HOBOHEMIA AND THE CRUCIFIXION MACHINE
INTRODUCTION

From Fordlandia to Hobohemia
HOMELESS MEN AND THE RELIEF INDUSTRY

What are the perils of jungle and prairie compared to the daily shocks and conflicts of civilization?

Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres

This book tells the story of the creation of two worlds: one we know well, having lived there for what seems like forever, while the other we know hardly at all, having forgotten how to cultivate its growth. The first of these worlds — the truly globalizing condition of permanent siege known as Fordism, under which the “scientific” combination of mass production and mass consumption techniques produced the explosive economic and state growth that characterized the “short twentieth century” — started with Henry Ford himself:

In our new laboratory building at Dearborn we partitioned off a corner which gives a ballroom big enough for seventy couples. . . . We are all getting a great deal of fun out of dancing. We have our dancing classes two nights a week, and everyone has to learn to dance in absolutely the correct way, for a fine part of the old dancing was its deportment. The rules are followed. . . . The instructions are all in the manual we have had written.

No one objects to the formality. They like it as a change from the casualness which is so often rudeness. . . . Our complete repertoire is fourteen dances — the two-step, the circle two-step, the waltz, . . . and

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so on through the infinite variety of combinations. These dances have to be danced! There is no improvisation of steps.

We are not, as has been imagined, conducting any kind of crusade against modern dancing. We are merely dancing in the way that gives us the most pleasure.²

It is tempting to read Ford’s testimonial to the pleasure he and others found in the rationalization of dancing — which took up three pages of his 1926 classic, Today and Tomorrow — as an exemplary instance of Fordist practice. Governed by rules (naturally written down in advance) that legislated every exacting movement and yet promised (theoretically, at least) “infinite variety,” the dance floor in Ford’s Dearborn, Michigan, laboratory shared much with the shop floor next door, and over time, Ford’s directives would be shared with dance floors across North America. By 1943, the printed instruction manual was in its fourth edition and promised to “preserve all that is characteristic and traditional in these dances, at the same time making the descriptions as clear and concise as possible.”³ This manual captured something essential of the “structure of feeling” of Ford’s brand of scientific management: his pleasure technicians rationalized “the old dances” and enabled their repetition time and again in an ever-expanding variety of locales by using sheet music, printed verse, and various types of pictograms to analytically fragment and reassemble each ensemble of physical acts along instrumentalist lines. The technicians thus separated the good from the bad — the former comprising elements branded “characteristic and traditional” and the latter, elements that confounded a “clear and concise” pedagogical process.

Ford’s marriage of mass production and mass consumption, his centralization of work planning, and his extension of managerial control beyond the factory doors promised to create “a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society,” in the words of geographer David Harvey. Harvey emphasizes the central importance of state intervention via the 1930s New Deal in creating and recreating the preconditions for the socialization of Fordist practices. At the same time, he underlines the unevenness of this process in the interwar years, arguing that only through “myriad individual, corporate, institutional, and state decisions, many of them unwitting political choices or knee-jerk responses to the crisis tendencies of capitalism, particularly as manifest in the great depression of the 1930s,” did Fordism become the dominant logic of the North American social formation.⁴ It was inevitable that Fordism would acquire (indeed, mass produce) much symbolism. For some, it was represented by the stopwatch, the much-hated tool of white-shirted scientific managers.⁵ Nothing captures this loathing better than John Dos Passos’s biting characterization of the death of American industrial efficiency champion Frederick Winslow Taylor from pneumonia: “He was dead
with his watch in his hand.” There were other symbols: the assembly line of Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, the fantastic fins of post-war Cadillacs, and the bulk-built boxes of the suburbs, exposed by Dan Graham’s photographic lens. Each inescapably captured the core values of the emergent structure of feeling: standardization, massification, and, above all, rationalization.

And Fordism could not be contained by national or even continental borders. “Fordismus” swept through Germany before the war, while the French would have to wait until after that conflict had ended and the next had begun. For our purposes, the most telling endeavour associated with the name was Ford’s own keenly ambitious, spectacular failure known as Fordlandia, the company’s veritable colony deep in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon. In an attempt to break the British cartel in the rubber industry in the early 1920s, Ford’s minions ventured into the untamed wilderness and attempted to transplant and cultivate what Marxists call a totality — in this case, one predicated on the notion of an organic, traditional American way of life no longer viable in America itself. From the latest production techniques to modern health care and housing, which many Americans would have envied, Ford’s undertaking sought to eradicate some of the limits to capital accumulation on a global scale while deigning to provide racial uplift in Brazil as it did in America. After all, why limit yourself to encouraging village industries when you could create the perfect village instead? That this very orderly project created copious amounts of untrammelled chaos through its dramatic transformation of social relations in the rainforest led historian Greg Grandin to conclude, “Fordlandia is indeed a parable of arrogance. The arrogance, though, is not that Henry Ford thought he could tame the Amazon, but that he believed that the forces of capitalism, once released, could still be contained.” While Fordlandia itself lay in ruins following a 1930 riot, the complex set of social practices embodied by the name thrived elsewhere, taking possession of so much held dear around the globe to the extent that there is nothing left to be returned.

The second world explored in this book, that of utopia, has no fixed address or permanent location, which makes it difficult to conceive of it as a world at all. Indeed, in many respects, we have become not post- but pre-utopian: in many quarters, it is no longer enough to dismiss the utopian because we must act as if it never even existed in the first place. Its elusiveness can be traced not only to the unremittingly hostile social formation in which it must take root but also to the contradictions within utopian projects themselves. Nonetheless, as Fredric Jameson argues in his widely influential 1979 article, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” utopian practice has become ritualistic, a daily occurrence, if only fleetingly so, for all of us surrounded by mass culture. It is thus helpful to set aside Thomas More’s original definition of utopia as “no place” and instead recognize that utopia is every
place: the question we are compelled to ask is when. In our context, against the global generalization of Fordlandia over the short twentieth century, I have counterpoised a much less glorious narrative concerning the rise and fall of Hobohemia: while the jungles of Brazil threw up obstacles to Fordism’s spread, the jungles of British Columbia — islands of non-capitalist, non-statist social practice — became something of an outside within Fordism, parasitically drawing from its creation of surplus value to create a homeland for a surplus population.

This book explores the history of the archetypal single transient homeless man as he could be found in British Columbia over the course of three years, from the Great Crash in October 1929 to the assumption of federal control over the bulk of British Columbia’s provincial relief camp system in November 1932. It is primarily concerned with conveying the effects engendered across the social order by the “transient,” as masses of individual bodies daily seeking food, shelter, and other commodities; as a collective figure in the political imaginary of those tasked with administering relief to these bodies; and as the core constituency of a mass movement that periodically sought to transform, if not overturn, this order. More modestly, I hope to add to our all-too-meagre understanding of the itinerant unemployed man on his own, away from authority figures and off with others of his kind — on the streets, in boxcars, and in jungles. From dozens of nations the world over, tens of thousands of mobile men travelled to and through Vancouver, where — to put it plainly — they made history, even if they did not always make it exactly as they would have chosen and even if what they made did not necessarily last long.

Divorced both financially and physically from the factories, forests, fields, and other places where a wage could be earned, innumerable men with no fixed address and no productive property to call their own founded and built hobo jungles in which emerged a new admixture of older forms of exchange, sociability, and culture — material and otherwise — that owed their existence to practices that had served tramps well in the pre-war period. And whether in the jungles, on the road, or in the cities, their very existence appeared to generate a perpetual “state of emergency” for the broader polity. In Vancouver, their presence caused Vancouver’s relief and police departments to proclaim crises at regular intervals; indeed, the former more or less admitted defeat in the wake of thousands of transients. Elected officials, too, felt their wrath: more than one City Council member saw his or her career in officialdom dashed upon the rocks of itinerant insurrection, and more than any other factor, transients were responsible for bringing down the sitting premier, Conservative Simon Fraser Tolmie, generating such instability so as to make the Conservative Party an irrelevant institution in British Columbia for decades. Of course, their accomplishments were limited: they could not, after all, substitute direct democracy for the parliamentary process.
Theory and Argument

Theoretically speaking, this book is a sustained argument for social history and what might be called the “epistemic independence of the oppressed.” Yet it is also something decidedly more, in that I have sought, wherever possible, to deny — indeed, to provisionally erase — the long-standing “epistemic independence” available to oppressors in a host of politico-theoretical frameworks across the spectrum. Liberal, feminist, postmodern, Marxist, and so on: regardless of allegiance, we find analogous analytical forms that situate the subaltern on the margins, where they do not act but react, where they are made into subjects, bestowed with identities, disciplined and regulated within an inch of their lives. More to the point, much of Canadian leftist and social history has become inward-looking and self-congratulatory. This process, one scholar has argued, is an inevitable result of the “overproduction” of history, the need to carve out new markets for scholarship. The ethical sensibility that saturated the early productions of social history — the fundamental connection between historical writers and actors — has metamorphosed into a more ironic, pessimistic sense of detachment from the subjects we study. Our post-humanist sophistications clash with the explicitly humanist elements of social history, whether methodological, theoretical, or political. Here, I have reversed the traditional flow of history from rulers to ruled, both as a conceptual exercise and because the extant evidence demands that I do so. Here, we will situate the relief industry in the shadow of homeless men’s lives.

This book offers four arguments concerning the past and one concerning Canada's progress as one of many branch plants of the Anglo-American “Theoryworld.” First, the mass need engendered by the crisis of the early 1930s led to the emergence of a distinct socio-economic order embodied in hobo jungles, communities that were parasitic upon and yet never fully integrated into the wider liberal capitalist social formation. The jungles of the early twentieth century were characterized by an “ethic of reciprocity and mutualism” rooted in “unapologetic rejections of acquisitivism,” to quote American historian Todd DePastino. Frank Tobias Higbie, another American scholar, extends the argument, citing the “transient mutuality” that was forged in contexts of “social marginalization” as an important “marker of community among migrants and between migrants and nonmigrants who chose to help them.” In the early 1930s, the social practices with which unemployed homeless men sustained themselves on the road and in the jungle owed much to a similar internal moral economy predicated upon mutuality and reciprocity. Through a variety of activities — begging and borrowing, foraging and stealing, working and collecting relief from government and private charities — tramps acquired resources, which they then distributed...
among their fellow tramps in the recognition that tomorrow, someone else would rustle up food and other necessities.

Jungle life was only periodically labor intensive and, especially in the peak years of the crisis, rarely involved waged work. Just as important, in the jungles themselves, the monetary value of these goods as commodities mattered little, and the exchange was usually conducted face to face, without recourse to a medium such as money. Neither paper nor writing, in fact, appears to have had a role in the internal governance of jungle life. Social relations tended to be immediate and relatively consensual, conducted in contexts in which neither capital accumulation through the exploitation of other people’s labor nor the imprisoning of those considered criminals or moral offenders could become an ongoing, systematic concern. There is, in short, no state here, no administrative body (centralized or decentralized) that we can identify as having established juridical, legislative, disciplinary, or regulatory functions. Although these road-based communities were never free of conflict, hierarchies within them owed little to the acquisitive individualism of laissez-faire liberalism or the abstract notion of “rights” of the liberal-democratic state.

Second, as thousands of itinerants moved from the jungles to the city, filling the cafés, flophouses, and shelters, and swelling the streets, they made innumerable demands upon Vancouver’s Relief Department, consuming resources at a rate that threatened the municipality with bankruptcy. To save their city from financial ruin, those who embraced the ideas of Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford unleashed a new reorganization on Vancouver’s Relief Department. The changes were extensive: a new card-control system was employed and the tasks of investigation and assessment were separated, with new procedures formalized for both. This new system of knowledge production translated applicants into faceless textual objects, stripped of all traces of individuality in order to rationalize and standardize treatment. Yet they were not Fordism’s only victims: the Relief Department staff—those who laboured so that tramps could be fed, clothed, and housed—had their own experience of scientific management. Employees found themselves singled out for efficiency tests, and the “speed-up” of the investigation process was accompanied by a network of office spies detailed to collect information about co-workers for the “Crucifixion Machine,” the name bestowed by one disgruntled investigator upon the host of punitive sanctions for those judged inefficient. The economic crisis thus occasioned state formation on a scale that had rarely been seen in Canada save in times of war, a process that is best understood as a moment in the primitive accumulation of Fordist forms of governance.22

Third, most histories of unemployment in the 1930s are predicated upon the conceptual separation of business and the state, and thus focus their enquiries on the obvious political dimensions of entitlement to government
aid. As a consequence, however, we lack a critical understanding of the extent to which relief provision was inseparable from capitalist social relations broadly conceived. In other words, while relief is typically associated with use value—the provision of goods and services as determined by human need rather than market mechanisms—the archives suggest a different portrait, one of exchange value and of exploitation. To provide transients with food, shelter, and clothing, Vancouver’s municipal government entered into contractual relationships with dozens of private businesses, tendering bids for meals in much the same fashion as for printing jobs and construction projects; the sizeable number of entrepreneurs who clamoured to get their share of this state spending testifies to the profits that could be made by providing charity. Here, too, we see the influence of Fordist ideas in the preferential treatment that the Relief Department accorded to those businesses able to effect economies of scale in order to reduce the relief budget. In this way, the 1930s witnessed the emergence of a relief industry grafted upon already existing relations of production, distribution, and consumption. However, this was not a free market for everyone involved: under this system, homeless men were refused cash and instead given tickets or scrip, which they could exchange for commodities and services such as clothing or a night’s shelter at a host of state-approved businesses. Because relief policies sought to remove the jobless man from the free market of consumption in order to deny him the ability to make the moral choices that came with hard currency, they also prompted the emergence of a powerful protest movement, dominated in the main by Communist-led organizations, such as the National Unemployed Workers Association, that asserted a program of consumer rights and relief in cash. In so doing, they would find willing allies in the form of small-business owners denied relief business because they were unable to effect savings through economies of scale.

Fourth, in exchange for relief, thousands of homeless men paid with the only currency available to them, their labour, as they were forced into the carceral archipelago of work camps created by the Government of British Columbia. The relief camp system would literally pave the way for the generalization of Fordism by developing a network of roads and airports to facilitate the transportation of natural resources and manufactured goods. Officials believed that once the crisis had passed and the unemployed migrant worker was reabsorbed into industry, the camps could be rented out as resorts, thus enabling a boom in the tourist-driven image economy. It is my contention that work relief needs to be recognized as a distinct form of unfree labour. If we strip away the label of “work relief,” we find thousands of men in situations that were in many respects identical to those they would encounter as “free” wage workers. In fact, as a result of the government’s decision to rent then-empty logging camps owned by a cabinet member, some itinerants found

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themselves living in the same logging camps and listening to the orders of the same foremen as when they had previously worked for wages. Yet the political distinction between free and relief labour produced a living contradiction, the “unemployed worker” who worked for a living — not for wages, but for relief. It was precisely this identity between past and present that spawned a host of campaigns to oppose the labour camps. The most radical critique of work relief came from Communist groups, like the National Unemployed Workers Association, that recognized that the coercive context of economic need forced thousands of transients to participate in a new form of sweated labour. Eventually, the particular form of exploitation found in work relief programs led to the emergence of the most significant protest movement in 1930s-era Canada, the On-to-Ottawa Trek led by the Relief Camp Workers’ Union.

Finally, in its combination of subject matter and interpretation, this account differs from the existing historiography of the Great Depression. In part, this difference is theoretical. I have drawn extensively from the following schools of thought (which are now also segments of the market): the research on rationalization conducted in the 1930s and 1940s by Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Siegfried Kracauer of the Frankfurt School; Michel Foucault’s writings on sexuality, disciplinary power, and, especially, madness; and the oeuvre of E. P. Thompson and R. W. Connell, the latter being imaginatively understood as the socialist-feminist half-brother of the former. Indeed, the experiential epistemological break that initiated this project was my 1993 reading of the script for Laura Kipnis’s stunning 1985 film, Ecstasy Unlimited: The Interpenetrations of Sex and Capital, which combines all of these schools of thought and more in a materialist-feminist exercise in estrangement and transcendence.

If theory moved me in different directions than those that are commonplace in conventional historical treatments, so too did my pursuit of the available evidence challenge me to follow different analytic routes. This project had its origins in a dissertation first sketched out at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, in the 1990s. My subject had a certain coherence: a social history of homeless men from the Great Crash of 1929 through to Bloody Sunday, 1938. The initial written plan followed a fairly orthodox chronology: commencing with the crash in 1929, the thesis then proposed to outline the experience of the homeless in the urban jungles (1931); the provincial and federal relief camps (1932–33 and 1933–35); and the mobilizations associated with the On-to-Ottawa Trek (1935), the Spanish Civil War (1936–38), and the Post Office sit-downs (1938). In addition, thematic chapters on communism, race, masculinity, and sexuality were envisioned. It all seemed so straightforward, with beginnings and ends that could be recognized as self-evident, some of this history even having been written about by the likes of Pierre Berton.
The archives put an end to all this. Everywhere I turned in the records of municipal and provincial governments, as well as in archives of private individuals and organizations, people spoke of the economics of relief provision, of the parallels (if not the identity) between the state and private industry, and of the crisis in value surrounding them. These stories are highly suggestive of the normalization of capitalist social relations. This did not mean that those who produced these records accepted the classical capital-labour form as much as they expected it: relief provision was experienced as a market relationship by every group involved, and in these early years, market mechanisms of exchange became a fundamental measure of value, both for goods and services and for the lives of the jobless. All of this has added up to what is perhaps best called a “mode of production” history, centred on the practices and processes of commodification and rationalization. This only served to heighten my awareness of an existing utopian alternative to these processes.

It is inevitable that histories of the Great Depression, whether popular or professorial, are saturated with talk of economics. It is difficult to imagine them otherwise. Yet our focus on the forest of the global unemployment crisis has prevented us from seeing the trees — the basic market relations that, taken as a whole, formed what might be termed the “relief industry.” Much ink has been spilled discussing the nature of the modern welfare state. By and large, interpretations derived from liberal political philosophy situate the state as the arbiter of the contending positions of different interest groups and as the guarantor of social order. This state is not monolithic in these accounts: intergovernmental conflicts remain an attractive subject. Scholars have also noted the quest for stability and security that motivated the development of policy. Along with the increase in Keynesian forms of spending, social policy like contributory unemployment insurance aimed at limiting the severity, if not the occurrence, of cyclical economic downturns. While some scholars explore the direct ties between the business community and various levels of government, and thus the subsequent absence of genuine reform policies during the 1930s, others emphasize the coming to power of politicians who challenged the traditions of laissez-faire competitive capitalism and the “night watchman” state. More recently, the welfare state has been conceptualized as an ensemble of techniques of social and moral regulation. The male breadwinner model of provision and the policing of women’s experiences in both public and private spheres has been at the heart of the welfare state. Finally, a number of historians, in order to explain the broad structural transformations entailed by the rapid expansion of welfare programs, have taken up Marxist ideas about the “relative autonomy” of the state and its “decommodified” role in developing the infrastructure for accumulation. While each of these interpretations has

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produced much of value, each is premised upon the separation of government and business.\textsuperscript{30} In other words, they shed little light on how state activities such as relief provision could not exist outside of capitalist social relations broadly conceived.\textsuperscript{31}

Because of the differences in approach, I have not devoted much space to a detailed demonstration of the myriad ways in which my interpretation clashes with the historiography of the transient, of relief administration, and of the era more generally. This I have done out of a profound respect for the literature: the Canadian historiography of the 1930s is too thoughtful, too interesting, and too politically engaged to warrant dismissing it because a single author steps outside its boundaries. Also, at this moment, I am hopeful that I can initiate a discussion about the significance of the commodification process — what I call capitalogic — rather than end one, and in the current climate, where Marxist criticism is all too often caricatured, I prefer to adopt a passive approach. In taking up the dialectical approach that Fredric Jameson labels “metacommentary,” this book is premised on the incorporation and reworking of the existing literature rather than its rejection.\textsuperscript{32} Thus, save in those cases where Canadian interpretations pose an obstacle to the adequate comprehension of a particular context, I have eschewed lengthy critical engagement and opted instead to focus my theoretical attentions on the works of the Frankfurt School and Michel Foucault, as is detailed below.

\textit{Definitions and Delineations}

Let us turn to the first important methodological matter at hand, that of definitions. While everyone knows that Chicago’s greatest accomplishment is to have provided the soil in which urban blues could flourish, I like to think that second on the list would be its role as the “Main Stem” for migrant workers. In this not unrelated development, birth was given to a host of classification systems designed to come to terms with the realities of life on the road. Ben Reitman, one of America’s better known tramps, settled upon a tripartite scheme. “There are three types of the genus vagrant,” he explained. “The hobo, the tramp and the bum. The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders, and the bum drinks and wanders.”\textsuperscript{33} St. John Tucker, one-time president of Chicago’s Hobo College, refined Reitman’s categories, arguing that “a hobo is a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory non-worker. A bum is a stationary non-worker.”\textsuperscript{34} Turning on notions of employment and mobility, these designations were far from arbitrary. Nicholas Klein, another president of the college, issued a warning to those who would confuse these distinct groups:
A hobo is one who travels in search of work, the migratory worker who must go about to find employment. . . . The tramp is one who travels but does not work, and a bum is a man who stays in one place and does not work. Between these grades there is a great gulf of social distinction. Don’t get tramps and hobos mixed. They are quite different in many respects. The chief difference being that the hobo will work and the tramp will not, preferring to live on what he can pick up at back doors as he makes his way through the country.  

By and large, this tripartite system of classification became the standard. Nels Anderson’s *The Hobo*, which captured the imagination of the sociological marketplace, employed it with a few modifications. In short, by the beginning of the Great Depression, self-generated itinerant systems of thought had been prominently incorporated into the most expert of expert studies produced under the auspices of the Chicago School of sociology.

This classification of the three types of propertyless migrants makes a good deal of sense, but I have not followed it, largely because of uncooperative evidence. Whether public or private, relief agencies rarely employed these distinctions. True, some officials knew of this literature and believed in its relevance. They did not, however, rely on it in their day-to-day work of administration. Nor do archival records contain information sufficient to allow the historian to move beyond speculation as to the specific identity of individual itinerants. Itinerant writers did on occasion discuss the differences within their community, but such texts are few and far between. Most important, the economic crisis of the 1930s fundamentally transformed these categories. No longer could a hobo be defined as one who “works and wanders,” since work was difficult to find. Instead, the difference between hobo and tramp became that of the expressed willingness to work. Given the collapse in the market for unskilled labour, it is well-nigh impossible to sort homeless men on relief into those who worked and those who dreamed. As a consequence, I use the terms *itinerant, hobo*, and *tramp* interchangeably to refer to all those who travelled in search of work or relief, or those who attempted to live without either during the 1930s.

This book examines men, provided we understand that category to include anyone who successfully passed as a man in the context under study. Most of the individuals for whom there are records are of indeterminate racial, ethnic, and national origin; I have foregone subjecting the available information to much analysis because of the tentative, fungible character of assertions of such identities in a context where discrimination was assumed to be (indeed, demanded as) the norm, and where deportation proceedings could await the hapless applicant for relief. There is also considerable ambiguity about the marital status of those under examination; without information...
to the contrary, I have considered them to be unattached, a term that includes men who deserted families and those who intentionally separated themselves from the family unit as a survival strategy. To be homeless, a person had to lack a fixed residence, which included those who declared the jungles their home as well as thousands of propertyless men who periodically received relief from public and private charities in Vancouver. This latter group should be considered homeless because of the absence of a long-term residence. They might have known that they had a week’s worth of lodging tickets; beyond that, the future was uncertain. The nature of the extant archival records can but frustrate the historian. All too often, we can know nothing of the situation of these itinerants, save for the fact that they were thought to be single and homeless. As a consequence, there is a certain homogeneity in my treatment of their history. It is regretted; it cannot be avoided.

Another term of great relevance to this study is transient, the central administrative category in the governance of relief programs for homeless and jobless unattached men. Here, I have retained the distinction between the “transient population”— a complex and yet carefully delimited group produced in the course of relief administration — and the larger and ever-changing cohort of itinerant men who lived on the roads and in the jungles — the other “population” of interest here. Due to the political process, the former was subject to much redefinition in ways that the latter was not. Indeed, as we will see, “transient” was a category flexible enough to include those who had never left the city limits. As well, I want to note the difference between the actually existing transient population (i.e., the statistically definable group of men administered as transients) and the category’s ideal type as dictated in departmental policy documents. To move from starting point — the rules and regulations governing the production of the “transient” — to end result — the people who came to be classified as such on a day-to-day basis — required much work, and the small group of civic officials tasked with the job often went into the field poorly equipped. Then again, we might well wonder if their task was manageable under the best of conditions: what kind of technology could have allowed them to begin a census of a community of substantial size and yet whose very constituents embodied modernity’s state of perpetual flux? In fact, in British Columbia, the extant data about the transient population are best seen as evidence of one of the weaknesses of the local state: its almost total inability to make visible and legible the internal workings of these jungle-based communities, regardless of what one hypothesized these to be. On the West Coast, state officials could typically only work on these communities from the outside, rarely piercing the spatial and cognitive boundaries that would enable knowledge production and the exercise of power from within.

In general, my discussion of itinerants and transients is of a different type than that which analyzes the intersectionality of the four categories of
the social history apocalypse: sexuality, gender, race, and class. Simply put, the extant evidence did not allow me to address many of the subjects that I had initially planned to study. For instance, nothing I have read would allow me to construct any argument about gender and racial relations among the itinerants and transients, let alone the kind of careful, sensitive arguments offered by American historians such as DePastino and Higbie, and Canadians such as Cecilia Danysk. Before beginning primary research, I had hoped to write something of a sequel to my earlier work on masculinity and the One Big Union, the revolutionary industrial union movement that vowed to build utopia with the hands of the itinerant workingman. The archives, however, proved a disappointment. Gender and sexual politics were clearly fundamental to relief provision writ large as an organizing principle for the division of applicants into administrative categories that, in turn, governed not only the end result — the commodities received, if any — but the entire process from start to finish. Yet they appear to have disappeared once that initial ideological work was complete. In the period under examination, the fall of 1929 until November of 1932, assumptions about male identities and abilities did not shape relief provision in a systematic manner. Even the Communist Unemployed Worker, which I had assumed would be a fount of references to manhood, offered me next to nothing on which to hang an analysis in comparison to the radical papers of earlier periods. Over the course of 1932, however, this changed dramatically. As thousands of itinerants were relocated from the cities, and as the worsening economy began to affect residents, and as thousands of these residents created block and neighbourhood councils, raided grocery stores, and swarmed the offices of the Relief Department, gender and sexual politics became fundamental to shaping all aspects of the crisis.

Since the 1960s, Vancouver historians have called for and implemented a shift from the itinerant single male to the family as the weightiest force in shaping local politics. But in isolating a small piece of the history of the transient as a first step in a project designed to map Vancouver’s 1930s, I felt safe in returning to the single transient man without fear of undermining the gendered histories of the period already written, to my mind among the best recent scholarship on the Great Depression in Canada.

The Mecca of the Surplus

As a point of origin into the lives of homeless transients, Vancouver has a rich history that is of considerable value. Unfortunately, this rich history comes at a cost paid long ago in the form of mass suffering, experienced not as an abstract, continuous state of being but as millions upon millions of acts, the discontinuous and cumulative effects of which the term alienation can
hardly begin to convey. Per capita income in British Columbia decreased by almost 50 percent from 1929 to 1933. A census taken in June 1931 revealed that one-third of those who had worked in manufacturing, two-thirds of those in construction, and one-quarter of those in transportation were unemployed at that time.\(^{46}\) British Columbia also had higher jobless rates in every employment category in the federal census than any other region in Canada.\(^{47}\) Seasonal unemployment, especially in the resource industries, soared to new heights: 58 percent of unskilled working men reported being unemployed for six months or more in 1930–31.\(^{48}\) There is no context in which these few figures add up to anything pleasant: evidently, the early 1930s in Vancouver saw much suffering surrounded by a surfeit of surplus stock.

That Vancouver was also a traditional resting point for migrant workers and other wanderers also helped guarantee that the city would see hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of “boxcar tourists” over the course of the decade. In addition to the network of employment agencies, hotels, restaurants, flophouses, and poolrooms geared to serving workingmen during the winter off-season, Vancouver was also home to numerous organizations concerned with unemployment that offered transients material support and sociability. For a group that is still largely hidden from history, Vancouver’s archives contain a treasured abundance of source material on the daily struggles of unemployed homeless men, both as individuals and en masse, to gain access to the means of life. The expansive nature of records concerning the economic relationships through which relief was provided allows us to articulate the relations of production, distribution, and consumption that made up the relief industry. We are also able to explore in detail the processes of abstraction and rationalization that swept through the Relief Department with the introduction of a Fordist managerial regime. The archives thus provide us with the possibility of a deeper understanding of the social relations that we traditionally label “relief.”

Chapter 1 explores a period that is normally viewed as the first serious phase of the Great Depression, December 1929 and January 1930. All of the elements associated with the better-known conflicts of the mid-1930s are present in these opening months: the growth of mass need, the miserly policies of municipal administrators, Communist-led organizations of the unemployed, public conferences on unemployment insurance, and street battles between the police and jobless crowds. Yet the politics of this period are not those of the dramatic confrontations waged on the streets of Vancouver in 1935. In fact, in the Depression’s first winter, most people involved in the public debate agreed that unemployment was a significant social problem that could only be solved through federal intervention and the enshrining in legislation of basic welfare state measures such as unemployment insurance. Instead, the real battle lay in the realm of relief provision — the specific social relationships

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through which poor men and women sustained themselves. Here, there was no consensus, only chaos. What was the minimum standard of living that could justly be accorded to those on relief? What form should this relief take? Who was responsible for transients? And how could they be stopped in their tracks and prevented from becoming an obstacle sufficient to halt Vancouver’s progress as a city in a world that included more and more of them?

In chapter 2, we enter the refuge for the homeless that I have called Hobohemia, imagined as a combination of what Michel Foucault calls “heterotopias” and what Karl Marx labelled “the realm of freedom.” British Columbia’s hobo jungles are best understood as a non-contiguous homeland fashioned by an ever-changing population of men physically separated from domestic and industrial sites of capitalist production and reproduction. Spread across the province at locations usually close to transportation networks, the jungles housed a mobile, provisional cohort of residents who, in their daily actions, asserted a claim to physical property and to social relations that were non-hierarchical, non-statist, and non-capitalist, to define them against the commonly accepted norms of modern life in Canada. What made the jungles a homeland, an actual physical space distinct from the Canadian nation-state and populated by an identifiable group whose members would never all meet, is also what made them a non-state. These wanderers were united not through any form of juridical right or familial relation, any bond of political affiliation or personal allegiance, or any claim grounded in identitarian thinking, but rather through the methods with which they organized the acquisition of the means of life: to live in the jungles may have required the acquisition of new skills, but it did not mandate a new mentality. Moreover, no documents, no oaths, no military service or forced labour were present in these temporary settlements, whose borders were as mobile as its residents. Indeed, where the jungle way of life ended cannot be definitively settled, and we may want to posit the boxcar as a liminal space, somewhere between Hobohemia and Fordlandia. In short, across the province thrived an archipelago of mobile islands of utopian practice within, but still separate from, the rationalized world of state and capital. While the land they occupied had been subject to certain juridical claims, the actual presence of authority, whether in public or private form, was periodic and weak. On this land, thousands of men lived without any of the trappings of the modern state and without a formalized capitalist market that governed exchanges of goods and services. One was free to participate in this mode of organizing life, and one was free to leave.

We can borrow for Hobohemia Fredric Jameson’s characterization of “utopian enclaves,” imaginatively devised blueprints of the future that, in their present-day context of creation, act as “something like a foreign body within the social: in them, the differentiation process has momentarily been arrested, so that they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of
the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on.”

Over the course of several years, this archipelago of squatters’ settlements was widely understood and acted upon by people arrayed across the political spectrum and the social body as if it embodied, indeed was home to, a different way of life. In fact, the itinerant as a species ultimately proved a significant obstacle to the efficient and accountable governance, acting as that which was always irreducible, unassimilable by the established order. By taking this division as my point of entry into tramping history, I hope to reconnect with whatever historical forces enabled Boxcar Bertha to say, “I have always known strange people, vagrants, hoboes, both males and females. I don’t remember when I didn’t know about wanderers, prostitutes, revolutionists.”

Chapter 3 begins the discussion of what I have called the “relief industry.” Like any market-oriented set of social relations, the exchange of value was the crux of commodification of the relief industry. In order to receive food and shelter, unemployed people unable to secure support outside of official charity institutions first had to offer something to the investigator. On occasion, this meant manual labour, but in every case, the jobless were obliged to offer information about their lives and a pledge of loyalty to the regime of private property and the tenets of the work ethic. They would not lie about their personal history. Nor would they steal. They would look for work and take whatever job was available. These oaths were often set out in a written agreement, although oral pledges were taken during those moments when the demand for relief far exceeded the administration’s ability to thoroughly process each case. With these guarantees secured, relief could then be exchanged. In caring for the unemployed, both government and private charities operated in a similar fashion. They assigned a value to each jobless man and woman — sometimes individually, but more often with blanket categorizations like “single transient unemployed man” — which translated into a certain amount and type of goods and services. Value, in these thousands of cases, was largely determined by the calculations of relief administrators: this was an exchange in which one party clearly had more authority than the other. In this sense, relief is not just a history of giving. It is also a history of taking.

The intertwining of economic and disciplinary logics in the daily workings of the Relief Department calls into question the boundary that historians use to separate “the state” from “the market” and suggests instead lines of inquiry that can register Fordism’s wide-reaching yet partial transformation of the practices of governmentality in the context of the transient crisis. While Vancouver’s appears to have been the only municipal relief department to turn to Fordism in the dark days of the early 1930s as a solution to...
the relief problem, the path taken by the Relief Department was not altogether a strange one. By that date, millions of North Americans had already participated in rationalization of some form or another — labouring on the assembly line and in the home, going to Family Court or the doctor, shopping in the department stores and participating in mass-market surveys, and watching the movie screen in a crowded theatre.53 Our specific case exists at a conjuncture of two historiographies of rationalization, that of charity administration and that of the modern office in the age of scientific management.54 Since the war, white-collar workers across Canada had found themselves subject to new workplace regimes premised upon increased labour efficiency, cost reduction and cost certainty, and the ability of managers to measure and regulate work processes.55 A plethora of arguments about the benefits of efficiency circulated among private charity providers, some of whom believed that modern management techniques could reform those in need more economically and thoroughly than could older voluntarist programs.56 In such a world, why would the rationalization of civic relief be unthinkable, especially since it was already expected that recipients would submit themselves to economic discipline in the form of the work ethic? The rationalization of Vancouver’s Relief Department involved the use of practices drawn from both public and private sources and thought to be modern and scientific to govern both relief recipients and relief providers.

Chapter 4 explores the economic relationships through which unemployed and unattached transients sought relief in Vancouver. When providing the poor with food, shelter, fuel, and clothing, Vancouver’s Relief Department and charities like the Central City Mission operated much as did service industries. However, faced with a demand for goods, the municipality acted to remove the jobless from the free market of consumption by denying them the choices that come with hard currency. As illustrated above, the money did not go to the poor but to local businesses. For most of the 1930s, married unemployed men and women received their relief in the form of scrip. This enabled them to shop for certain approved commodities — scrip could not be used to purchase alcohol, tobacco, and a host of other products. Businesses, in turn, exchanged the scrip for money at the Relief Department. Single unemployed men who did not own property were given bed and meal tickets. Those who approached private charities like the Central City Mission or the Emergency Refuge were given food and a bed. From both public and private agencies, single transient men could receive clothing.

The records of state and private relief provision are instructive in several respects. First, pace Vancouver Mayor McGeer, these transactions rarely meant that governments gave money to poor people, which then vanished down the black hole of improvidence. Across the city, firms clamoured to get their share of relief money, hoping to translate some of the money spent on
the unemployed into profit. This form of exchange, intended to remove single unemployed men from the market in order to control them and keep them under surveillance, actually increased government spending on administration. Second, the primary focus of department officials was all too often the bottom line. They used moral and often explicitly humanitarian arguments to publicly explain and justify relief policies. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, administrators of every ilk discussed relief in terms of dollars and cents. It was in these terms that its value was determined. Such policy determinations rarely took into consideration issues related to quality of life. The jobless had a right to relief, but little else. Their own ideas about relief provision — what they needed and how they should receive it — commonly met with blanket rejection. Provision thus centred on how to provide food and shelter cheaply and efficiently, all the while enabling a more thorough form of investigation. These goals were to be met by limiting control of the unemployed over their consumption. The market had failed them. Now, it would be denied to them as well.

In the face of such opposition, Vancouver’s Communists became the most ardent defenders of the right of poor people to freely choose what and how to consume. Through the organ of the Unemployed Worker, not to mention countless delegations and demonstrations, Communists contested the specific conditions of the relief exchange; their goal was to remove relief provision from the market altogether. For these men and women, each decision by City Council, each Relief Department regulation, each subsection of each policy document like Mundy’s “Special Instructions to Visitors” stood in the way of a genuine relief effort. “The militant unemployed workers must prepare a counter offensive,” explained one radical. “The law that says, thou shalt not eat in this land whose rivers are teeming with fish, whose elevators are choking with grain, whose grazing lands are alive with live stock, whose warehouses are glutted with boots and shoes, clothes and food, that law must and will be broken.” Interestingly, in their campaign to increase relief rates and to ensure the right of freedom of choice, Communists found unexpected allies in small entrepreneurs such as the proprietors of rooming houses and restaurants. This uneasy alliance reveals the market relations that formed the basis of the relief industry.

Chapter 5 explores the relief camps organized by the government of Premier Simon Fraser Tolmie. Without question, when we think of work relief during the 1930s, the term “boondoggle” comes to mind. Mayor McGeer was certainly not alone in suggesting that work programs for the unemployed were worthless, but this idea, heard across the political spectrum, was misguided in that it failed to recognize that work relief projects increased the property value of both the City and the Province. The former, to highlight but one project, ended the decade with a revenue-generating golf course, while
the latter had roads valued at more than $1 million. The development of the
camp system also allowed for the primitive accumulation of state forms.
In Marx’s use of the term, primitive (or original) accumulation referred to
the practices through which the preconditions of capitalism were forged:
namely, the separation of people from the land and from access to the means
of production, rendering them propertyless and obliged to work for wages.58
“Primitive accumulation,” he wryly noted, “plays approximately the same
role in political economy as original sin does in theology.”59 The process
of primitive accumulation did not end with the solidification of capitalism,
however. Instead, the concept can help us to understand subsequent processes
of economic and state formation.

In the 1930s, provincial and federal intervention in the lives of the
unemployed through the creation of the work camp system helped prepare the
way for the generalization of Fordism across Canada by — in perfect Fordist
fashion — developing a network of roads and airports to facilitate the trans-
portation of commodities. The park-building strategy of provincial politicians
looked to a future in which tourism would generate much economic value.
Boxcar tourists would, in this scheme, craft cultural experiences for tourists
of the self-supporting variety.60 Along with property creation and develop-
ment came a trained labour force: to facilitate these hundreds of thousands
of acts of production, governments gave work to thousands of architects
and engineers, civil servants and military officials, gang bosses and skilled
tradesmen across Canada. Such a large-scale relief program also dictated the
creation and expansion of administrative practices and institutions designed
to govern the jobless, paving the way for the state interventions of the 1940s
and 1950s. That the Japanese could be unjustly interned during the Second
World War is no surprise to those familiar with Canada’s long history of deny-
ing the rights of citizenship to subordinate groups.51 That such a campaign
could happen so quickly and efficiently was testimony to the camp system
brought into being a decade before to house unemployed men. Through the
provision of relief, then, new forms of governance — financial, administra-
tive, and disciplinary in nature — were created, enabling the socialization of
Fordism on a mass scale via the welfare/security state that began with the
outbreak of war.

While I want to draw attention to the economic value produced by work
relief programs, it should be noted that the essence of work relief — that
which separated it from wage work — was political in nature, rooted in the
distinction between free and unfree labour. When men entered into the pro-
duction side of the relief industry, they did not find themselves in a wholly
alien world. As we have seen, men in the city performed many of the same
tasks that were assigned to the municipality’s outdoor workers: building and
improving parks, roads, and sewers. For their part, jobless men sent to camp

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may have found themselves living in the same shacks, eating food from the same cook, and listening to the orders of the same foreman as when they had logged for wages. In other words, if we strip away the label of “work relief,” we find thousands of men in situations structurally identical in many respects to those of the everyday world of waged employment.

It was precisely this identity between past and present, however, which brought about the host of campaigns to oppose the labour camps. The most radical challenge to work relief came from Communist-organized movements of transient men, who sought to eradicate the political distinction between waged and relief work. The latter, they argued, was forced, sweated labour, not because of the work performed but because of the legal relationships that governed their labour. Instead, they claimed the rights and entitlements of wage workers: namely, a genuine wage and the right to collective representation in the form of a union. The Depression produced a living contradiction, the “unemployed worker” who worked for a living. The oppositional movement that grew out of the camp system pledged not to rest until this contradiction had been resolved.

Foucault / Kracauer / Adorno

Before concluding, I will briefly outline the relationship I have forged between Michel Foucault and two individuals associated with critical theory in its original incarnation, Siegfried Kracauer and Theodor Adorno. Many of the conceptual questions that guide my interpretation were already asked, if not wholly answered, shortly after the symbolic moment of the genesis of the crisis, the Wall Street crash of October 1929. Kracauer’s *The Salaried Masses*, initially serialized in the *Frankfurter Zeitung’s* feuilleton in 1929 before appearing in book form in 1930, traversed the entire surface of white-collar life in Berlin. A troika of beautifully constructed vignettes that take place in a Labour Court, a nightclub, and a train introduce Kracauer’s book. Together, they interact as an inescapably engaging comment on how office and sales girls negotiated the ever-moving dialectic among men and women of different classes, in which sexual, gender, and class relations truly mutually constituted one another. Kracauer’s attention to detail and his willingness to say what was (and remains) in most contexts unsayable made each “thought-image” a powerful statement indeed. Male clerks, faced with the increasingly powerful cult of youth, employed hair dyes to reinvigorate their appearance, ending up facilitating their abstracted alienation by such acts of individual stylistic non-obsolescence. Another white-collar man rigidly obsessed with a wholly rationalized courtship through correspondence served as evidence of “the insanity with which business principles here penetrate a field where
they have no place,” providing a “straitjacket” for both the letters themselves and the feelings they were planned and written to express. After reading Kracauer’s book, Walter Benjamin bestowed upon him a wonderful complimentary characterization, “a ragpicker at daybreak.”

The school of analysis inaugurated by Kracauer was continued in many respects by Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer, among others. In particular, this account owes many debts to Adorno’s work from 1937 to 1947, eleven of his years in exile in America. *The Case of Wagner*; his research on radio in New York, including his essay “On Popular Music”; his encounter with the Hollywood horrors of Los Angeles in *Minima Moralia*; and the now famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written with Max Horkheimer: each of these writings has inspired much wonderful intellectual work. For the North American market segment known as popular music, David Jenemann’s discussion of the National Broadcasting Company’s attempt to provide *Musical Leadership* over the airwaves and Eric Lott’s note-perfect essay on The Carpenters employ Adorno’s ideas about fetishism and regression to brilliant, if often disturbing, ends. More indirectly, Michael Denning’s *Cover Stories* and *Mechanic Accents*, and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* can be considered within Adorno’s ambit, as can hundreds of other works, via the postmodern reworking of Adorno by Fredric Jameson over the past forty years. In this group, Ariel Dorfman’s analysis of “the infantilization of the adult reader” via the rationalization of knowledge production in *Reader’s Digest* deserves special attention. Above all, I appreciate Adorno’s unending ability to demonstrate in and through his writing the truth value of dialectical methods, it being understood, of course, that one of the truths he offers is the fact that non-dialectical methods have their own truth value.

In an interview published in 1983, Foucault suggested that his early work would have possessed a different character had he been exposed to the work of the Frankfurt School. As Foucault acknowledged, “I then understood that the representatives of the Frankfurt School had tried, earlier than I, to say things I had also been trying to say for years.” He even imagined an alternative history in which he would have encountered the Frankfurt School when young and would “have been so captivated by them that I wouldn’t have done anything else but comment on them.” Nonetheless, Foucault remained critical of what he saw as the humanism of the Frankfurt School in its reliance on a belief in the possibility of liberating identity, suggesting that he was unfamiliar with Adorno’s writings on identity and non-identity. Nor does he appear aware of the Frankfurt School’s detailed empirical studies in the areas of mass culture, the authoritarian personality, social science research methods, and so on. Most important, Foucault appears to have been unaware of Adorno’s writings on music: here, more than on any other terrain, they could have conversed productively for hours on end.
I count myself lucky to follow in the footsteps of the thoughtful, respectful (if ultimately negative) analytical assessments of Foucault’s writings offered by Dews, Neil Brenner, David Garland, Kate Soper, Pieter Spierenburg, and Paul Paolucci, among others.\textsuperscript{75} One of the most important lessons I learned from E.P. Thompson is that “Marx is on our side; we are not on the side of Marx.”\textsuperscript{76} I think the same of Foucault. Also, as a historian of the 1930s, I believe that there are clearly enough productive points of contact between Adorno and Foucault as to warrant rereading them together, in the hopes of creating a new hybrid. In many respects, Adorno did for mass culture in the twentieth century what Foucault did for disciplinary institutions in the nineteenth, partly through his concept of governmentality.\textsuperscript{77} Both were concerned with the “human sciences”: psychology and social sciences are particularly fruitful areas of overlap. Both understood the making of power-knowledge, even if Adorno was to focus on the further rationalization of these units through their commodification.\textsuperscript{78}

In arguing for the complementarity of Foucault and Adorno, I am mindful of the many areas of the former’s complex and multi-faceted œuvre in which critical theorists have identified analytic problems. Among these are Foucault’s framing of power as if it possessed human characteristics and his tendency to depict resistance as the opposite reflection of power, spontaneous rather than planned, chaotic rather than strategic. Certainly Foucault’s minimal textual engagement with Marxisms and feminisms, as well as his occasional outbursts of knee-jerk hostile reaction to movements associated with these theoretical orientations, compromised his project. Finally, for historians serious about their craft and the difficult negotiations it entails, Foucault’s philosophic mode of presentation — which all too often confuses actually existing social relations in contexts bound by time and space with an ideal-type efficient and effective model of the workings of power — while illustrative and stimulating, too often contains questionable if not crude characterizations of the historical context and extant evidence.

Nonetheless, as the following pages reveal, the insights that can be drawn from Foucault and Adorno are productive of a materialist reassessment of “relief.” Combined with a Thompsonian appreciation of the human agency that created the beggar’s homeland, this theoretical ensemble animates my study of Vancouver as a “mecca of the surplus” in the early years of the Great Depression. In what amounts to a final articulation of difference from conventional historiography, I attempt to write the history and the theory of the making of this mecca simultaneously. Rather than opt, as most historians do, for a separate articulation of conceptualization (which usually introduces and then concludes a study) and empirical narrative (evidence-based and seemingly untouched by analytic concepts, constituting the substantive body of most historical texts), I instead regularly punctuate my outline of historical
developments with theoretical introductions and interludes that flow logically from my reading of the archives or that usefully preface my engagement with evidence. I do this for two reasons: first, because it makes a particular kind of sense, and second, because my hope is that it will suggest the possibilities of new kinds of historical practice in which theory and evidence are not separate and unequal realms but part of an indivisible analytic totality.