they are!” The conjurer unfailingly pulls a red card from the deck, making sure there are only red cards in it in the first place.

Meanwhile, there are all kinds of activities of working-class people, which do not represent class consciousness at all, but are surely part of the “totality” of their experience. Among the young, sex, or the pursuit of it, is a main preoccupation, which sometimes even results in family life. There is also the pursuit of other pleasures, especially pub culture and sport. In Scotland, for instance, “fit ba” probably beats politics as a subject of debate. And, dare one mention it, working-class people often take steps to “get on” in a career which might involve a degree of social mobility.

Scholarship raising such a possibility gets short shrift from Kealey (p. 146). Many activities that express class feeling are not necessarily a prelude to class action. Nose-thumbing behind the backs of those in authority or making life uncomfortable for workmates who kowtow to the boss and refuse to “ca’ canny” may be forms of resistance but they are more likely ways of coping with a humdrum job.

Rough action by groups or individuals among the working class is another form of behaviour that is open to different interpretations. The new social historians often subsumed it as “community action” in pre-industrial times, and part of the cultural baggage that became “class action”. This interpretation may be justified in many cases, but rough behaviour is just as likely to be sheer bloody-mindedness or hooliganism, a product of testosterone as much as of bad conditions. In either case, hooliganism is usually the bane of the lives of other working-class people, especially older ones. As a case in point, take Kealey’s description of the Toronto riots of 1855, when a volunteer fire company attacked a traveling circus and used the truck to pull down the big tent. The action, we are told, was connived in by the local police, since both organizations, firemen and police, shared membership with the proletarian Orange Order (p. 191). The incident is presented as an example of class conflict in which the moral economy of the community was defended, thus forcing an outraged bourgeoisie to reassert their hegemony by re-establishing the fire service and police on a more professional basis. But what about the rest of the working class? Reading Kealey, I was reminded of the place of the circus in the lives of working people as described by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*, published the year before the Toronto events. Sleary, the circus owner, in his own accent, echoes Dickens’s view: “The people mutht have amusement”. Perhaps in Coketown but not in Hogtown. Kealey’s description sounds like a perfect example of hooliganism, whose suppression working people probably applauded.

Finally, even if one concentrates on the “movement cultures” during the great crises when there was doubtless a maximum of class consciousness and militance, there is still a problem of what constitutes the essential working class. By what criterion do the few voices who speak in terms of revolution somehow represent the essence of a larger working class who might be aiming at changes in the existing system? This problem and the others discussed above are best considered in the three “movement cultures” discussed in the books.

The Knights of Labour, the subject of Kealey and Palmer’s joint essay, was the first Canadian working-class “movement culture” of significant proportions. The authors manage to convince me that the movement went further than political and economic organization, and that it represented a broad movement for dignity and justice. It was not a relic of the past, as early American historians pointed out, nor an aberration inevitably replaced by the American Federation of Labor and its constituent craft unions. The authors therefore agree with the American historian Leon Fink who studied the movement in the United States. But on what grounds does this point the way towards an alternative hegemony, a new social paradigm comparable to 1789 or 1917? Do a few statements about “production for use and not profit” and “dreaming of what might be” justify such conclusions? The 19th century saw many interesting, but usually fantastic, schemes of cooperative production which would redeem society. They usually became part of broader social democratic movements. The trouble with “movement cultures” is that, like soldiers who die in

battle, they remain forever young and unsullied by compromise. Admittedly, the social activity of the Knights — picnics, dances, funerals, as well as political and trade union organization — is impressive enough, and the authors interpret it with sensitivity. One wonders, however, what an equally sensitive historian such as Richard Cobb would make of their findings. In his interpretations of the history of the ordinary people of France, Cobb remains skeptical of all group action, and he constantly brings the reader back to individuals and the complexity of their motives.⁶

Kealey's article, "1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt" takes up the second of the movement cultures. It appears both in his retrospective and in Bercuson and Bright, eds., *Canadian Labour History*, alongside Bercuson's "Labour's Civil War", originally a chapter of his book, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union*,⁷ to which Kealey's piece is a reply. In Bercuson's view, the eastern-based craft unions tied to the Trades and Labour Congress and the American Federation of Labor inevitably clashed with radical movements which were essentially a product of the resource industries of the West. Kealey, on the other hand, brings out the radicalism that permeated labour organizations throughout the nation. So widespread was this revolt, and so far-reaching in its confrontation with capitalism, it pointed once again to an alternative hegemony even if it ultimately failed. Kealey's piece makes use of a number of other articles which now appear in the Atlantic reader he and David Frank have edited. Ian McKay's "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914" is an excellent account of the unrest in the decade preceding the Great War, and helps explain the events of 1919. McKay's article also appears in *Canadian Labour History*. Nolan Reilly's "The General Strike in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1919" brings attention to the unity in the movement, literally from coast to coast. David Frank's "The Trial of J. B. McLachlan" explores the government's clampdown on a leading figure of the period.

Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers' Revolt in Canada, 1917-1925* attempts to clear up the 1919 controversy with a series of studies on each of Canada's main regions: Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton on the Maritimes, Geoffrey Ewen on Quebec, James Naylor on Southern Ontario, Tom Mitchell and Naylor on the Prairies and Allen Seager and David Roth on British Columbia. In addition, Heron and Myer Siemiatycki explore the effects of the Great War on the working class, and the editor provides both a general introduction and a summing-up. If the aim is to show that the militancy of labour in 1919 was of national proportions and not just a western phenomenon, the point is well proven. Bercuson's characterization of events as "Labour's Civil War" does not do justice to the extent of class-conscious militancy that existed in each region and together exerted an influence at a national level. Nevertheless, sooner or later dissension arose in each region and eventually proved fatal. Heron's summing-up thus has something for both sides, even in its title, "National Contours: Solidarity and Fragmentation". He also admits that "during the period in question and arguably throughout its history, the 'Canadian working class' never existed as a coherent, self-conscious social force", yet he begins his introduction by linking the "workers' revolt in Canada" with movements in other countries —

6 For an interesting discussion of Cobb's work by a novelist, see Julian Barnes, "Always True to France", *New York Review of Books*, XLVI, 13 (12 August 1999), pp. 19-31.

7 David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto, 1978).

Germany, Britain, France, Italy and, of course, Russia — where, he says, workers envisioned “a new kind of society that promised a better life for the workers” (pp. 3-4, 7-8). These are fair statements, but they beg the question: How coherent and self-conscious does the Canadian working class have to be, and for what? How “new” was the “new kind of society” that European workers sought? Are we talking about revolution and an alternative hegemony?

Events in Canada were indeed part of a world-wide phenomenon of worker militancy, but just how radical was this world-wide movement? The crowds in Glasgow, as Heron notes, may have “seethed with radical fervour” but it did not prevent them from trooping off to the football matches as usual.⁸ The aborted German revolutions were serious enough, but it is well to remember they were undertaken by distinct minorities, in a number of industrial cities, against a provisional social democratic government desperately trying to create a stable democracy.⁹ The so-called “revolutionary situation” created by the Italian sit-down strikes in 1920 existed mainly in the minds of young intellectuals; the only revolution in the offing was the fascist one.¹⁰ “The Russian workers themselves, not a tiny revolutionary elite”, may have “propelled their country into a new age”, but it is far from clear that the new age they got was the one that most of them wanted. With due respect to Heron and a host of others, a tiny revolutionary elite did indeed stage a coup d’etat that seized the government in November 1917, though it was probably assisted by a good deal of lower-class hooliganism.¹¹

There is absolutely no doubt that in every industrialized country in this period workers were in a state of unrest and demanding change. They conducted massive strikes and created new institutions that brought in the unskilled and reflected shop-floor concerns. The unrest had started in the decade before 1914, lessened during the war when governments made promises of “industrial democracy”, and it resumed again when promises were slow in being fulfilled. Real revolutionaries (“chiliasts” is probably a better term since they aimed at redemption rather than reform), led by intellectuals, played a part in this unrest. They had been in the doldrums early in the century as “revisionism” replaced revolutionary Marxism, but the worker unrest soon filled their sails. Mesmerized by the great strikes and new industrial institutions of the workers, chiliastic intellectuals changed their doctrines accordingly. Their theories now revolved around direct action or what was widely referred to as “syndicalism”. Decentralism was the order of the day. Taking advantage of improved literacy, they also created schools to spread the word among promising proletarians, and so created a new brand of well-educated worker chiliast. The chiliasts’ constant minority status, however, was reinforced by factionalism. They found it impossible to agree on whether to try to work within existing labour bodies or support new ones. They were also undecided as to what role, if any, the state should play. The Bolshevik revolution

8 William Ferguson, *Scotland, 1689 to the Present* (Edinburgh, 1968), p. 361.

9 Gordon Craig, *Germany, 1866-1945* (New York, 1978), pp. 402-14. See also A.J. Nicholls, “Weimar and the Workers”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 17-23 March 1989.

10 Paolo Spriano, *The Occupation of the Factories: Italy, 1920*, translated and introduced by Gwyn A. Williams (London, 1975), pp. 130-1, 136-7.

11 See Orlando Figes, “Hooligans in the Revolutionary Crowd”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 May 1994, p. 6.

helped bring them together, but they got it all wrong. Lenin's slogan, "All Power to the Soviets", bamboozled chiliasts both in Russia and throughout the world. He did not set them right until the meeting of the Communist International in 1920, when he distributed his devastating pamphlet, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. During 1919, however, chiliasts managed to give the workers' unrest a complexion of decentralized revolutionism with talk of workers taking over factories and the like. They also managed to put the wind up the bourgeoisie. But they remained a minority, usually a small one. For most workers "industrial democracy" meant free trade unions, welfarism and a chance at power by working-class parties within democratic systems. True, some working-class parties, who formed what Lenin dubbed "the Two-and-a-Half International", propagated "democratic socialism", by which they meant revolution by democratic means, a compromise between full-scale Russian-style revolution and social democracy. But they soon discovered this was a delusion and rejoined the social democratic movements.¹²

To sum up, Canadian workers in 1919, like workers in most countries, were angry and militant, but they were angry and militant in their demand for a degree of clout in the existing system rather than to replace it. The article that reflects this most clearly is David Bright's own piece in *Canadian Labour History*. Focusing on Calgary, where the One Big Union was launched in March 1919, he shows how attitudes were less radical than that event might suggest. Workers were angry, frustrated and class-conscious, but their aim was decidedly for reform, not revolution. As the socialist carpenter Robert Parkyn stated to the royal commission investigating the unrest: "We are all kin, we are all trying to create a better condition, and I believe that we will eventually come to it" (p. 235). He spoke on behalf of the Calgary Trades and Labour Council. As in most of the democratic countries, workers' circumstances improved a little, but they lost out during the Depression. The fight resumed after the Second World War.

This was the third upheaval discussed by Palmer. It occurred in 1946-47 under circumstances comparable to 1919. The 1930s had seen more unrest, followed by a war in which promises were made, and then there were massive strikes by "the resource proletariat and the industrial workers of central Canada". The great difference was that this time the demand for collective bargaining proved irresistible. Working-class politics also became more vital. The New Democratic Party eventually appeared in 1961 and, even if it achieved only limited success, it helped bring about the consolidation of the welfare state. Palmer in no sense denies these "triumphs". "But triumphs", he reminds us, "can become, over time, a trap as bureaucratization, legalism, and consumerism circumscribe workers and their leaders". Kealey also shows these developments are part of managing class conflict on the part of capitalism and the capitalist state.¹³ "Managing class conflict" is a fair description, and it was a form of management that most workers embraced. In the United States, the post-war period saw the consolidation of gains that labour had acquired through pre-war New Deal legislation, and there too some historians have searched for the missed opportunities for entirely new departures. The trouble with this theory, however, as

12 Julius Braunthal, *History of the International, 1914-1943* (London, 1967), p. 254.

13 Bercuson and Bright, ed., *Canadian Labour History*, pp. 65, 69; Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History*, pp. 437-9.

David Brody has pointed out, is the sparseness of the evidence that workers wanted something fundamentally different. Even an old Marxist such as Eric Hobsbawm now refers to the post-war period as the “golden years”.¹⁴

After the big debate that permeates so much of these volumes, it is something of a relief to turn to other articles which simply inform rather than score points. In the fourth section of *Canadian Labour History*, “Labour Between the Wars”, John Manley examines Communists and the auto workers between 1925 and 1936, which includes the so-called Third Period when communists established dual unions. While he does not exaggerate the importance of communism, Manley shows how communist unions laid the foundation for the startling new industrial unionism that followed later. In contrast, Michael Earle and Herbert Gamberg study the politics of the miners in Cape Breton during the fourth or “popular front” period of communist history starting around 1936. The high point of the story is the affiliation of District 26 of the United Mine Workers with the CCF in 1938. Communism had formerly been strong in the district, and the CCF leadership was taken by surprise. The article shows, however, that in the late 1930s the CCF seemed the more radical of the two organizations, a position that changed quickly after 1945. Laurel Sefton MacDowell describes the failure of the steel workers in their strike against wartime wage controls in 1943. As the editors point out, however, the article shows that “the ‘good guy’/‘bad guy’ interpretation” often offered by labour historians to explain labour setbacks is simplistic to say the least. On this occasion, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King was not unsympathetic to the steel workers.

The final section of *Canadian Labour History* takes up the theme of worker power in the face of technological change. Ian Radforth shows how the woodworkers in the pulpwood logging industry of Northern Ontario used a variety of tactics to influence company strategy on mechanization. Blair Laidlaw and Bruce Curtis observe postal workers confronting technological change in a government-run corporation. They proved much more militant than their union advised. Nevertheless, wildcat strikes in Canada Post would have been much less likely without the defences against dismissal provided by the union. This duality in the functioning of the union bureaucracy is understated by radical historians. The volume ends with a tour de force by Wayne Roberts and John Bullen entitled “A Heritage of Hope and Struggle: Workers, Unions, and Politics in Canada 1930-1982”, which takes us through the dirty thirties, fighting forties, feisty fifties, soaring sixties, souring seventies and eerie eighties, leaving us just before the onset of the narky nineties. The authors certainly show that resistance is alive and kicking in contemporary Canada. Their explanation of their concentration on strikes, however, is noteworthy: “Conflicts are the easiest events to document and present. Also, they form the essence of labour history” (p. 378). Facing a similar situation in describing the great strikes in Europe before the First World War, Peter Stearns includes just one written contract in his collection of documents. It lends an entirely different perspective.¹⁵

14 David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, pp. 135-54; Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London, 1995), Ch. 9.

15 Peter Stearns, ed., *The Impact of the Industrial Revolution: Protest and Alienation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), pp. 68-70.

The remaining articles in *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada*, some of which include the pre-industrial period, are more concerned with class formation and resistance in the Kealey and Palmer style. Rusty Bittermann, by studying the need for wage labour in farm households, sets out to refute the mythology of the yeoman farmer. His findings contrast sharply with the work of Darroch and Ornstein regarding land acquisition in Ontario in the 1860s. Linda Little shows community action and community resistance alive and well in Newfoundland during the 1830s. Even Anglicans defied authority: they dug up the corpse of a Catholic suicide that magistrates had buried in their cemetery after Catholics had refused it. T.W. Acheson explores the ways in which artisans in Saint John tried to assert their status and worth as citizens against the increasing domination of merchants and masters. Eric W. Sager shows continuing patterns of resistance among merchant seamen, who were probably the earliest proletarians in Canada.

In the early industrial period, Peter DeLottinville explores the coming of the cotton industry to Milltown, New Brunswick. Community solidarity in welcoming industry to the town soon gave way to class conflict. Nevertheless, when ownership of the mills passed to outsiders, community solidarity revived even to the point of shopkeepers aiding strikers with credit. Robert McIntosh shows resistance even among boys in the Nova Scotia coal mines between 1873 and 1923, at which point their employment was forbidden by provincial legislation. In the remaining article of the section entitled "Labour's War", Jessie Chisholm offers a surprisingly upbeat study of the St. John's Longshoremen's Protective Union between 1890 and 1914. This union organized much more widely than the docks and was able to maintain an absolute monopoly of the labour supply. This enabled it to provide a great deal of labour solidarity and accomplishment.

In the final section, "The Rights of Labour", government relief is one of the main themes. E.R. Forbes shows the inadequacy of federal relief in the Maritimes because under the system of matching provincial grants there was so little for the federal government to match. Sean Cadigan deals with relief in a Labrador community but shows community action still alive and well in pursuit of survival. Connelly and MacDonald show how relief often has unexpected results for women workers. On another theme, Anthony Thomson shows how an internal association, the Nova Scotia Civil Service Association which lasted from 1956 to 1967, was unable to prevent the birth of an independent unionism.

Almost all of these articles in *Labour and Working-Class History in Atlantic Canada* are concerned with resistance and class consciousness. Their tone contrasts with Eugene Forsey's piece on "Labour and the Constitution in Atlantic Canada", which points out the importance of legal decisions to Canada's industrial relations system. Atlantic Canada set the pace for its development. In addition, however, the article shows the late Senator Forsey's faith in the ultimately benign nature of the state and therefore in social democracy. Given its position toward the end of the volume, Forsey's article almost suggests a change of heart on the part of the editors. The book ends, however, with "Death by Consensus: The Westray Mine Story" by Harry Glasbeek and Eric Tucker. Even the most reluctant reader of this piece would be forced to acknowledge the pernicious influence of class in bringing about the disaster. Consideration of the pressures created by a work-starved region scarcely alters this judgment. Although the authors of the article concede that "a range of mediations are

possible within an untransformed social system”, they nevertheless look forward to “a political and ideological climate in which the radical surgery which is required will be on the agenda, one in which the workers will be the chief surgeons” (pp. 436, 438). This final article, therefore, forces us back to the theoretical debate about Canadian labour and working-class history.

In answering his empirical critics, Bryan Palmer claims that “writing on Canadian history suffers not from too much theory, but from too little”. Empiricists, he notes in his contribution to the Bercuson and Bright collection, provided merely a “history made up of episodic but unintegrated, isolated struggles; a history governed by the progressive Whig march of legal victories and the emergence of stable structures and social democratic leaders; a history useful to Canadians in need of the kind of democratic socialism the NDP can supposedly provide” (p. 67). But what of the theory of “historical materialism” as expounded by Palmer and Kealey? Their non-teleological Marxism looks like a theory of unending class struggle: you win a few, you lose a few, and you occasionally get to scare the bourgeoisie out of its wits, but that is it. As Kealey notes in *Workers and Canadian History*, he wants a history that avoids both “the cynicism of most contemporary bourgeois historians and the burgeoning pessimism of many left wing analysts” (p. 151). Judging from much of the work in these books, however, the historical materialists merely relieve their pessimism by narrating a general subversiveness and celebrating potential but invariably failed revolutions as the sign of some great redemptive insurgency at the heart of the working class. Or perhaps there is a specific goal that the working class might achieve, and which is occasionally hinted at. In discussing the movement culture of the late 19th century, Kealey and Palmer quote Lawrence Goodwyn: “The difficulty we ourselves experience in comprehending their vision and their striving is a measure of significant failures — theirs and ours” (p. 262). But it really is not all that difficult to understand the vision. It boils down to an idea of modern industry being democratically controlled by the workers in each of the local plants, accompanied by similar local institutions in place of the centralized state. It was the idea of the loosely labeled “syndicalists” of the early 20th century, and was also expressed in the Russian “soviets” to whom Lenin promised to deliver all power. It appears in a very English form in G.D.H. Cole’s Guild Socialism. It quickly fizzled in the statism of the interwar period, but it revived again in the 1960s. Palmer provides a practical example in the building of the Yugoslavian railway in which E.P. Thompson was a participating observer. Leo Panitch is a persistent advocate of this kind of social organization.¹⁶

I have no problem with envisioning such a world; I am less sure of its practicability. Forget about the problems of realization or the expertise necessary for running modern industry. The main problem is that, in spite of Marxist talk of ending “alienation”, most working-class jobs are boring and likely to remain so. Working people are unlikely to sit around pretending to run the factory when they could be doing something more interesting. Outside of the professoriate, few people show the

16 Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History* (Toronto, 1981), p. 34; Leo Panitch, “We have to learn how to democratize the state—and the economy”, *Globe and Mail*, 30 September 1995, D4.

slightest interest in such a development. While premier of Ontario, Bob Rae helped save Algoma Steel in Sault Ste. Marie by having its workers acquire 51 per cent ownership in return for immediate concessions in wages and hours. This was not exactly workers' control, but it was a beginning; Rae claims the move brought "a different culture to the company . . . and worker participation became the order of the day".¹⁷ In spite of the success of the experiment, however, workers have since sold out to an American company. This may be a poor example, but the fact is that examples are few.

If these are the theories of the historical materialists, they are not much of a guide either to the past or the present. The late Ken McNaught, one of the "triumphal" social democrats whom Palmer and Kealey criticize, once remarked to me how much he was impressed by the work of the "new Canadian social historians" — apart from their conclusions. I believe that judgment remains valid. As for the future, Bob Rae's recently published plea for a renewed social democratic party as the way ahead makes much more sense than the solutions hinted at in these works.¹⁸ For the professors who think there is a different system waiting to spring from the dreams and efforts of the working class, the words of G.D.H. Cole provide an appropriate closing. He wrote them in 1929, after a quarter century of spouting workers' control in the form of Guild Socialism.

Some of us, who find a large part of our happiness in congenial work, have been too ready to assume that all the world's work can be made as pleasant and satisfying as our own. We have built Utopias on the assumption that all the irksomeness of this work arises from defects of social organization, and that in a world rightly organized each man will find pleasure and some measure of self-realization in the work which he does on the common behalf. What is more — we have sometimes felt rather proud of ourselves for asserting this, on the ground that our ideal was a higher ideal of pleasure in service than our critics could appreciate. That has been our particular form of cant, and it had for a time a great appeal. But the modern world has seen through it.¹⁹

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17 Bob Rae, *From Protest to Power: Personal Reflections on a Life in Politics* (Toronto, 1996), pp. 145-9.

18 Bob Rae, *The Three Questions: Prosperity and the Public Good* (Toronto, 1998).

19 G.D.H.Cole, *The Next Ten Years in British Economic and Social Policy* (London, 1929), p. 16.