PANEL REVIEW

Newfoundland's Past as Marxist Illustration

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on

Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration. Gerald M. Sider. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986. 205 p. ill.

THE PAST IS A FOREIGN and treacherous country. This truism is well-understood by historians, who learn at their supervisors' knees that in order to travel knowledgeably and sure-footedly in a land that no longer exists, they must steep themselves in the period which they have chosen to study. "Read," admonished G. M. Young, the great historian of Victorian England, "Read until you can hear people talk." A second precept is that because the past exists only in the historian's mind, it is all too easy to let imagination run riot, and to create a portrait that bears little resemblance to the original. To avoid this trap, the supervisors say, be guided by the evidence, all the evidence, and nothing but the evidence: remember Procrustes. No harm in speculations and theories, but make sure that you understand that they are just that. Those who choose to visit the past would do well to remember these graduate school commonplaces. Otherwise they may wander there aimlessly, like bewildered tourists; or, more dangerously, they may assume, on the basis of a brief tour and a quick sampling of the

accessible literature, that they are experts.

Gerald Sider's approach is quite different, as his title indicates. His book is about *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History*; Newfoundland is an *Illustration*. The past becomes a country from which evidence can be selected to prove or support given theories. It is the antithesis of the supervisors' method, and a glance at the manuscript would send them tottering towards their decanters. In any event, many historians tend to be wary of general theories and interpretations, even when dealing with areas of the past in which an immense amount of research has been done. The sheer volume of evidence creates such complexities that the effort seems almost futile. They also shy away from monocausal explanations of historical events and processes, understanding that human societies are immensely complicated, and that individual motivation is often difficult to explain. The broad, bold interpretation works best where the evidence is most scanty, but can also be attempted by scholars who, for whatever reasons, disregard the supervisors' advice. Sider has produced such an adventurous interpretation of Newfoundland's history, in part because he is dealing with certain areas—social and economic history in particular—where academic research is in its infancy; and in part because, armed with a set of *a priori* assumptions, he set out to find what he wanted to find, ignoring or discounting such evidence, from primary or secondary sources, as did not fit.

Approaching Newfoundland's past from a Marxian perspective, Sider presents merchant capital as the villain of the piece. In the 17th and 18th centuries, English merchants controlling the migratory fishery opposed permanent settlement, landed property, and the development of agriculture. Nevertheless, a settled population did emerge, and subsequently a colonial government. The reaction of merchant capital was first to entrap an impoverished fishing population in a cashless truck system, and then to dominate the state itself, maintaining its opposition to agriculture and to any economic development which might be seen as a threat to the fishery. There emerged, therefore, a stark division between two classes: the poverty-stricken "fisherfolk" on the one hand, and the merchants on the other, who controlled both the economy and the state. But merchant hegemony had within it the seeds of its own destruction. The truck system kept the price of fish low and the price of supplies high. As a result the fishermen had to receive additional support, either through generous credit from the merchant, or through public relief. Yet merchants became increasingly reluctant to extend winter credit. The state, for its part, could not afford to pay for extensive relief programmes, and provide other expected services,

without expanding its tax base. This it could only do by encouraging economic diversification—which the merchants effectively prevented. Such developments as they did tolerate were giveaways with little direct benefit to the state, which was forced to borrow to make ends meet. Thus a brittle and fragile state became enmeshed in a nightmare of mounting debt, and collapsed in 1933-34.

This is a neat and ingenious interpretation, but presents some serious problems. The history of pre-19th century Newfoundland has been substantially revised by Keith Matthews and Grant Head (Matthews; Head). Both appear in the bibliography, but Sider's version of this period reads as if they had never set pen to paper. The facts are that the west country merchants did not oppose settlement, which was in any case allowed by King William's Act of 1699, and did not consciously stifle the development of agriculture. Land titles were to some extent uncertain until the 1820s and 1830s, but by and large Newfoundland residents and courts behaved as though firm title existed. If agriculture remained a minor sector, this has much more to do with climate, soil and market accessibility than with the nature of land title or mercantile hostility. But Sider, curiously, dismisses the relevance of geographical factors. The "failure" of agriculture is important to his thesis. Had a viable agricultural sector existed, he argues, then there would have been a middle class, a "gentry", to mediate between fishermen-farmers and merchants. Further, the rural economy would have been stronger, class solidarity firmer, and the mitigation of, or the resistance to merchant hegemony possible. Such a middle class as did emerge, the planters, was "wiped out" by the merchants in the early 19th century.

In this section of his analysis, Sider follows the work of Stephen Antler (Antler). More recent work (Lewis) has demonstrated that while the planters as a group were severely weakened by such factors as the decline in the seal fishery after 1860, they were not the victims of overt mercantile hostility, and that many such individuals survived into the 20th century. Clearly, outport society was much more complex than Sider thinks. Part of the problem here is that for ethnographic evidence he has relied on such studies as Firestone's analysis of Savage Cove, and Faris' of Cat Harbour (Firestone; Faris). Both of these are small, remote and comparatively recently settled communities. Sider did not have similar material on older, larger and once prosperous outports such as Trinity, Carbonear or Twillingate. There, I suspect, he would have found a very different picture.

There can be no argument that the truck system did play a significant role in keeping many fishermen poor and dependent, and that, to some extent, it

kept them divided (Hiller)—though religion and ethnicity are also important in this connection. It is clear, however, that a latent class consciousness did exist, on which politicians played when it suited them, and which the FPU mobilised to considerable effect. The portrayal of a fragmented, defenceless, powerless group of fishermen is exaggerated. It is significant, and indicative of Sider's approach, that he does not provide a sustained analysis of the FPU, for here was an organisation which, although it failed to achieve its goals, demonstrated that concerted and dramatic resistance was possible.

Sider would no doubt argue that an important reason why the FPU failed was because the state was the creature of merchant capital and inherently anti-fisherman. The reality was more complex, and I do not have the space here to present an extended critique of Sider's account of Newfoundland political history. Suffice it to say that, for a variety of reasons, the state effectively delegated control of the fisheries to the merchants, and of education to the churches, who also policed the denominational accord of the 1860s, whereby place and patronage were divided between them on a proportional basis. Both merchants and the churches were conservative and powerful interests, and could not be challenged with impunity. The churches—which Sider hardly mentions—were treated with perhaps excessive respect. The mercantile interest could be, and was on occasion challenged when a government could count on popular support. There existed, in fact, a tension between governments and the mercantile interest which varied over time in its intensity and form. Moreover, the political arena was not simply the stage on which class hostility was expressed. The political tensions of the 19th century, for instance, also reflected antagonisms between Catholic and Protestant, Anglican and Methodist, Irish and English, radical and conservative, native and immigrant, and ins and outs.

The state was no more anti-fisherman than the mercantile interest was opposed to economic development. Both were concerned about unemployment, impoverishment and expensive relief bills, and realised that fishermen had votes. Both realised by the mid-19th century that economic diversification was vital. The argument was about strategies and priorities. True, the merchants opposed the construction of the railway, and resisted fishery reform. But they lost the first battle, learned to live with the consequences, and supported initiatives in agriculture, and in the mining and forest industries. Their attitudes were not static. The failure adequately to develop the economic base, apart from the fisheries, cannot be attributed to the dominance of merchant capital. Indeed, Sider himself offers some per-

suasive alternative reasons. That the state did not emerge as the overt champion of the fisherman was the result of its need to balance their claims against those of the more powerful. A not untypical situation, particularly since governments are not in the business of planning their own demise.

Newfoundland collapsed in the 1930s as a result of a multitude of factors. Merchant capital must bear its share of the blame, but so must politicians intoxicated by visions of interior development, the facts of geography, the determination of the country as a whole to buy the trappings of independence, and price movements in the international economy over which the country had no control. Sider's explanation of this crucial event, and, indeed, his entire political narrative and analysis, must be treated with great caution.

For all my difficulties with this book, replete as it is with contentious interpretations, semantic and factual howlers, and highly selective use of evidence, I found it a great deal more stimulating than many texts produced by historians who have absorbed all too well their supervisors' admonitions. It is brimming with ideas and insights, many of them valuable and provocative. It forces one to re-examine the familiar and to explore new avenues. But it is not a book I would recommend to those venturing into the Newfoundland past for the first time. Sider's reconnaissance is too selective, quirky and idiosyncratic. It is a work for those who have been there before. And it is a work which demonstrates that, for all their caution, the supervisors were right: the writing of good history is a difficult, painstaking and time-consuming task.[1] J. K. H.

Congratulations to Professor Sider for writing an engaging and stimulating book. It has forced me to re-think many of my assumptions about Newfoundland society, culture and folklore. Interpreting culture in terms of socio-economic structure, an avenue that I have pursued in a study of Newfoundland labour songs (Narváez, *Protest Songs*), yields valuable results, and in an area where class has played such an overwhelming role in everyday life I am surprised that it is an academic path that has been taken so infrequently. In addition, I want to stress that, from a folkloristic and anthropological point of view, his work is an important re-interpretation of Redfield's and Foster's "folk society" model; i.e., the "traditionalism" of folk cultures has not always been a matter of simple choice.

On the other hand, my misgivings about his analyses stem from my view that, for folklore at least, hegemony as an interpretive frame is too neat a

package; its assumptions about folklore are overly restrictive, and it forces a fit which excludes too much.

In this century folkloristics as a discipline has enlarged its focus from micro-studies of verbal texts to performance analyses in community, regional, and national sociocultural contexts. The field has moved beyond the view that folklore is comprised solely of "survivals," i.e., beliefs and customary practices which continue to be transmitted although their earlier meanings have been altered, transformed, rejected or forgotten, to an understanding of folklore as traditional interstitial knowledge and expressive behaviour. Realizing the ideological dimensions of "tradition" as "invention," folklorists still find the term "tradition" a useful analytical concept, but they have changed their earlier static conception of it to a dynamic and processual one. Today folklorists regard tradition, and more significantly "traditionalization," as a "symbolic process that presupposes past symbolisms and creatively reinterprets them" (Handler and Linnekin; Ben Amos). In addition, the "folk group" is no longer equated with an agricultural peasantry but is considered any group whatsoever that shares traditional, informally acquired knowledge and behaviours. Thus, the modern folklorist is aware of folklore in ethnic ghettos, corporate offices, and assembly lines, as well as in the rural village. Lastly, the academic study of folklore in the twentieth century has distanced itself from popular romantic treatments about the quaintness and goodness of folkloric materials to hard-nosed objective evaluations of language, form, structure, media, creativity, aesthetics, small group communications, social function, and nationalism.

Given my understanding of folklore as a subject comprised not only of survivals but of dynamic emergent forms capable of many shapes and uses, I find the position of Western Marxist critics who espouse a decline or "devolutionary" thesis for folklore to be untenable and romantic. Moreover, I reject their intuitive view of folklore as "collective behaviours whose fundamental character is in some way inherently opposed to state capitalism" (Limón). Although Sider's analyses do note the contradictions and complexity of Newfoundland folklore, his book and previous works follow these two *a priori* strains of Western Marxist thought with statements such as:

> . . . the decline of folk culture, occurring in the context of the ending of community control over work relationships at least, ends the availability of folk culture as a basis from which to judge the state. . . . A resurrected folk culture,

> as artefact rather than a way of life, be it expressed in music, dance, or in such phenomena as the recent revival of the mummers' play in urban Newfoundland, with performers financed by the government, or in some form of romantic "tribalism" such as occurs in the "hippy" movement, ultimately has no significance as a political rallying point. . . . The decline of the functions of folk culture . . . leaves people with nothing but new kinds of ideologies in which to root humanistic concerns . . . (Sider, "Christmas Mumming," 125).
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> . . . tradition becomes dynamic because it becomes a vehicle for intentionality—which is often *in opposition to current forms of social organization*. Such intentions are not simply opportunistic . . . they can also be fundamental. The "traditional" customs of outport Newfoundland—mummering, scoffing, cuffing, and so forth—*are set at least partly against the fragmentation of social ties produced by the daily operation of merchant capital in the fishery* [my italics]. (*Culture and Class* 185).

There are insights in these quotes but I also sense elements of an academic version of what I have designated elsewhere as the "Myth of Old Newfoundland," an ideational construct, especially prevalent in the contemporary popular arts, which postulates a period before resettlement or Confederation when outport life was *the* good life of family, home, perpetual collective "times," foot-stomping jigs and reels, fine traditional songs, great stories, terrific cuffers, wonderful mummering, delicious scoffs, and satisfying rum (Narváez, "Newfie Bullet"). What bothers me about this mythic vision is not that it is necessarily false, but that specific folkloric forms are at the core of a blurred vision of paradise lost. Although he deprecates Newfoundland folk revivalists, Sider's romantic attitude towards *particular forms of historic folklore* has much in common with theirs. Through such attitudes the subject matter of folklore becomes stereotyped for political ends. While it has been argued that "in the very aesthetic of performance may be found the inherent oppositional quality of *all* folklore" (Limón, 50), my view of folklore is that it is a variegated complex of expressive behaviours some of which are oppositional, some of which are not, some of which may be better understood in light of hegemony, some of which are quite apart from hegemony. No matter what the focus of his analysis, romanticizing folklore detracts from his overall argument, for folklore is not always good, beneficial, and collective. Traditional custom and belief may spawn dissension, fear, misery, and death.

Since Sider examines "the traditional customs of outport Newfoundland—mummering, scoffing, cuffing, and so forth" let me delve a bit further into the "and so forth" for a moment that I might cite an instance of folklore and cultural change that does not fit into the hegemonic scheme.

Consider the fate of the Yule customs described by Captain Cartwright. As has been well documented, such customs in the eighteenth century were folkloric survivals, or what Raymond Williams would refer to as examples of "residual" culture. Had they been "oppositional," I suppose that their eradication would have served the interests of the mercantile class and that that class might well have played a part in consciously suppressing such practices. As I have argued elsewhere, however, folklore is often supplanted, altered, and transformed on *unconscious levels*, particularly in situations of changing technology and media forms. Such was the case with the demise of Yule Log traditions in outport Newfoundland, a process which commenced in the 1870s with the widespread change from the open fireplace to the free-standing cookstove, a change which created generational dissension within communities, altered foodways procedures and repertoire, and transformed kitchen proxemics (Narváez, "Old Foolishness"). The free-standing cookstove, using one third the fuel of the former open hearth, was an efficient heat source which made life easier and more comfortable. It also exerted a major impact on folklore, but I do not believe that the full social and cultural ramifications of that medium were foreseen or measured by either merchants or community members. Merchants were not conscious destroyers of folklore, neither was there any struggle between merchants and consumers on folklore's account. The struggle occurred in the widespread consumer demand to purchase the stove itself, actions which *inadvertently* supplanted and changed traditional expressive behaviours. It was an old struggle in the usual arena of perpetual indebtedness and servitude, characteristics which do not tie up all the loose ends of culture.

At one point in his book Sider maintains,

> The extraordinarily rich and vibrant customs of Newfoundland outports were developed in the past century and a half, at the longest. None are ancient relics . . . (*Culture and Class*, 185).

Depending on what he means by "ancient," if he includes traditional singing as custom he is in error. Forty-five examples of British balladry in Newfoundland have been documented from the classic compilation of Francis James Child and many of these stem from at least the seventeenth century (Quigley). More directly in the realm of ancient survivals are Newfoundland narratives about the encounters of berry pickers and fairies. This complex of customs, beliefs, and experiences, that may well be traced back to the an-

cient Celtic Festival of Lughnasa, represents a mode of fear and terror which in the oral societies of outport Newfoundland maintained boundaries of contractile space, continuous time and absolute morality. While I do not wish to deal with these topics here, I must emphasize that such survivals have much to do with folk religion and orality, and painfully little to do with hegemony (Narváez, "Berry Pickers").

Besides the above points respecting hegemony, it is important to note from a folklorist's point of view that much of the "history" conveyed by the "cuffer" has had to do with internationally well-known exaggerations of individuals biting off the heads of iron nails, riding a horse mackerel, and shooting game in a circle with a bent rifle. It has been the agonistic edge, typical of oral cultures, of potential falsity and mendacity which has given the cuffer a quality of humorous attack. True, egalitarianism, "the equality of the victim and the victimizer" (*Culture and Class*, 165), is implicit in such narration to the extent of equal verbal opportunity, as in the "lying contest," but more significantly, telling cuffers has been a competitive struggle for the attainment of special individual status through the demonstration of verbal skills in performance. I have argued elsewhere that the spatial bias and the unidirectional qualities of the radio medium combined to give cuffer performer Joseph R. Smallwood, the "Barrelman," high status as a skilled narrator in outport Newfoundland, a status which eventually contributed in crucial ways to his rise to political power (Narváez, "Smallwood").

These critical comments should be received in the constructive spirit in which they are offered. Perhaps the over-riding trait that made Sider's book an exciting read for me was that it was a compassionate view of Newfoundland, a quality all too often lacking in similar works. P. N.

Gerald Sider's *Culture and Class* does not study the workings of merchant capitalism in detail. The book is premised, however, on the existence of this system; and it is worthwhile comparing the brand of merchant capitalism that Sider identifies in the Newfoundland fishery with that which arose in its New England counterpart.

While discussing the servant fishery of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Sider describes how fishermen were recruited in England on the promise of a guaranteed wage. "Labor could not be brought out from England in sufficient quantity on other terms" (p. 48). "It was impossible to draw Englishmen into the fishery," he writes on another occasion "unless

fixed shares or wages were paid" (p. 19). When the family fishery developed in the nineteenth century, however, "Newfoundland residents had fewer options" (p. 19). They became trapped in a truck system "that at least on the surface worked to the merchant's advantage in almost every circumstance" (p. 19). The transition from wage to truck represented a loss to the fisherman and was one which had to be forcibly imposed by the courts.

This makes an interesting contrast to the pattern of events in New England. Both in the Gulf of Maine and on the Massachusetts North Shore, fishermen hired as servants in the Old World could not be retained by a cash wage in the New; they ran away as quickly as they could in order to establish themselves on credit as semi-independent operators. The terms on which they obtained access to supply and equipment did convert them into clients of their merchant creditors, and many of them fell far into debt—often for sums amounting to several years' income. Yet, they preferred this sort of relationship to the paltry cash wage that could be negotiated in the West Country. There is no mystery to this development: New Englanders had more "options" than Newfoundlanders, and merchant capitalism had to operate in a more open and less exploitative manner. Indeed, behind the Massachusetts coastline in New England's rural economy, it usually operated between farmers and village merchants with very little measurable coercion at all.

Another interesting contrast between the two fisheries lies in the relative persistence of the two varieties of truck. Sider describes the Newfoundland system as a brake on the local accumulation of capital; indeed, one of its chief purposes was "to keep the people at the bottom continually within the existing system . . . by substantially demonetarizing the village economy" (p. 86). Investing in the fishery made no sense to truck merchants; hence, the fishery stagnated. In New England, by comparison, the truck system (which had been established for the same purpose of labour control) outlived its usefulness in a few short decades and gave way rather easily to a dynamic and expansive free labor fishery which employed larger vessels on longer, more productive voyages and paid its men in shares redeemable in a mixture of cash, notes, and supply. (Sider outlines exactly this process in general terms on page 147.) In fact, much of the capital out of which this free labor, bank fishery was constructed was almost certainly accumulated during the inshore, truck phase. In the process, furthermore, control over the fishery passed from the merchants of Salem and Boston to a rising group of new merchants (often descended from fishermen and shoremen) in the former outport of Marblehead—precisely what never happened in

nineteenth-century Newfoundland. Again, there is no real mystery to this either: in the more open economy of New England, merchants had to compete, and investment in the fishery was critical to entrepreneurial success. Fishermen did not benefit from this development; indeed, in a very real sense they were proletarianized by it. But Marblehead evolved to a degree that Twillingate did not.

My point is not that Sider is wrong about Newfoundland, nor is it that his analysis of truck is incomplete (although I think it is). My complaint is, rather, that he tends to use the concepts of merchant capital and truck interchangeably without always granting that they are different things, or, to be more precise, that the latter is a particular variety of the former and may itself be subject to variation. In his general characterization of merchant capital or "the harness" (p. 34), Sider claims that one of its basic features is "domination at the point of exchange" (p. 34). This certainly *can* be true but, as the New England example illustrates, not in every case or to the same extent. Similarly, when Sider states that communities producing for merchant capital "invariably do so in the context of an imposed set of constraints that *more or less* (my emphasis) force them to continual production on terms, and at a pace, over which they ordinarily have had but little influence," I suggest that he is stating the truth for truck but not for merchant capitalism as a whole. The degree of coercion that this statement implies was simply not true in New England, even in its commercial centers on the very wharves where the fish changed hands.

Sider's description of merchant capitalism allows for autonomy in production but not in exchange; I believe that exchange can be the point of domination *or negotiation*, depending on the circumstances. And it was the peculiarity of Newfoundland's circumstances (its "secondary" and "tertiary" characteristics—especially its geographical position) which shaped merchant capitalism into its local variety of truck and gave rise to the forms of culture which Sider has identified. This point does not contradict the argument in *Culture and Class*, but it does recast it slightly and in a manner that better reflects the range of merchant capitalisms. D. V.

Note

[1]For a stimulating discussion of historical anthropology, which addresses some of Sider's earlier work, see Ian McKay, "Historians, Anthropology and the Concept of Culture." *Labour/Le Travail* 8/9 (1981/2): 185-241.

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