CONCLUSION

Vancouver, “The Mecca of the Surplus”

Fitter, happier, more productive, 
comfortable, 
not drinking too much, 
regular exercise at the gym 
(3 days a week), 
getting on better with your associate employee contemporaries, 
at ease, 
eating well 
(no more microwave dinners and saturated fats) . . . 
healthier and more productive 
a pig in a cage on antibiotics.

“Fitter Happier,” Radiohead, 1997

We start from negation, from dissonance. The dissonance can take many shapes. An inarticulate mumble of discontent, tears of frustration, a scream of rage, a confident roar. An unease, a confusion, a longing, a critical vibration.

John Holloway, Change the World Without Taking Power, 2002

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Radiohead’s “Fitter Happier,” a post-Fordist equivalent of Edvard Munch’s modernist *The Scream,* addresses the experience of alienation, the sense that all avenues of escape are closing in. Frederick Winslow Taylor’s dictum about the “one right way” to organize the production of goods was taken up by Henry Ford and extended into other realms: consumption patterns, living arrangements, and American values. With Ford, the control verged on total: he was employer and investigator, efficiency expert, defender of the family, and visionary of the “American Plan.” Add to this mix a hitherto unrecognized explosion of state formation and public-private regulatory programs in the 1930s, and it is all too easy to argue that North America became home to the “one right way” for everyone — an ultimately exploitive prescription for worker productivity, now cunningly disguised as personal fulfilment.

To the many symbols of Fordist practice in North America, we can add at least two drawn from British Columbia’s past, circa 1931: labour camps and bed and meal tickets. Neither of these was unique to this time and place, yet in this context, each became a powerful mass instrument of Fordism via the provision of relief to transient single men. This particular group of jobless people — archetypes of the Great Depression — found themselves fed and clothed, sheltered, and worked literally en masse: files, tickets, and camps enabled and facilitated this process. The economic crisis occasioned state intervention hitherto unseen in Canada save in times of war. As a microcosm of this national and international trend, Vancouver’s Relief Department became a hotbed of state formation. In this case, we have compelling evidence for the importance of modern business practices and valuations to these fundamental changes. Also compelling is the evidence of the extent to which this mass phenomenon was experienced as a new form of economic exploitation by substantial numbers of single male transients. Some have argued that state provision of relief was, by definition, humanitarian in nature. In Gramscian terms, this notion has the feel of common sense. To give the homeless a place to sleep, however temporary, could be nothing if not a charitable act. As such, relief is saturated with the associations of use value: the provision of goods and services is determined by human need rather than market mechanisms. Yet the archives suggest a different portrait, one of exchange value and of exploitation. In the magisterial 1981 work *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World,* G.E.M. de Ste. Croix argues for the utility of Marxism to the study of worlds outside of the classical labour relation of modern capitalist development. Class, de Ste. Croix persuasively explains, is best understood as “the collective social expression of the fact of exploitation”: “The most significant distinguishing feature of each social formation, each ‘mode of production,’ is not so much how the bulk of the labour of production is done, as how the dominant propertied classes, controlling the conditions of production, ensure the extraction of the surplus which makes their own leisured existence possible.”

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This notion brings into relief the exploitive nature of the exchange values generated through the unequal and unfree social relations of relief provision in Vancouver. De Ste. Croix’s work also reminds us that it is in the detail that we find the “fact of exploitation” and the fact of its absence.

Needless to say, there were none of Radiohead’s “associate employee contemporaries” in Hobohemia. While far from harmonious, jungle life was predicated upon mutuality and reciprocity in the distribution of food, drink, cigarettes, and other goods. Extant evidence suggests that tramps in the jungles sustained each other through begging, foraging, stealing, and collecting relief from government and private charities. The resources thus attained were distributed among their fellow tramps in the recognition that, perhaps tomorrow, someone else would rustle up food and other necessities. Jungle life does not appear to have been labour intensive. The monetary value of these commodities was of little relevance, and the exchange was usually conducted face to face, without recourse to a medium such as money. The organization of the means of life was thus immediate and relatively consensual, a direct contrast not only to the ethos of capital accumulation but also to the restrictive regulations of state and private charities.

While the obvious importance of the decade’s revolutionary struggles elsewhere around the globe — from the City of Vancouver to Vancouver Island, taking the long route — would normally betoken a humble, modest stance (if not one of skepticism or outright disbelief) about the significance of these events, we can nonetheless appreciate the very real rupture founded in the rubble of the world economy at this particular juncture of time and space. In Hobohemia, thousands of itinerant men from around the world changed that world without taking power, without living under a state, without institutionalized obstacles to residency — indeed, without formalized relations of authority. In fact, Hobohemia was a homeland without juridical borders and without a fixed location: it was as mobile as the men whose labour created it. Nor could any government that existed in Canada at that time stamp out this island archipelago; the non-contiguous character of this homeland was a physical manifestation of “the art of not being governed,” as James Scott argues, a tactic of state evasion and state prevention. Yet this archipelagic utopia could exist all too easily because of its parasitic dependence on those who created value.

When tramps left Hobohemia and made their way to the cities, they left behind this way of struggle and were often obliged to feel the full effect of the transient label. For thousands of single men, being a transient meant becoming a client of the relief industry, a complex and ever-expanding set of social relations. Each introduction to the relief industry began with a story about one’s life. This information was translated by investigators and visitors into knowledge designed to be functional for clerks: that is, to allow them...
to judge the worthiness of the applicant and the type of relief they should receive. This system of knowledge production translated the poor into faceless textual objects, stripped of all traces of individuality, in order to rationalize and standardize treatment, the nature of which was determined by a small clique consisting of the relief officer, powerful politicians on the Relief and Employment Committee, and top-level financial bureaucrats. Mass need in Vancouver meant mass administration, the reliance on the management methods of modern businesses. This new managerial style was designed to assuage the financial concerns of governments while also providing a sound basis for the investigatory and disciplinary aspects of relief provision. The personalized relations of road life gave way to the alienation of abstraction.

The reorganization of the workplace in the Relief Department was extensive: a new card-control system was employed; the tasks of investigation and adjudication were separated, with new procedures formalized for both; and dozens of new staff members were hired and trained. “Special Instructions to Visitors” embodied this process of rationalization. Every step in the investigation process was itemized, complete with written instructions, in order to ensure both economy in expenditure and efficiency of investigation. The Relief Department staff — those who laboured so that the poor could be fed, clothed, and housed — had their own experience with scientific management. Visitors found themselves singled out for efficiency tests: speed-ups of the investigation process were accompanied by a network of office spies detailed to collect information about co-workers for the “Crucifixion Machine,” a host of punitive sanctions for those judged inefficient. The jobless were objectified: their life story was fragmented into pieces of administrative knowledge, each with a market value in bed and meal tickets. Nor was the objectification process confined to the Relief Department. Hundreds of Vancouver residents put pen to paper in order to convey the threat posed by transients and the need to subject them to stringent forms of discipline — economic, political, and moral. The value of transients, in this sense, lay in their functionality as evidence of the need for new policies of coercion and control.

One alderman on the Kamloops City Council labelled Vancouver the “mecca of the surplus,” an appellation with several relevant meanings. Not only were the jobless “surplus” workers, those not currently needed by Canada’s industrialists, but they also embodied the term: with each bed and meal ticket in civic cafés and rooming houses, with each order for lumber or mattresses for the relief camps lay the possibility of profit. That big government is big business is not news. As we watch the American empire expand anew, the blurring of public and private in the highest realms of the military-industrial-entertainment complex is so extensive that it usually seems impossible to imagine life in North America ending up any other way. Stories about the power of firms like Bechtel, Halliburton, and Lockheed Martin
encourage us to revel in the common-sense obliteration of the distinction between state and private enterprise. As one commentator put it, men like Dick Cheney should be thanked: their naked accumulation of power “finally show[ed] us how to play the game!” The economics of relief in Depression-era British Columbia was considerably more modest, yet its character was much the same. The relief industry was shot through with capitalist social relations.

Canadians will never know exact figures about the amount of government appropriations for relief that ended up not in the bellies or on the backs of the poor but in the pockets of the not-poor. Because most of the money that governments spent on the relief industry had to be borrowed from financial institutions, interest charges shaved off a percentage of departmental funds. In August 1932, city councillors Dean and Deptford, the latter a member of the Independent Labour Party, criticized the policies of financial institutions in regard to relief loans. The Dominion government advanced funds to Canadian chartered banks at 3 percent interest to guarantee the issuance of municipal securities. Banks, however, loaned the municipalities money at rates of between 5.5 and 7 percent. In March 1933, a majority of Vancouver City Council carried a motion that the federal government “collect as a special tax for Unemployment Relief purposes” the interest charges on government bonds in excess of 2 percent. To be sure, the amount of interest paid was insignificant when compared to the portion of relief budgets consumed by administrative costs, 20.5 percent (or just over $500,000) in Vancouver in the years 1929 to 1932. Much of this spending was necessitated by the use of instruments of control. The processing of bed and meal tickets involved a host of workers in a complex set of workplace procedures that would be superfluous under a cash-based system. A portion of each relief dollar was also absorbed by private industry, which contracted with the municipal and provincial governments to provide goods and services to those on relief. Farmers produced, truckers transported, and merchants sold food. Waitresses and cooks received wages (and waitress union leaders, their dues), and some owners made profits. In short, the forms of relief provision — wholly political in character as elements of state rule — allowed for jobless transients to be exploited economically.

Within these confines, the tramp’s freedom to consume was largely abrogated through the use of bed and meal tickets as well as through private charities like the Emergency Refuge and the Central City Mission. Each form of relief provision freely linked governments with private corporations. Yet these contractual agreements stipulated processes that limited the relief recipient’s choices. They received tickets allotted to restaurants of the Relief and Employment Committee’s choosing, and many were detailed to the private missions each night. They received no money, which meant they had to depend upon begging and private charities for clothing and other items. Archival evidence, much of it produced by jobless activists, suggests that the most hated feature

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of the relief industry in Vancouver was its missions. While Communists and others objected to the investigatory procedures and disciplinary atmosphere in those institutions, entrepreneurs challenged what they saw as the preferential treatment accorded to private charities. Exempted from the regular licence fees and taxes, missions were also guaranteed a constant stream of clients. Restaurant owners and rooming-house operators organized a trade association in order to sound the alarm against “unfair competition” and raise the banner of freedom of choice for the unemployed.

In September 1931, just as Vancouver’s jungles were razed to the ground, the provincial government of Premier Simon Fraser Tolmie opened labour camps for unemployed and destitute men. Over thirteen thousand passed through a camp in the span of two months, until a financial crisis necessitated the halting of all works projects and the dismissal of eight thousand provincial residents. Thousands more would make a camp their temporary home over the course of the next year. The shared vision of Premier Tolmie, Minister of Public Works R.W. Bruhn, and Chief Engineer Pat Philip called for the utilization of unemployed labour to develop the transportation infrastructure: what could be more Fordist than the politics of roads? The camp system also spoke to the need for a spatial strategy, one that considered the containment of jobless transients and their controlled dispersal to work camps as a necessity to restore order and rescue the municipalities. Work relief produced one of the decade’s central contradictions: the unemployed worker who worked for a living, but for relief rather than wages. While the efficiency of camp workers was less than that expected of the average wage worker, so too was their pay. Just as administrative measures assumed their essential dishonesty and meal and bed tickets sought to control their consumption, so too were jobless transients unfree in their work.

As a “mecca of the surplus,” Vancouver was home to a radical movement of considerable size and import. The Communist challenge to the relief industry does not fit well into the dichotomous construct of the Victorian notion of poverty as a failing of individual character and the modern, Fordist understanding of poverty as a structural phenomenon. Beginning in the winter of 1929–30, jobless transients piled into Communist-run groups by the hundreds. Thousands more would take part in demonstrations over the course of the ensuing three years. The Relief Department was a frequent target of unemployed protesters, largely because each policy shift seemed to signify a worsening of treatment. James Overton persuasively argues in his study of 1930s Newfoundland that financial crises often resulted in government policies that increased distress and stimulated protest rather than securing social order.11

This was also the case in Vancouver and throughout the province, especially with the relief camps constructed by all three levels of government.
As their primary agitational demand, Communists fought for the union wage as the minimum standard of living for all workers. Often, these radicals offered to work for these wages, but they also believed that everyone, whether on work relief projects or not, was entitled to the same minimum. These Marxists also offered the most consistent argument for the equality of resident and transient, and rejected most of the gendered, racialized, and ethnic categories employed by public and private charity organizations. The only substantive difference in treatment in the Communist-run relief industry is that of breadwinner status, although here too, Communists operated with a broad definition that included female household heads and single men and women who supported family members. Communists also wanted cash, a demand shared by many unemployed people. Cash meant freedom to engage with the market on equal terms with the employed consumer. Finally, they organized against work relief performed at substandard rates, crystallizing their campaign in the Hunger March of February 1932. Throughout this period, their movement fought street battles with the forces of law and order. Their continuous agitation for the rights of freedom of speech and assembly, and the abrogation of laws that allowed for the deportation of radicals and those on relief signalled their recognition that the battle for the union standard of living would fail without thousands of workers on the street in support of the movement.

This book owes much to critical histories of Fordism, the dominant social formation in twentieth-century North America. Most of all, this project took its form from the nature of the archival evidence. The lives of jobless transients in Vancouver were shaped by the specific forms of relief provision — we know this because of the thousands of documents that express this conflictual process. In other words, we can better understand the economic aspects of state formation during the Great Depression because thousands of people — jobless transients and administrators, politicians and citizens — have already taken the time to analyze them for us. We need not blindly follow their directions, enshrining their words in the form of hagiography. But in order to assess the value of these voices, we must first hear them.