

## Dissenting Traditions

## **WORKING CANADIANS: BOOKS FROM THE CCLH**

Series editors: Alvin Finkel and Greg Kealey

Labour activism has a long and powerful history in Canada. Since 1976, the Canadian Committee on Labour History has published *Labour/Le Travail*, Canada's pre-eminent scholarly journal of labour studies. Working Canadians: Books from the CCLH, published in conjunction with AU Press, likewise focuses on the lives and struggles of Canada's working people, past and present, and on the unions and other organizations that workers founded to represent their interests. Underlying the series is the recognition that anyone who labours on behalf of another is a working person, and that, as working people, we continually participate in creating our own history. That history, which stands as a tribute to our collective strength, should not be solely an object of academic scrutiny. Rather, it is a living part of our identity as working people and should be readily accessible to all.

### **SERIES TITLES**

Champagne and Meatballs: Adventures of a Canadian Communist  
*Bert Whyte, edited and with an introduction by Larry Hannant*

Union Power: Solidarity and Struggle in Niagara  
*Carmela Patrias and Larry Savage*

Working People in Alberta: A History  
*Alvin Finkel, with contributions by Jason Foster, Winston Gereluk, Jennifer Kelly and Dan Cui, James Muir, Joan Schiebelbein, Jim Selby, and Eric Strikwerda*

Provincial Solidarities: A History of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour  
*David Frank*

Solidarités provinciales: Histoire de la Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Nouveau-Brunswick  
*David Frank, traduit par Réjean Ouellette*

The Wages of Relief: Cities and the Unemployed in Prairie Canada, 1929–39  
*Eric Strikwerda*

Defying Expectations: The Case of UFCW Local 401  
*Jason Foster*

Dissenting Traditions: Essays on Bryan D. Palmer, Marxism, and History  
*Edited by Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith*

# Dissenting Traditions

Essays on Bryan D. Palmer,  
Marxism, and History

Edited by

Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith



Canadian Committee  
on Labour History

Copyright © 2021 Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith  
Co-published by the Canadian Committee on Labour History and AU Press,  
Athabasca University  
1200, 10011 – 109 Street, Edmonton, AB T5J 3S8

<https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781771993111.01>

Image on the cover: Bernard Goodman, untitled, 1998.

Cover and interior design by Sergiy Kozakov.

Printed and bound in Canada.

Title: *Dissenting traditions : essays on Bryan D. Palmer, Marxism, and history* /  
edited by Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith.

Names: Carleton, Sean, 1984- editor. | McCoy, Ted, 1978- editor. | Smith, Julia,  
1982- editor. | Canadian Committee on Labour History, issuing body.

Series: Working Canadians (Edmonton, Alta.)

Description: Series statement: Working Canadians, books from the CCLH |  
Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 2021013903X | Canadiana (ebook) 20210141662 |  
ISBN 9781771993111 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771993128 (PDF) |  
ISBN 9781771993135 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCSH: Palmer, Bryan D—Influence. | LCSH: Labor—History. |  
LCSH: Working class—History. | LCSH: Communism—History. | LCSH:  
Socialism—History.

Classification: LCC HD4841 .D57 2021 | DDC 331—dc23

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF) for our publishing activities and the assistance provided by the Government of Alberta through the Alberta Media Fund.



This publication is licensed under a Creative Commons licence, Attribution–Noncommercial–No Derivative Works 4.0 International: see [www.creativecommons.org](http://www.creativecommons.org). The text may be reproduced for non-commercial purposes, provided that credit is given to the original author. To obtain permission for uses beyond those outlined in the Creative Commons licence, please contact AU Press, Athabasca University, at [aupress@athabascau.ca](mailto:aupress@athabascau.ca).

# Contents

Acknowledgements *vii*

Introduction 5

*Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith*

## PART I LABOUR

1 Bryan D. Palmer, Labour Historian 15

*Alvin Finkel*

2 Bryan D. Palmer, Social Historian 51

*Ted McCoy*

3 Labour History's Present: An Account of *Labour/*

*Le Travail* Under Bryan D. Palmer 75

*Kirk Niergarth*

## PART II EXPERIENCE, DISCOURSE, CLASS

4 Bryan D. Palmer and E. P. Thompson 99

*Nicholas Rogers*

5 On Polemics and Provocations: Bryan D. Palmer vs. Liberal  
Anti-Marxists 127

*Chad Pearson*

6 Bryan Douglas Palmer, Edward Palmer Thompson,  
John le Carré (and Me): Workers, Spies, and Spying,  
Past and Present 169

*Gregory S. Kealey*

PART III POLITICS

- 7 Palmer's Politics: Discovering the Past and the Future of  
Class Struggle 191  
*Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin*
- 8 The Hippopotamus and the Giraffe: Bolshevism, Stalinism,  
and American and British Communism in the 1920s 207  
*John McIlroy and Alan Campbell*
- 9 The June Days of 2013 in Brazil and the Persistence of  
Top-Down Histories 255  
*Sean Purdy*
- 10 Old Positions/New Directions: Strategies for Rebuilding  
Canadian Working-Class History 279  
*Sean Carleton and Julia Smith*
- Afterword: Rude Awakenings 299  
*Bryan D. Palmer*
- Selected Works of Bryan D. Palmer 353
- List of Contributors 363

# Acknowledgements

The editors thank the authors in the volume for their generous contributions, the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions, and Athabasca University Press, especially Pamela Holway, Angela Pietrobon, Mary Lou Roy, and Karyn Wisselink, for helping to bring this book into being. We wish to acknowledge the death of contributor Leo Panitch, whose kindness and commitment to socialism will always be remembered. Finally, we thank Bryan Palmer for his work in the dissenting tradition and for encouraging us to dream of what might be.





# Dissenting Traditions





Bryan D. Palmer in the mid-1980s. Photo by Nelcya Delanoe.



# Introduction

*Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith*

In 1844, a young Karl Marx outlined a vision for a new publication that would serve as a “gathering point . . . for the really thinking and independent minds.”<sup>1</sup> Taking aim at what he saw as socialists’ misguided and futile efforts to predict the future, Marx stressed the importance of the dialectic and *Kritik*, or criticism; he believed that new ideas could only be generated by critiquing old ones. Thus, he wrote, “if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present—I am speaking of a *ruthless criticism of everything existing*, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be.”<sup>2</sup>

The work of Bryan D. Palmer, much-indebted to Marx, is similarly infused with a commitment to critique, not simply for criticism’s sake but as part of building theoretical frameworks and political movements for radical and revolutionary social change. For nearly fifty years, Palmer has written about the history of labour, working people, the dispossessed, and revolutionary politics, critiquing the status quo to develop new ideas and avenues for change and emancipation, fearing neither his own conclusions nor conflict with others who would disagree. He stands in the company of such historians as E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Eugene D. Genovese in the dissenting tradition of advancing socialist and Marxist politics through scholarship. None of this is an easy path. Palmer’s work reveals a life dedicated to the difficult task of understanding the past—in all of its contradictions, victories, and failures—and imagining alternative futures.

This volume explores the old and the new in Palmer’s historical work. It addresses his intellectual origins in Marxist, and specifically

Trotskyist, theory and connects them to the path he has charted as a groundbreaking voice of “the new labour history.” In connecting the old and the new, Palmer has also worked toward the goal of connecting multiple contexts. This is among the most important elements of his work: bringing together histories of working people, labour organizing, Communist politics, social history, and the real possibilities (and failures) for revolutionary change. This collection adds to that project by bringing together multiple areas of Palmer’s career for discussion and debate. It includes the works of his contemporaries, his sometimes critics, and some of the students he has mentored over his career. The essays are organized roughly along the trajectory of Palmer’s research interests: from his labour history of the mid-1970s to his most recent publications on poverty and Communist politics in the late 2010s. Some essays bridge multiple areas to explore Palmer’s approaches to social history and discourse theory, and his contributions to multiple areas of research through *Labour/Le Travail*.



It is important to begin by historicizing the historian. For Palmer, the political and professional have always been animated by the personal. We make our own history, as Marx reminds us, but not in conditions of our own choosing, and this was certainly the case for Palmer.<sup>3</sup> After coming of age in the heady days of the late 1960s and being schooled in New York’s radical left political circles, for Palmer, debate and dissent have always been important tools of education and activism.

Bryan Douglas Palmer was born in 1951 in London, Ontario, a medium-sized, working-class Canadian city with suburban characteristics. He grew up in a version of the 1960s that was not yet radical or revolutionary. Palmer’s upbringing bred a rebellious spirit as well as a curiosity for history and critique that would shape much of his life. “Brought up in a house without books,” Palmer later wrote, “by parents whose educations were either truncated by dropping out of high school or being streamed into practical, gendered employment and living in what could have been considered a suburban retreat from any traditions that connected the present and its antecedents, my privileging of the historical was not so much learned as it was resourced, held as a kind of antidote against

what I came instinctually to regard as a barren, philistine upbringing.”<sup>4</sup> Increasingly interested in oppositional politics and the civil rights struggle in the 1960s, he got involved with a radical study circle affiliated with the Canadian Party of Labour. After finishing high school, Palmer enrolled at the University of Western Ontario, but he was drawn more to the exciting politics of the New Left than to presentations in lecture halls. After a year of university, Palmer dropped out and travelled south to New York City, hitchhiking his way into the “tested waters of dissidence.”<sup>5</sup>

It was through activism, then, not the academy, that a young Palmer encountered “theories and texts as well as mobilisations and movements” of a revolutionary flavour.<sup>6</sup> In New York, he immersed himself in “late-night study and affinity groups,” worked in one of the city’s bookstores, and argued “with all manner of leftists” in the radical educational experiment known as Alternate U.<sup>7</sup> As Palmer later reflected, “Spirited, informed, passionate, sometimes angry, discussion was always comradely . . . Oppositions clarified positions.”<sup>8</sup> In these circles, Palmer read Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Gramsci, Luxemburg, and Trotsky, but also historians such as W. E. B. Du Bois, E. P. Thompson, and C. L. R. James. In post-May 1968 New York, Palmer frequented East Village bars with comrades and debated everything from anarchism and Maoism to Trotskyism, often with history as a frame of reference to guide discussion. Engaged and ruthless critique was not only welcomed, it was expected.

After a year in New York, Palmer returned to Ontario to complete his undergraduate degree. Upon graduation, he returned to New York and enrolled in graduate studies at the State University of New York at Binghamton under the supervision of historian Melvyn Dubofsky. While completing his PhD, Palmer connected with other Marxist graduate students in the United States studying history. Academic Marxism, however, proved more muted than the fiery movement debates to which he had become accustomed. At first reluctant to align himself in published work with Marxism, Palmer instead focused on studying working-class history. This environment, one that mixed intellectual debate and discussion about labour history and the politics and poetics of working-class life from a Marxist perspective, significantly shaped Palmer’s personal and professional trajectory.

Recruited by the left and trained as a historian by academics attuned to historical materialism, Palmer set out on a career committed not only

to interpreting the world but, through ruthless criticism accented by historical analysis, changing it. This commitment and its influence is the subject of this volume. The contributors comment, in varying ways, on Palmer's work and its influence, discussing and debating his contribution to various dissenting traditions. As Alvin Finkel writes in the opening chapter, Palmer is a prolific, influential, and controversial figure in the fields of left and labour history. The volume of his contributions underscores the "prolific." He is the author of fourteen monographs, twenty-nine chapters in edited volumes, thirty research notes and review essays, and fifty journal articles. Palmer's work has been translated into multiple languages. Between Simon Fraser University, Queen's University, and Trent University, he supervised nearly eighty graduate students. Palmer has also been instrumental in building the field of labour and working-class history, both through his own work and his stewardship of the journal *Labour/Le Travail*, where he served as English-language book review editor from 1981 to 1997 and editor from 1998 to 2014 and again from 2016 to 2017.

It is also true that Palmer has been controversial: debate and disagreement are central themes that run throughout this collection. Palmer's scholarship has been at the centre of historical and theoretical debate in Canada, Britain, and the US for more than forty years. In Canada in particular, Palmer has often been regarded as a source of objection within the profession. He has faced ongoing opposition to his Marxist analysis of the past, and has often stood on his own against attacks on historical materialism. As his flourish for debate and engagement has shown, Palmer has never needed anyone to defend his positions; however, this volume honours his scholarship and commitment to dissent, debate, Marxism, and socialist politics. This collection contains contributions from his colleagues, contemporaries, and former students—some of whom have followed Palmer's path, and some of whom have carried forward the same debates, both political and historical, that run throughout his work. Together, the essays in this volume offer an important and timely engagement with Palmer's scholarship, and an opportunity for new scholars to investigate the positions advanced by his research and to consider accepting the challenge of his politics.



## Labour

Part 1 of this volume includes essays that discuss Palmer's approach to what was called "the new labour history." This was a designation both accurate and derisive, a debate that is highlighted in Alvin Finkel's chapter on Palmer as a labour historian. Finkel positions Palmer as part of the new labour history, emerging from the 1970s as the bearer of approaches to understanding labour and the working class that generated significant debate and opposition. He traces Palmer's contributions through the splintering of the field, as Canadian and American history matured in the 1980s and grappled with the incorporation of discourse analysis and the reification of language. Palmer was at the centre of each of these debates, and Finkel's analysis of the fallout is a helpful primer for understanding Palmer's contributions to Canadian labour historiography.

A chapter by Ted McCoy begins on the same terrain as Finkel but explores Palmer's contributions as a social historian. McCoy argues that while Palmer was charting a new course in labour history, his methodologies and conclusions were concurrently expanding the horizons of social history in Canada and internationally. The chapter re-examines Palmer as a social historian and connects his labour history to his later works on discourse and marginalities and transgression.

Kirk Niergarth concludes the first section with a different perspective, positioning Palmer as historian *and* editor through an impressionistic and quantitative analysis of his multiple roles with *Labour/Le Travail*. This view is essential to understanding Palmer in the context of the historical profession in Canada.

## Experience, Discourse, Class

Part 2 places Palmer in a different set of debates and links him to historical questions about experience, discourse, and class. Palmer's relationship to Edward Thompson comes into full view through a deeper understanding of both historians. Nicholas Rogers writes an expansive chapter that directly connects Palmer to Thompson, a link that makes explicit what has always been implicit in Palmer's work: Palmer is the author of two books about Thompson and has cited his influence in multiple places. Rogers analyzes the connection between their methodologies and conclusions about experience and agency in working-class history.

A chapter by Chad Pearson explores an area of Palmer's scholarship that has been contentious and intensely debated but not critically analyzed. Questions about postmodernism and the linguistic turn animated Palmer's engagement in the historical field in the late 1980s and early 1990s and thrust him into the spotlight of an international debate about the changing shape of historical scholarship. Palmer was a dissident voice in this moment, captured best in his work *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* published in 1990. Pearson revisits the debates at the centre of questions about history and postmodernism, and he argues that Palmer's voice helped to define the limits of institutional liberalism in US history in particular.

The final chapter in this section is by Palmer's collaborator, journal co-editor, and long-time friend Gregory S. Kealey. Kealey brings some personal context and insight into his collaboration with Palmer and uses this as a springboard into a new consideration of the connections between Palmer and Thompson around questions of the state, surveillance, and spying.

## Politics

Palmer's work as explored in the essays of part 3 will be of value to people seeking left political alternatives to North American social democracy. Palmer's scholarship reveals a multitude of alternatives and oppositions, from his work on the legacy of E. P. Thompson, to his historical research on the revolutionary politics of American Communist James Cannon, to the direct action of modern anti-poverty struggles in Toronto. Palmer writes the history of the working class in principled terms, and this often involves setting his sights on the uncomfortable realities of failure. As Finkel also notes in the volume's first section, Palmer's teleology gives him the ability to critique the working-class cultures he writes about—including their misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and tacit acceptance of imperialism. These are important points, for they position Palmer's work in an ongoing debate about how different oppressive contexts are so frequently connected.

An essay by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin explores the ways in which Palmer's historiography connects to working-class politics in Canada. Panitch and Gindin examine the often-contentious debates in which Palmer engaged, and of which he was sometimes the subject, throughout

the changing directions of Canadian history in the 1980s and 1990s. They reveal the implications of holding and defending positions in the study of working-class history and comment on the legacies of struggle and dissent that define Palmer's work and politics. A chapter by John McIlroy and Alan Campbell addresses Palmer's place in Communist historiography. The authors critically examine and build on Palmer's important work in this field as they analyze the development of Communist politics in the United Kingdom and the United States. The essay is complemented by two other pieces that connect different political contexts. Sean Purdy's chapter looks at the immediacy of working-class politics through an analysis of the 2013 June Days protests in Brazil. Like Panitch and Gindin, Purdy contrasts working-class politics with the forces of neoliberalism and confronts the realities of political struggle and failure.

The volume concludes with an essay by Sean Carleton and Julia Smith that explores strategies for rebuilding Canadian working-class history. As several contributors point out, there are fewer people teaching and studying labour history than in previous decades and this presents a substantial challenge. Carleton and Smith argue that the field can be revitalized by returning to some of the old positions adopted and advanced in previous decades by scholars such as Palmer. Returning to class analysis, building institutions, teaching labour history, and engaging the public can help ensure Canadian working-class history continues to thrive in the twenty-first century. Engaging with Palmer's scholarship and exploring his contributions to various dissenting traditions, as this volume does, is an important part of that project.

The last word goes to the subject of this volume. In the afterword, Palmer reflects on his life and scholarship and discusses their dissident dimensions. He also responds to his critics and to the chapters in this collection, and he comments on old and new directions in Marxism and historical practice. True to form, Palmer's words are ruthless and revelatory, and he, like Marx, would have it no other way.

#### NOTES

1. Karl Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 12.

2. Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism," in Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 13; emphasis original.
3. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Tucker, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 595.
4. Bryan D. Palmer, "Introduction," in *Interpretive Essays on Class Formation and Class Struggle*, vol. 1, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1.
5. *Ibid.*, 2.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Bryan D. Palmer, "Becoming a Left Oppositionist," *Canadian Dimension* 39, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 58.

PART I



# Labour



## Bryan D. Palmer, Labour Historian



*Alvin Finkel*

Bryan D. Palmer is the most prolific and one of the most celebrated Canadian labour historians of the past half century. He is also the most controversial Canadian labour historian, a subscriber to “orthodox Trotskyism” while also a champion of history from below.<sup>1</sup> This chapter begins with a portion of the controversies because they provide important clues to Palmer’s location in the labour history canon. It is a canon that, in his case, embraces Canadian, American, and British labour history.<sup>2</sup> A discussion of his major labour works follows, informed by what these controversies reveal of Palmer’s approach to working-class history and how that approach has evolved over time. We finish with an interrogation of the long-term impact of Palmer’s research and analysis on labour history scholarship, particularly in Canada.

Palmer first became an object of controversy early in his publishing career as part of the first group of social historians of working people that emerged in the 1970s. He was a founding member of the journal *Labour/Le Travailleur*, and his article on nineteenth-century artisans was the lead article of the first issue.<sup>3</sup> So Palmer was a predictable target for a campaign by traditional scholars of labour against “culturalism” in labour history. They used that term to refer to any discussion except in passing of ordinary or radical workers as opposed to successful labour institutions within capitalism and their leaders. Conservative labour historian David Bercuson, who would later pan Palmer’s book with Gregory S. Kealey on the Knights of Labor in the *American Historical Review*, was co-editor of the *Canadian Historical Review* when it invited the patrician social democrat Kenneth

McNaught to comment on recent trends in labour history.<sup>4</sup> It was the first time that the major historical journal in the country, which had never demonstrated much interest in the history of workers, chose to print such an article. McNaught was the sympathetic biographer of J. S. Woodsworth, the first leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, and can be viewed as more supportive of left-wing ideas and left-wing figures than his postwar cohort of academic historians.<sup>5</sup> But, like most of the others, he was a Cold Warrior and an elitist who believed that the study of history must focus on the thoughts and actions of “great men.” An opponent of both Communists and the New Left, with its anti-hierarchical demands regarding universities and workplaces alike, McNaught was aghast at the socialist libertarianism of the Young Turks and their emphasis on an international and interdisciplinary Marxist literature. He granted begrudgingly that the new social historians of the 1970s had researched subjects that earlier historians had ignored and had added useful empirical knowledge. But he rejected their efforts to recast Canadian labour history from a focus on the progenitors of the modern labour movement that was well integrated into the capitalist system and parliamentary democracy toward both workers themselves and leaders and members of supposedly less successful, dissident workers’ movements. His contempt for the new social historians of labour and the people whose stories they told is clear in this passage that extols economist H. Clare Pentland’s depiction of “the smart union leadership” of the 1930s and 1940s: “That smart union leadership was not the product of any autonomous working-class culture. It grew out of an increasing sophistication and education. And its goal was not to defend an Archie Bunker-charivari culture, but, rather, to liberate those who had been entrapped by the economic-cultural constraints imposed by political capitalists.”<sup>6</sup>

Disgusted that the social historians appeared to “accept an essentially revolutionary goal as the inner purpose of historical research and writing,” McNaught unsurprisingly singles out the social historian least reluctant to deny such a goal. Palmer, he writes, is the “most overt amongst the celebrants of ‘the rich and vibrant culture of the artisan.’” He dismisses Palmer’s evidence as “almost anecdotal” and then demonstrates the closed mind of those who insist on a history limited to great men and institutions by adding: “In a sense it fills in some of the interstices and provides a more detailed background than was previously available for understanding our



social history rather than providing any convincing new interpretation of the role of the working class and its spokesmen." Somehow the inclusion of the grassroots workers themselves changed nothing about the interpretation of working-class history. To add insult to injury, he complains about Palmer's "turgid neo-Marxist theoretical framework."<sup>7</sup>

By the time of the McNaught article, Palmer had already debated an even more dismissive critic of so-called "culturalism," political scientist Terry Morley, who asserted a restrictive view of policy and society in which any discussion of working-class efforts to assert their right to control what they produced was "romantic."<sup>8</sup> But Palmer had bigger fish to fry as he inserted himself into a debate on the British Left regarding E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, the single most influential work for social historians of labour throughout the English-speaking world. An important group of left-wing British scholars was at war with alleged "culturalists" for a reason quite opposite to that of Canadian social democrats: they regarded culturalists as anti-revolutionary, anti-Marxist, and anti-Leninist. Their ranks included Perry Anderson, historical sociologist and editor of the influential *New Left Review*.

Palmer's defence of Thompson, with whom he nonetheless had political disagreements, revealed much about his own approach to the history of the working class. In Palmer's view, the debt that historians of working people owe to Thompson is "the significance and place of agency and experience."<sup>9</sup> Thompson emphasized "the process of class struggle."<sup>10</sup> Countering those on both right and left who viewed that focus on the bottom-up self-organization of working people as a rejection of broader social forces that had an impact upon working people, Palmer comments: "None of this should be taken to mean that class is essentially cultural, the political dimension of its existence obliterated, the objective aspects conditioning or setting the limits of its existence ignored." Indeed, he argues that *The Making of the English Working Class* meticulously blends the economic, political, and cultural "history of common and not so common people, those living the experience of class formation." The Thompson book rescued them at once from the right-wing structural functionalism of Cold War American sociologist Talcott Parsons and the vulgar Marxists who proposed theories of social change in which rank-and-file workers were pawns of forces bigger than themselves.<sup>11</sup>

But for all his commitment to telling the story of rank-and-file agency while examining the economic and political forces within which that agency occurs, Palmer soon had his Canadian critics from among the social historians to add to his raging opponents on the right. The latter, little by little, abandoned labour history altogether, indirectly conceding victory to the social history group.<sup>12</sup> The social historians, though all to some degree influenced by Marxism and the New Left, were no more united than the British Marxists in whose debates Palmer did not flinch from intervening. An unspoken united front had been maintained against the institutionalists, as issues of control inevitably occurred over the Canadian Committee on Labour History (formed in 1970 as an all-inclusive subcommittee of the Canadian Historical Association to promote the sharing of research among historians interested in working-class history) and the CCLH journal, *Labour/Le Travail* (which first appeared in 1976 under the name *Labour/Le Travailleur* and then was renamed in 1984 because French-speaking women increasingly described themselves as *travailleuses*, rejecting an older convention that privileged masculine nouns when more than one gender was described).<sup>13</sup>

With the common enemy gone, the social historians of labour were free to air disputes among themselves. For the most part, like feminist historians in English Canada, who were increasingly also historians of the working class, labour historians preferred to minimize their differences. That was partly because of strong personal and professional friendships that their research and dissemination of research had created and partly because they remained united against the old guard of male establishment historians focused on “great men” and Whig history. Such unity seemed to many even more necessary in the era of neoliberalism that began in the late 1970s, and was characterized by a call for a partial return to an earlier stage of capitalism in which state interventions and non-interventions alike focused on creating a huge imbalance in the rewards won by capital over labour. That perspective gradually replaced the postwar compromise in which capitalism survived challenges from below by granting concessions to the working class and incorporating trade unions at least partially into the system. One-time welfarist liberals like Jack Granatstein, David Berenson, and Michael Bliss became fierce neoliberals and poured contempt on scholars whom they regarded as radicals, which increasingly meant egalitarians of all kinds.<sup>14</sup>

The left, in turn, for the most part, dampened its expectations, including the academic left. Faced with austerity policies even from NDP governments and a labour movement that mostly responded with a deer in the headlights immobility to capitalist plans for neoliberal restructuring, many progressive scholars focused on saving what could be saved of postwar gains rather than on a forward program. The discursive turn, which tended to replace scholarship wedded to activism with an introverted “postmodernist” scholasticism, provided some solace for many. It provided a distance between the scholar and everyone else that allowed the former to gaze dispassionately on the latter, supposedly to explain mass attitudes and behaviours that New Left activists lacked the proper tools for understanding. Palmer, the orthodox Trotskyist, was not alone in rejecting any thought of anti-materialist analysis overtaking the “culturalist” project. While historical materialists might disagree in their explanations of working-class consciousness, all regarded the injuries of class as real and brutal rather than a product of discourses. While others were content with implicitly lamenting the abandonment of class conflict and social structures in favour of competing, floating discourses, Palmer waged an open battle with adherents of the postmodernist trend.

Palmer’s increasing willingness to make explicit his disagreements with other labour historians predictably produced some sharp responses. When Palmer’s second, renamed edition of his survey text on Canadian labour history appeared, Craig Heron, who had collaborated with Palmer in 1977 on an important article on the strike wave in Ontario before World War I,<sup>15</sup> provided a largely negative review in *Left History* in 1993. The review began by acknowledging that “in his long series of books and articles, and through his penchant for confrontation and debate, Palmer has played a major role in defining what the rest of the historical profession (and many others) thought Canadian labour historians were up to.”<sup>16</sup> The rest of the review suggested that Heron believed that Palmer’s prominence was undeserved. In particular, he objected to what he regarded as a preoccupation in Palmer’s survey with why Canadian workers did not embrace a socialist rejection of capitalism. Heron called this “an analytical trap in writing the social history of the working class,” adding, “We need to get beyond the polarity of acceptance or rejection of capitalism to a subtler understanding of how they struggled to survive, to express themselves, to assert individual and class pride and power.”<sup>17</sup>

But an objective reading of *Working-Class Experience* reveals plentiful evidence and subtle analysis of how workers in various periods struggled in all those various ways. Indeed, early in the text Palmer notes:

For all of the cultural inertia of the working class, however, its apparent fragmentation, acquiescence, and accommodation could change with the drop of a hat or, more precisely, the drop of a wage, the demise of a skill, or the restructuring of a job. In confrontations that turned on such developments, cultural experiences might resurface and be moved beyond the passivity of a way of life to articulate a rejection of acquisitive individualism or affirm class identity in demonstrations of mutuality and collective aspiration.<sup>18</sup>

Palmer may have invited the wrath of Heron and others by singling them out for criticism in his text. He assails both Heron and Laurel Sefton MacDowell for “presentism,” the former because his *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* is particularly brief on pre-1900 working-class history, and the latter, a historian with a favourable focus on modern trade union leaders, because she had critiqued his first edition for giving as much attention to movements that failed as to enduring institutions. Palmer insists that a history that digs deeper into the past and that places Canadian developments in international contexts allows for broader theoretical understandings and challenges presentism with knowledge “of what kinds of possibilities, lived out in various historical contexts, might exist in the changed contours of the here and now.” He charges those whom he regards as “presentists” with a lack of understanding that “possibility is never simply and only determined by the obviousness of the conjunctures of the current moment.”<sup>19</sup> That *longue durée* approach is hardly consistent with charges of a kind of action freakiness focused on whether a particular group of workers at a given moment was interested in overthrowing capitalism.

Heron explained in other forums that his intention was not to provide a competing comprehensive text to Palmer’s and that he was complying with a publisher’s request for an introductory, short work. So, he no doubt regarded Palmer’s attack against him within a textbook as rude and unjustified. Still, while Palmer’s comments seem unfair in the context of Heron’s overall impressive oeuvre, they are not unwarranted in terms of *The Canadian Labour Movement*. By contrast, Heron’s comments regarding *Working-Class Experience* are misleading, though he is correct

in identifying Palmer's obsession with the potential of the working class to make a revolution that will end class-based societies forever. That was Karl Marx's obsession too and it did not prevent him from doing excellent historical and sociological research. I would be concerned as well if Palmer's commitment to a working-class overthrow of class society coloured his ability to explore fully working-class lives. But as the balance of this chapter will suggest, I see abundant evidence of the opposite. Indeed, I think that Palmer's teleology, annoying as it may be to those of a different ideological bent, makes him far more willing to critique aspects of worker culture in different times and places—misogyny, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and acceptance of imperialism—than historians focused on celebrating the working class with all its blemishes might be willing to tackle. He is not a vulgar Marxist and he calls for a Communist society without subordination of workers to elites, private or state. So, he is hyper-aware of the ways in which bourgeois society co-opts workers and distorts their values. His search is for evidence of how working people, because of the injuries to body and spirit that capitalism inflicts upon them, manage at various times to emphasize their class solidarity to win victories and advance the ultimate creation of a post-class society.

Debates between Palmer and other scholars on labour subjects demonstrated his opposition to both the “descent into discourse” and left-wing versions of liberal pluralism that may have a dissentient feel about them but which understate or ignore the roles of social class and class struggle.<sup>20</sup> Palmer's comments also demonstrated close attention to detail and an unwillingness to be silent when others appeared to be basing their opposition to the class struggle point of view on what Palmer regarded as flimsy research and questionable extrapolations. He proved to be one of the few historians of the working class willing to challenge an emerging consensus for a need for solidarity of a broad left against establishment-oriented historians. Palmer ended up in at least two controversies that caused six labour studies scholars from outside the editorial board to ask the board in 2002 to remove him as editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, a position that he held from 1997 to 2014 after having served as English-language book review editor for the journal from 1981 to 1997. Though neither controversy involved the journal that he was editing, the complainants suggested that Palmer was too aggressive in his debating style in other journals and that that might cause junior scholars to give pause before submitting articles to

*Labour/Le Travail*. Of course, it might also have caused junior scholars to feel that they would get a closer, critical reading of their work from Palmer compared to editors of other journals. But, in any case, the editorial board determined that Palmer's scholarly activities outside the journal had not compromised his work as editor.<sup>21</sup>

The first controversy involved a wide-ranging article by Palmer in *Histoire sociale/Social History* in which, among other targets, he raised serious objections to two otherwise favourably received books: *Gender Conflicts*, edited by Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, and Lynne Marks's *Revivals and Roller Rinks*. The article begins by noting that he wants to deal with "tensions that connect as well as separate labour and gender historians."<sup>22</sup> Both books, in his view, carry too much of the freight of the discursive turn, and deal too little with either the material lives of their subjects or the political economic framework that shaped those lives. He asks pointedly: "in this settlement have we not given up the fight for a transformative history, content instead to advance inclusivity within the seemingly unalterable structures of oppression and exploitation?"<sup>23</sup> He suggests that *Gender Conflicts* is a mix of essays that have no concern about class at all and that there are those that exaggerate their differences from labour history in order to be seen as part of a new paradigm.<sup>24</sup> As for *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, while he offers some praise for Marks's efforts to trace the role of religion in small-town Ontario in the late nineteenth century, he claims that her book lacks "a convincing depiction of the economic structure, demographic make-up or cultural tone of this milieu."<sup>25</sup> Marks's book takes Palmer and Kealey to task for failing to deal with religion in their study of the Knights of Labor. But Palmer argues that the statistical evidence provided by Marks to suggest overlap between the Knights of Labor and the Salvation Army proves nothing of the kind. He suggests that her comparisons between messages from the pulpit and messages from Knight leaders, both in terms of form and content, obscure discussion of the oppressions that the Knights were fighting.<sup>26</sup>

*Histoire sociale/Social History* permitted Marks to respond to Palmer's comments, and she attacked what she regarded as "blind spots" on the part of some labour historians who have "a resolutely secular world view."<sup>27</sup> She contended that she did not assert an overlap of Salvationists and Knights, but only called for this to be considered, suggesting that Palmer's alleged

opposition to such a consideration was the consequence of his antipathy to religious feeling as opposed to a fair reaction to her statistical evidence.<sup>28</sup>

Valverde also got her licks in on Palmer in a piece that appeared in the same issue as Palmer's critique of her book with Iacovetta. Proudly proclaiming her complete break with materialism and issues of social class, Valverde blasted the entire historical profession for its limited willingness to follow a trail that she, as a sociologist, had followed. But she then proceeded to blame Palmer alone for the historians' failure to follow the sociologist guru who was showing them the shining path of scholarship that would transcend their fetish with analyzing people's material lives and interests with a sophisticated examination of a competition of discourses stripped from any connection with real lives. Palmer had made a "career" of "invective," she charged, in a rather invective-filled passage in which she accused him of using "vitriolic" attacks that bullied historians "from any discussion of theory for fear of being embroiled in polemics." Two pages later, she added: "I tried to do my bit to rectify the situation and generate a more level-headed debate among progressive historians and other Canadian scholars in two review essays for *Labour/Le Travail* commissioned by Bryan Palmer" (the emphasis is mine; Valverde ignored the glaring contradiction between that fact and her statement that Palmer was blocking discussions of discourse theory). The two essays that Palmer commissioned likely had more influence on historians than Valverde suggested. But even if they did not, her blaming Palmer's takedowns of her work for her failure to influence the historical profession had strategic value. Rather than having to denounce the practitioners of an entire discipline, she made a final appeal to them by assuring them that they had been unable to see the light because of bullying from an evil fellow historian steeped in historical materialism.<sup>29</sup>

The second controversy involved the *Canadian Historical Review's* unprecedented decision to have five reviewers comment on a book called *On the Case: Explorations in Social History*, an edited collection produced by Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson from papers for a conference dealing with finding and analyzing huge qualitative data sets of individual "cases."<sup>30</sup> The introduction to the book promised that the collection offered groundbreaking theoretical and practical perspectives. Three of the reviewers seemed generally to agree with that claim. Conservative but very courteous historian Doug Owrarn demurred, questioning why a book of essays, some new but all somewhat recycled from earlier

work by its authors, had become the first book ever to be the subject of a multi-reviewer feature in the *Canadian Historical Review*. Palmer was the fifth reviewer, and, while sharing Owram's view that the book was a rehash of existing work, was not polite at all. He interrogated the book in terms of the labour process for Canadian historians and suggested that chumminess among a certain group of social historians that included the editors of *On the Case* and the editors of the *Canadian Historical Review* had caused the latter to allow themselves to be misled by the former. Unsurprisingly, an effort to raise issues of social relations of production among historians themselves as opposed to the objects of their study was uncomfortable for many historians. The editors of the journal would have pleased the editors of *On the Case* if they had refused to publish the Palmer review, but having solicited it, they included it despite its accusations against the editors themselves. Iacovetta, at least twice criticized in print by Palmer (though also sometimes praised by him), believed that she was being singled out unfairly and that her gender, rather than her writing or actions, had caused his hostility. She had support from some feminist colleagues with whom she had worked closely, who regarded Palmer's critique as an unwarranted attack by a male senior scholar upon a more junior female scholar. They noted that Palmer's work to that point, like most of what male labour historians had produced, was overwhelmingly male focused. I certainly would rank Palmer's contribution as a writer to the history of working women as mediocre, if not negligible. On the other hand, as the editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, he did encourage a growing gender balance in both the composition of the editorial board and the articles that the journal published.

The bias in labour history toward the world of working men was certainly something that needed to be debated. But it was tangential to the issues of anti-materialist discourse analysis and the social relations of production of historical work that Palmer was raising. Palmer, something of an iconoclast in his writings, rejected the notion that either the works or the professional schemes of left-wing scholars were off limits for scholarly analysis. Willing to lambaste in print his close friend and sometimes writing partner, Gregory S. Kealey, when he saw problems with his work,<sup>31</sup> he disliked the implicit arguments of his detractors that it was bullying and male chauvinism to subject the work of female junior scholars to the same scrutiny that he applied to the work of fellow senior scholars. While his



survey textbooks generously embrace the work of all of the social historians of labour, he believed strongly that our own labour as working-class historians is strengthened not by mutual self-congratulation but by ruthless mutual interrogation. Some of his opponents, in my view, were not so much partisans of indefensible theoretical and empirical positions as “debatophobes.”<sup>32</sup>

Certainly the zeitgeist among Canadian social historians did not welcome his approach, which some viewed as one-upmanship and destructive in the effort to create a collective scholarship that would replace the old paradigm of privileged white male, imperialist, militarist, flag-waving scholarship that predominated before the 1970s and certainly still had vestiges within the profession. Ironically, Canadian historiography had been characterized by more real debates in that period of stultifying elitism than it was in the period when egalitarians had mostly replaced the old, conservative farts. Whether or not one is comfortable with Palmer’s overarching concerns about finding revolutionary moments in working-class history and tracing their evolution—a concern that, though his critics may overlook it, causes him to spend at least as much time as they do in searching out and analyzing accommodation of workers to capitalist hegemonic forces—they offer a vantage point for judging other work in working-class history. Though he is the first to concede that his vantage point enjoys only minority support among historians of working people in Canada, I would argue that he has played the major role among such historians in keeping alive questions of how and not just why workers have at different times challenged capitalist hegemony in various ways. More than most working-class historians, Palmer has put special emphasis on what kind of leadership emerges in various labour struggles and its impact on both short-term successes and the long-term building of movements of resistance.

So, with this background of the passions of Palmer as he has attempted to shape debates on how the working class is treated—or ignored—in historical and other scholarship, it is time to look at his major labour history works to interrogate how well his own work lives up to the principles that he has enunciated and how his work has changed over time in terms of emphasis and conclusions. His first book, *A Culture in Conflict*, which appeared in 1979, lays out his notions, based on a combination of the insights of E. P. Thompson, Karl Marx, and his own broader readings as a young scholar, about how the working class should be studied.<sup>33</sup> He

was already cementing his reputation as a controversialist by having repeatedly denounced the approach of another historian of Hamilton workers, Michael B. Katz, on the subject. Katz, who would eventually become a distinguished social theorist of American poverty, was in a stage of his scholarship in which he focused almost exclusively on what was quantifiable. His obsession with numbers, overlaid on an assumption of particular fixed social structures that reflected Parsonian structural functionalism, reduced the working people of Hamilton to an undifferentiated mass of individuals whose attitudes, institutions, and resistance to employers' dictates were of no interest.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, Palmer maintained: "it is the way in which culture is used, adapting to the changed environment of industrial capitalism, that predominates in much of this examination of skilled workers in Hamilton. Indeed, if there is a central concern in this study it is with the way in which working-class culture sustains a persistent protest against industrial-capitalist disciplines and development, enriching the process of class conflict, bringing workers and employers into battle with one another, despite the apparent inevitability of working-class defeat."<sup>35</sup> To this, he added: "Class . . . is inseparable from class struggle. The process of confrontation conditions an understanding of class and of people's place in the larger social order, an understanding mediated by a particular cultural context. Class is thus defined by men and women as they live through the historical experience. It is class struggle and culture, not class itself, as an analytical category, that are the primary concepts upon which classes themselves arise and assume importance."<sup>36</sup>

The first quotation emphasizes that the cultural and economic spheres of daily life are closely intertwined. The economic position and the cultural values of skilled workers are to be viewed as interdependent rather than separate phenomena. The second quotation refutes economic determinism to suggest that the term "social class" is largely meaningless as an analytical category until members of this class demonstrate, by their collective behaviour, that they regard themselves as having interests distinct from other classes. For Palmer, that understanding of their class position comes through their experience of conflict and struggle with the bourgeoisie and consequent recognition of the opposed interests of the two classes.

The book traces the organizations and events that skilled workers created and imbued with their particular values, including friendly societies,

mechanics' institutes, baseball teams, and processions. Palmer demonstrates how an apartness created by workers' sense of having somewhat separate interests from employers—he is careful to note that for some time “producerist” ideology linked workers and owners—gradually produced the Knights of Labor, which worked to free workers from employer domination in the short run but had a vision, however hazy, of creating a new society in which workers were owners. Earlier social historians noted the defensive aspect of unionism, which Palmer acknowledges. He goes beyond that to emphasize skilled workers' efforts to maintain and expand their control over the labour process, in response to employer attempts to transfer such control to owners via new techniques of managing the labour process that reduced owner dependence on skills of particular groups of tradespeople. The powerful worker campaign for a nine-hour day in the 1870s exemplified workers' views that too much of their time was stolen by employers. The movement for a legislated shorter workday, the brief flowering of the Knights of Labor, and then sympathy strikes and boycotts that characterized the “new unionism” emerging in the 1890s and early 1900s united skilled and unskilled workers in defence of common working-class interests. It also sent Allan Studholme, a stove moulder and former Knights activist, to the Ontario legislature from 1906 to 1919 as an Independent Labour MLA. Palmer, while clear about his own skepticism regarding the parliamentary road to socialism, provides a sympathetic portrait of Studholme, whom he views as relatively typical in his thinking of Hamilton's skilled workers.

Palmer, contrary to what his later critics would say, recognizes in the book that gaps in its analysis include a failure to deal in any depth with family life, religion, and partisan politics. He points out that source materials on these questions are either scarce (particularly for religion) or so abundant as to merit separate studies (particularly for the family). Though McNaught and other defenders of the historical status quo attacked his methods and his political engagements, Palmer's first book established his commitment to empirical rigour—rather early in his career, the phrase “a Bryan Palmer footnote” came to mean a lengthy footnote for a particular claim that included both meticulously cited primary sources and vast references to an international body of literature.

Kealey's study of workers in Toronto in the latter half of the nineteenth century, published shortly after the Hamilton book, covered similar ground

to Palmer's manuscript.<sup>37</sup> Kealey and Palmer worked closely together on *Labour/Le Travail* and shared support for the historical approach of E. P. Thompson. The main difference between the two books was that Palmer began his book with a chapter of fairly explicit Marxist theory, while Kealey chose to embed the Marxist thrust within his book. I therefore chose to use Palmer over Kealey when I had the pleasure of offering the first labour history course ever to be offered at an Alberta university. Kealey certainly has had an equally distinguished career as a labour historian as Palmer, and, in addition to his own published works, he has left an indelible mark on the fields of Canadian labour history and labour studies as the founding editor of *Labour/Le Travail*. Ultimately, he would generally play a rather more diplomatic role among working-class historians and within the historical profession than Palmer and become a significant university sector bureaucrat. But both were initially viewed as "bad boys" in the profession, and it made sense in the early 1980s that the two of them worked together to produce a book on the Knights of Labor, whose role in Hamilton and Toronto each respectively had pursued in their study of urban labour. *Dreaming of What Might Be* studied the Knights across Ontario and placed its research in the context of broader American studies of the Knights, though curiously made only passing references to the Knights in Québec, where their history proved to be of longer duration than in Ontario.

Though a joint effort, the spirit of *Dreaming* seems similar to that of the authors' respective books on Toronto and Hamilton. The language of the book seems a mix of class conflict references and more toned-down reflections. It opens with rather vague reformist formulations, such as the following:

The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor saw a different way forward, glimpsed another kind of social system. They failed to bring it into being and their conception of what might be was certainly flawed, but their critique of the new industrial order prefaced other attacks and helped to establish a tradition of dissent that continues to this day. Without that tradition, without the many challenges it has raised, we might well be in worse shape than we are. To look at the origins of that long history of opposition, then, is to make ourselves aware of important critical insights.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, later in the book, the Knights are credited with an “attempt to forge a culture in which workers saw themselves as a class, and in which members of that class could see past the mystifications of a bourgeois domination to the promise and potential of a better world.”<sup>39</sup> Further, they “built upon a class culture to create a movement culture, taking the differences in ways of life that had existed for so long and channeling them toward the demand for change.”<sup>40</sup> The wide-ranging book challenges earlier notions that the Knights were authoritarian because of the secrecy vows that both bound members together and provided a degree of protection against employer hostility. It also provides evidence against claims that the Knights opposed strikes or that they limited the ability of skilled workers to protect their turf because of the presence of many workers deemed unskilled. Its materials on the Knights’ inclusion of women and black people, though the Order failed to struggle against strong white working-class prejudices against Asian people, are also significant. They might look to be too brief a portion of the book by 2020 standards, but by 1982 standards, when virtually all employed Canadian historians were white males, they were something of a breakthrough. Willingness of the Knights to organize at least some women and non-whites is part of the Kealey and Palmer complicated story that blows away the myths that skilled workers were a “labour aristocracy” without concerns regarding fellow workers. While skilled workers were indeed trying to defend artisanal control in workplaces, they did reach out to other workers, and the Knights had a vision of a cooperative society where ownership and working could be blended. Neither the decline of the Knights nor the eventual success of the conservative, crafts-oriented Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, with its business unionism and aristocracy of labour ideal, were foreordained. Finally, the emphasis on the development and decline of a producerist ideology as earlier competitive capitalism moved toward bigness and eventually monopolies helped the authors to depict a changing class consciousness.

Interestingly, in the introduction to the book, when the authors imagined playfully whose identity among the characters in their book they best saw in themselves, “Kealey found himself shoved into Powderly’s chair,” that of the natural leader of an organization. But “Palmer unassumingly identified with Tom O’Reilly,” a minor character in the Knights’ playbook, but one who was a strong critic of opportunist leaders within the movement,

particularly A. W. Wright, who became the head honcho of the Ontario movement in the early 1890s as the organization was falling apart.<sup>41</sup> About all we learn of O'Reilly is that he regarded Wright as either indolent or uncaring about the members. At one point he wrote that "if every man did as little work as A. W. Wright, and all were paid for it there would be no industrial question to solve as everyone would be contented and happy."<sup>42</sup> Symbolically, while Kealey seemed a natural leader, Palmer viewed himself as a rank-and-filer willing and able to critique working-class leaders and their strategies objectively and witheringly.

Palmer's iconoclastic position among the new social historians of labour was somewhat in evidence from the start, as McNaught's singling him out for condemnation demonstrated. But it would grow during the 1980s. There were certainly hints, in *A Culture in Conflict*, of his taking a harder line than others took on the need for a focus on strengths and impediments in working-class life and institutions regarding the goal of overthrowing class society. That was true as well in his E. P. Thompson book in 1981, and in his first edition of the text *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980* in 1983.<sup>43</sup> The latter was a direct competitor for Desmond Morton's *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour*, which was released two years earlier and exemplified the perspectives of the social democratic defenders of the trade union status quo at the time that the social historians were interrogating.<sup>44</sup> Palmer's text was characterized by his having read virtually everything that had been written about Canadian labour and by a broad focus on workers' lives, values, and struggles that contrasted with Morton's steadfast emphasis on pragmatic trade union leaders and ridicule for more radical movements and leaders. Instructors and readers interested in the radical possibilities of workers' movements, including the Knights, the Industrial Workers of the World, and the Communist Party, found the Palmer text to be a breath of fresh air after the Morton text, which relied on conservative accounts of such organizations and dismissed their importance altogether.

By the time that Palmer published the revised version of the textbook in 1992, both the literature on working-class history and Palmer's personal experiences resulted in important shifts in emphases. Though the focus on workers' struggles remained, he devoted more analysis to workers' accommodation to capitalist structures. The new text built on the feminist literature of the 1980s to take a critical stance toward a labour

literature that assumed, uncritically, the “family economy.” It also embraced the 1980s literature on regulation of trade unionism.<sup>45</sup> Palmer placed an even greater emphasis than in the past on leadership, making clear his disagreements with other labour historians who drew their punches when discussing the class collaborationist enthusiasms of the post–World War II labour leaders. Following on the work of Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, among others, on the postwar compromise by capitalists and the state that attempted to co-opt the labour leadership to placate a working class that demonstrated great militancy during the war and the early postwar period, Palmer stressed the gradual collapse of that ruling-class willingness to compromise. For him, that raised serious questions about the character of the union leadership. He wrote: “Intellectual trends, which focus on ‘history from the bottom up,’ and a deeply entrenched quasi-syndicalist belief that leaders themselves are only a product of what the rank-and-file produces, coincide to shield labour leadership from serious scrutiny.” That leadership is focused on defending the postwar settlement “in spite of the blunt reality that the settlement has been gutted by capital and the state in the recent past.”<sup>46</sup>

Palmer’s increased attentiveness to the paralysis of the postwar union leadership as the postwar compromise that had given them respectability and big salaries crumbled had much to do with his experiences during the 130-day Solidarity movement in British Columbia in 1983. He was a participant-observer in Solidarity, and as a professor at Simon Fraser University had a vested interest in the outcome of a fight to at least preserve existing education, health, and social programs. His book, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (1987), is an angry but closely argued book about how the trade union and NDP leadership worked to dampen, then eliminate, a grassroots movement toward a general strike in response to Social Credit Premier Bill Bennett’s effort to impose a harsh, neoliberal budget in 1983. In retrospect, we know that the trade union and NDP establishment suppression of a workers’ revolt in British Columbia encouraged the bourgeoisie, not only in that province but right across the country, to believe that they could tear up the postwar compromise with little fear of successful reprisals from the working people who were the greatest victims of a concerted global capitalist effort to further redistribute wealth from labour to capital. But at the time, both the unions and social democrats were either oblivious to the imposition

of a new capitalist paradigm or too wedded to their comfortable ways of operating to risk yielding any power to the masses, or both. As Palmer notes, the social welfare measures granted begrudgingly by governments and capitalists in the 1940s were a response to “capital’s long-term interests,” including the undercutting of left-wing challenges.<sup>47</sup> Once those challenges decreased, capitalists and the state tested the waters to see how much they could increase capital’s share of national income.

State sector workers were horrified by the Bennett government’s proposed sweeping legislation to cut jobs, services, and pay. A Solidarity Coalition arose to unite all organizations and individuals who would suffer from the Bennett legislation, either as workers or as service recipients or both. Communists seized the initiative to create the Operation Solidarity movement. But their intention, notes Palmer, was only to get the Federation to act. “Stalinism, with a record of half a century of reformist practice and conditioned by decades of red baiting and the suppression of revolutionary will, aspired to be nothing more than an introduction to a more mainstream reformism, a butler for the bureaucracy.”<sup>48</sup> While that characterization of the role of the Communists from the time of the Popular Front onwards is much challenged by labour and party historians, it seems appropriate for the 1980s, by which time the Communist movement in Canada in particular had shrunk, aged, and become objectively as cynical about a socialist overthrow of capitalism as the social democrats.<sup>49</sup>

Operation Solidarity was indeed taken over by the mainstream labour bureaucracy, who generally ignored the far larger Solidarity Coalition, which claimed the allegiance of about 950,000 people. While the latter demanded the withdrawal of the entire package of Bennett cuts and privatizations, the former just wanted workers to sit on their hands until the next election, when they could all go out and work to put the NDP back in power. Of the NDP, Palmer writes forcefully: “The NDP in British Columbia, as elsewhere in Canada, epitomizes the worldwide capitulation of social democracy to electoralism in the twentieth century. It has no sympathy for nor conception of struggle outside of the parliamentary forum.”<sup>50</sup>

So, while many groups of public workers had walked off the job and were promoting the idea of a general strike to force the Bennett government to beat a retreat, their leaders were mostly concerned about getting them back to work. The new president of the British Columbia Federation of Labour (BCFL) was Arthur Kube, a “consummate social democrat, the



perfect bureaucrat.”<sup>51</sup> Kube described himself as “a Steel heavy” who fought the Communist-led Mine Mill union. “I did work in immigrants. There was the whole anti-Communist thing. No question there was redbaiting.”<sup>52</sup> But Palmer resists the temptation to attribute the eventual sell-out of the BCFL leadership to Kube or to Jack Munro, the gruff BC leader of the International Woodworkers of America – Canada, who served as the public face of the weak accord that the union leaders reached with Bennett and that largely preserved Bennett’s policies. They were, in Palmer’s view, symbols of a larger malaise within the Canadian trade union movement. “Events were thus not guided by individual choices and decisions, either conspiratorial or democratic, but by an implacable structure of bureaucratized authority, reformist agendas, and limited conceptions of what it is possible to do.”<sup>53</sup>

Palmer concludes *Solidarity* by claiming that his experience “taught me some hard political lessons.” Though he had already been suspicious of trade union officials, “I, too, was guilty of slighting the critical importance of leadership and program, trusting implicitly if uneasily in the momentum of the movement to carry the struggle forward.” As a committed Trotskyist, that led him to Lenin’s statement in 1906 regarding the soviets: “How inadequate a temporary nonpartisan organization is, which at best may supplement a stable and durable militant organization or a party, but can never replace it.”<sup>54</sup> Palmer’s experience of the Solidarity movement and the efforts by the trade union leadership to dampen grassroots revolt contributed to his critical review in 2018 of *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement* by journalist Rod Mickleburgh. The book’s production was heavily funded by the International Woodworkers of America, the long-time leader of which, Jack Munro, was the public face of the trade union leadership’s sell-out of Solidarity, whose ghost Palmer finds throughout the book, which is dedicated to Munro’s memory.<sup>55</sup>

Another book project of Palmer’s before the second edition of *Working-Class Experience* appeared involved his working with Communist Party renegade Jack Scott on the latter’s memoirs about his life as a Communist within the workers’ movement. While Palmer clearly respected Scott’s spirited life of sacrifices for the Communist cause and his efforts to keep the Marxist faith after parting with the Communist Party, his introduction to Scott’s book makes clear his own perspective that Stalinism was a tragedy for the workers’ movement. Palmer notes that there

are two main schools among historians of the working class regarding the Communists. For one group, mainly social democrats, they were simply a foreign element inserted in national working-class movements. For the other group, which focused on the social history, Communist militants were local actors in local movements whose formal connection to Stalin and the Comintern exercised little impact on their working-class activities. Palmer regards both views as lacking in nuance and calls for a “two-sided appreciation of the Communist experience, attentive to Stalinism’s capacity to structure thought and action in deforming ways and appreciative of the limited possibilities for political activity open to people like Scott.” While suggesting that “international developments and the importance of leadership” must be stressed, Palmer also argues that the party rank-and-file activities do need to be studied, “if only to appreciate the ways in which Stalinism squandered so much human material, subverted the course of revolutionary communism, and provided the formative political experience for so many class conscious workers who managed to find their way out of the trap that the CP had become.”<sup>56</sup>

His political work and subsequent publications in the 1980s having sharpened Palmer’s focus on the importance of leadership within the workers’ movement and the largely negative role that both Social Democrats and Communists had played in terms of responding to workers’ complaints, his anger with the discursive turn, reflected in *Descent into Discourse* in 1990, is unsurprising. It was a dress rehearsal for the revision of *Working-Class Experience* and then the dressing down he received from colleagues such as Heron. Palmer was unrepentant and his work after the revising of that book demonstrated a continuing historical focus on workers’ class consciousness and the potential for revolutionary action, as opposed to the pluralist-influenced celebration or at least examination of everything about workers’ everyday lives that some social historians of labour preferred.

Indeed, Palmer’s shift in emphasis toward big “P” political issues regarding working people and revolution was evident in his second book on E. P. Thompson in 1994, which, while a homage to his late mentor who had recently passed, was also far more openly critical of the shortcomings in Thompson’s work even as Palmer defended his oeuvre overall. For example, Palmer writes:

Yet in the end it matters far less that Thompson's claims for the working class of early nineteenth-century England rest too lightly on an understanding of accumulation and capitalism's uneven march, privilege artisanal debasements and efforts to deflect proletarianization, focus attention on the resisting side of experience . . . and understate accommodation, elevate unnecessarily the question of consciousness to the detriment of an appreciation of socioeconomic structure, reproduce and valorize the masculinist understanding of the politics and workplace meanings of class, and overstate the level of class cohesion in a chronologically premature insistence that the working class was in fact made by 1832, than that the book opened interpretive eyes to a new way of seeing class.<sup>57</sup>

He adds quickly that Thompson did try to respond to his critics by investigating the themes that they accused him of ignoring or treating too lightly, but that he did so without surrendering his emphasis on the lives and institutions of working people themselves. But the extent to which Palmer concedes that the complaints of Thompson's critics, while perhaps missing the whole point of his work, had merit suggests also a degree of self-criticism for some of his earliest work. But we are not by any means talking about something close to a retreat. He continues to defend Thompson's contribution to the study of working people as one of immense importance and warns against any efforts to toss out the baby with the bathwater: "If the study of class can best be appreciated by historians sensitive to the structural and economic dimensions of class experience *as well as* the social, political, and cultural context of class formation, it is rather difficult to imagine what gains are to be made (in terms of our appreciation of class) by returning solely to the analysis of forms, tendencies, and laws of the capitalist system."<sup>58</sup> This was a message directed at fellow Marxists as much as or more than anyone else, since it was Marxist structuralists who had denounced Thompson's humanistic Marxism for straying from a narrowed focus to those important, but in their hands often mechanistic, concerns.

That same year, in a case study of Goodyear, Palmer attempted to apply his overall appreciation of both Thompson and the concerns of his critics in a study of Goodyear in Ontario and its relocation of a plant from Etobicoke to Napanee. "This is a study of 'the manufacturing of consent,' and examination of just how, in the context of specific human needs, capital

manages to extend its needs into the realm of universal need, to bury its own interests in an avalanche of 'benevolence,' highlighting not the inequities of social relationships but their supposed reciprocities."<sup>59</sup> It is a close examination of the behaviours over a century of both sides in the class struggle that demonstrates the imbalance of economic and social power of the capitalist and the workers. It also explores why and how, at times, the workers tried to assert their class interests collectively. The book also provides an important commentary on how capital, at times confronted by working-class organization in the cities that threatens capital's share of income, turns to the countryside (or for that matter to other countries where labour is deemed cheap and weak in its ability to organize against capital).

In this case, Goodyear had excellent reason to believe that the Napanee plant, unlike the Etobicoke one, would not be successfully unionized, and it wasn't. Palmer notes that the Knights of Labor, while they had 185 members in the local assembly, faced great resistance in efforts to grow in the region. The Order's organizer commented: "This section of the country is sadly in need of organization . . . but fear of the money kings (the Rathbuns) keep the working class in slavery."<sup>60</sup> Even by the mid-1960s, only four of sixteen major Napanee and district employees had been organized. Unemployment levels cautioned against unionism; they were higher in the area than the Ontario average when Goodyear moved to Napanee in 1988, and in double digits in the early 1990s. A wage increase also helped to fend off an effort by the United Rubber Workers (URW) to organize the Napanee plant. The company's anti-union efforts extended to the builders of the new plant. The Carpenters' Union protested that local carpenters were excluded from making forms for the plant foundations in favour of non-union general labourers from outside the region. Goodyear feebly claimed neutrality, indicating that decisions about who was hired for construction were in the hands of the Oakville contractor that Goodyear had hired. Even the unionized workers often lacked basic safety protections. Polydore St. Jean, an ironworker and member of the United Steelworkers of America, was not wearing a safety belt when he fell to his death. The coroner denounced the Ontario ministry of labour's failure to require safety measures in structural steel erection.<sup>61</sup>

It was not as if the URW were revolutionaries who refused to cooperate with plant owners and managers. While the Etobicoke plant workers

certainly protested the move, they and their union had been drawn earlier into support of the current owners from a takeover bid. Of course, there were class differences in their motives. For the workers, the issue was job security.<sup>62</sup> When they lost their jobs, a counsellor to the laid-off operatives noted: "Their work defined them. They thought, 'I'm a *rubber* worker. I'm a *Goodyear* worker.'" They lost the team members who had become friends and though they had abundant skills, "they're getting the impression from the world around them that they're worth nothing."<sup>63</sup> That was consistent with what a later literature would find regarding plant shutdowns generally.<sup>64</sup> Palmer notes that the workers produced a play called *Shadowboxers* that celebrated their work and outlined what the workers believed they were losing.<sup>65</sup>

Before the URW organized the plant, Goodyear had attempted to co-opt workers with welfare and recreation programs and the establishment of a company union. The latter collapsed in the 1930s when the company refused to return to the eight-hour day in the mid-1930s. But policies of placating the workers continued. In all of his relating of worker–company relations, Palmer attempts to be sensitive to the strategies and attitudes on both sides of the class divide, and to the ways in which workers' options were limited by capitalist economic structures. He is interested in workers' resistance, but also in the restrictions that particular sets of circumstances placed on them.

While the Goodyear book is compact, Palmer attempts to place the experiences of that company's workers in southern Ontario within an international framework of capitalist restructuring and the limits that worker resistance faced as the postwar compromise gave way to neoliberalism and a ruthlessness on the part of international capital as it attempted to regain and exceed earlier income shares relative to labour as well as its uncontested power over workers in all workplaces. This was in line with his concerns in the second edition of *Working-Class Experience* that studies of workers' lives in particular locales be integrated with an international viewpoint, emphasizing not only class conflict but changing economic structures that influenced both capital's momentary strategies and the kinds of resistance by workers with any chance of success at the time. Palmer indeed conceded in 2000 that the right-wing critics of social history had a partial point in their critiques that those with left-wing objectives needed to heed, if not for the reasons that caused the laments of the reactionaries.

Social history, notwithstanding its necessary direction and positive impulse, has indeed led toward the privatizing of historical inquiry, immersing us in a fetishization of the particular that has an inevitable consequence of depoliticizing historical practice. This was never the intention of the social historians of the working class, who opted to study class formation in the particularities of nineteenth-century place. Because our research and writing were consciously articulated against the routinization of labour history's respectable institutional and social democratic face, however, we tilted our arguments too forcefully in ways that immersed us in the local to the detriment of the appreciation of larger settings, where provincial and national state power and policing were ensconced. At a more conceptual level, although we wrestled with the meaning of relationships that were developed at the interface of agency and determination, our accent was understandably on the former, to the point that we at times underestimated the latter.<sup>66</sup>

Both rebellious and revolutionary workers continued to be a focus for Palmer as his outpouring of books and articles after the Goodyear study demonstrated. In 2007 came the first of two intended volumes on James Cannon, a lovingly constructed, well-written biography. The first book is a model of working-class history, placing as much emphasis on the personal to explain the evolution of Cannon's ideas as on the political debates of the period themselves. Perhaps Palmer had taken the Heron criticism somewhat seriously, but was determined to continue to focus on workers' revolutionary prospects, while providing as fully textured a history of working-class life as possible. Cannon emerges as both a symbol of the kind of revolutionary that a deprived, working-class life could produce as well as an individual whose trajectory was very different from those of his fellows, since most of his childhood friends barely considered walking in the revolutionary working-class path that he took. From the Socialist Party to the Industrial Workers of the World to the Communist Party to the Left Opposition, first inside and then independent from the Communist Party, we see the evolution of a revolutionary worker.

At times, necessarily, the focus in the book is well away from the shop floor and is instead in the rooms where political parties met, or in Moscow where committed Communist Internationalists were treated as if they were to be no more than ciphers for the latest political flavour of the Stalinist gangsters. But Palmer always keeps in sight Cannon's work with various

groups of workers and his effort to make Marxist ideas supple enough to meet workers where they were at in terms of their particular level of class consciousness, their lived occupational and community situations, and their choices of unions and political organizations. That made remaining in the stifling Communist Party with its pseudo-scientific notions of Marxism and subordination to Stalin's perceived domestic and international needs at given moments impossible. Cannon's commitment was to workers and he could not accept the notion that he should park his brain at the front door when he attended CP meetings and think and do what Stalin's stooges ordered. As Palmer concludes in the conclusion to Volume 1, as Cannon mulled about how a revolutionary working-class party should conduct itself, he grasped that the American working class was

of a monolithic, homogeneous mass, a proletarian essence marching inevitably to class victory and ultimate power. Rather, the working class was divided, layered in differentiations of ethnicity, race, skill, and region (gender, too, we might add, although Cannon, like so many of his time, paid too little attention to this realm). Such heterogeneity was also reflected in the organizational forms adhered to by workers (industrial vs. craft unionism), and Cannon, in contrast to most early communist leaders, was insistent that revolutionaries approach and interact with the plethora of working-class mobilizations in the United States astutely rather than dogmatically: he would countenance no routinized dismissal of any body of workers, organized or unorganized, IWW-affiliated or American Federation of Labor-led.<sup>67</sup>

In line with that suggestion of the Stalinist dismissal of trends in working-class organizing other than their own, Palmer provides a much more problematic approach to the labour defence movement, which the Communists led, than most labour histories document. Palmer confirms that literature's suggestion that the International Labor Defense (ILD), formed in 1925, involved far more militants than the Communist Party as such. While the CPUSA enrolled no more than 7,500 people in 1926, there were 20,000 individual members and 75,000 affiliates in 156 branches of the ILD that year. The ILD represented a united front that led protests to free class prisoners, to fight racism and lynching, and to expose terror against workers worldwide. It mailed class-war prisoners monthly donations, and its newspaper saluted the struggles that had led toward their

incarceration. With Cannon taking much of the lead, the ILD fought cases such as the celebrated framing of revolutionaries Sacco and Vanzetti with demonstrations, telegrams, mass meetings, and more. Throughout all of this, Cannon took seriously the notion that the ILD was both fighting for the rights of all working-class tendencies the authorities were trying to suppress and involving their militants in its efforts. But in his discussion of Cannon's leading role in the ILD, Palmer finds that an important section of the party, with Comintern support, objected to Cannon's efforts to make the ILD a true united front, as opposed to simply a Communist-controlled recruitment agency with disdain for other working-class groups.<sup>68</sup> The distinction that Cannon made between the party as the vanguard of the working class and as a defender of struggling workers and all their organizations was not appreciated by an increasingly Stalinized party.

For Palmer, the point of recovering the struggles of James P. Cannon, who some might dismiss as just another fellow the CPUSA decided was unable to accommodate its ever-shifting, Soviet-dictated lines, is that he, though not he alone, represents an important "fusion of theory and practice" that a revolutionary left, if it is going to re-emerge, needs to understand and recreate.<sup>69</sup> He has an interesting observation about Cannon's eclectic political life and why it might explain why he has been so ignored despite his crucial role in establishing the early CPUSA.

Because Cannon was a Wobbly who insisted that he had learned something from the Russian Revolution, he is not championed in circles where the Industrial Workers of the World remain much in vogue, but the legacy of 1917 is regarded with loud disfavour. The anarchist tradition within which Cannon conducted much united-front work, especially in defence of class-war prisoners, at the same time as he polemicized against it in debates on the left, has little time for such an unambiguous Leninist. A Stalinist school of falsification has managed to write Cannon out of the history of the Communist Party in the 1920s, which takes considerable effort. Most New Left scholarship in the United States has a deeply ingrained hostility to Trotskyism, so much so that Cannon is remarkably absent in accounts of the American radical tradition emanating from this quarter.<sup>70</sup>

While Palmer's work on Cannon is an examination of leadership among insurgent workers through the life story of one American working-class revolutionary, *Revolutionary Teamsters* tells the story of a collective leadership in a set of famous strikes, unlikely led by Trotskyists: the Minneapolis



teamsters' strikes of 1934. "If the latter [teamsters] are the leather-jacketed, cigarette-smoking clique gathered in the corner, demanding that all others give them a wide berth, the former [Trotskyists] are the proverbial wall-flowers, metaphorically sitting alone on the sidelines."<sup>71</sup> His goal is to analyze these strikes and their leaders' successes and failures "within the framework of the uneven and combined development of class relations in Minneapolis and the United States."<sup>72</sup> Comparing these strikes to the Toledo mass strike of the same year led by pacifist A. J. Muste and the Communist Party leadership of the San Francisco mass strike, he notes that all three were spontaneous strikes to which politically oriented groups came to provide leadership and that all three demonstrated the way in which workers were poorly served by the craft unionism of the American Federation of Labor. But, in his view, the Minnesota Trotskyist leadership distinguished itself from the leadership of the other two strikes in originating more directly from the industry than the other two, being more resolute and visionary, and being better able to battle both the red-baiters and the AFL bureaucracy with which strikers in all three cities were forced to contend.<sup>73</sup>

The Minneapolis strikes began with the organization of a coal-yards strike in February 1934 that succeeded in winning recognition of the union and a slight wage increase. Mass picketing, picket-line fights with police, and sympathy strikes by ice wagon drivers prevented movement of coal in the city. Next came support for an upholstery workers' strike. The Trotskyist leaders, whose background Palmer outlines, had worked for several years in a program to mobilize workers within the Communist League of America. In 1934, they created rank-and-file committees across all facets of trucking, so that there was full involvement in all developments by "the coal-yards, drivers and helpers, gas and oil-workers, market and food-store workers, warehousemen, shipping-room employees, packers, checkers and weighers, dispatchers and counter and platform workers."<sup>74</sup> They trained younger militants as speakers and agitators.

Strikes in May led to considerable gains and a massive influx into Local 574, despite reactionary attacks against the local strike organized by International Brotherhood of Teamsters' leader Dan Tobin. In July, twenty-five hundred workers voted to strike, facing better organized trucking companies and a police chief committed to providing police protection for companies insisting on moving goods during a strike. The strikers also

once again faced the opposition of their national leadership, while the AFL bureaucracy, though claiming support for the strikers, refused to call workers into the street to support Local 574. Meanwhile, the Communist Party proposed a workers' takeover of the city, which Palmer labels as "ultra-leftism" that led to "state-victimisation" of the Trotskyist leadership.<sup>75</sup> Militancy and a politically astute leadership won the strike. Palmer then analyzes why the strike gains were gradually whittled away in an atmosphere where the workers had the entire ruling class organized against them, while the AFL also remained committed to their defeat.

While his two American labour history books of the first decade of the twenty-first century focused on leadership and political organization within the labour movement, the working-class component of Palmer's chief Canadian monograph of the period had a very different focus: wildcat strikes. Palmer's well-crafted collage of 1960s events and social changes, *Canada's 1960s*, traces the growth of rebellion against Cold War conformity, demonstrating the ways in which cultural values shifted in a changing economy. After describing the emergence of a New Left on campuses committed to anti-imperialism and a rejection of every type of authoritarianism, Palmer devotes a chapter to the study of the impact of an emerging youth culture on young people who did not go to university, but who brought some of the same attitudes to workplaces that their middle-class counterparts were bringing to the halls of post-secondary learning. Young workers rejected hierarchical, bureaucratic structures, both within management and unions. They scoffed at the legalistic arrangements that the union leaders defended, including the Rand Formula trade-off between guaranteed union check-offs for all workers in unionized workplaces and the union promise that no labour actions would occur during the tenure of a collective bargaining contract. Workers were supposed to seek justice through grievance procedures that often took months or even years to come to conclusion, rather than striking, working to rule, or otherwise using workers' collective potential power to respond to owners' law-protected privileges.<sup>76</sup> The result was that "segments of labour were placing limits on how much they would be contained by the bureaucratic legalism of modern class relations."<sup>77</sup>

Violence during the Inco strike in 1966 and in the Québec longshoremen's strike the same year was evidence of this rising of working-class anger. This was after almost two decades of Cold War quiescence orchestrated by

managers and union leaders working in tandem to protect an employer–union–state compromise effected in the late 1940s, and meant to give workers a share of an increasing capitalist economic pie in return for their agreement, enforced by their unions, to give all power in the workplace to owners and the management teams they assembled. Class and nation combined in many strike actions in Québec, while there were also some nationalist uprisings in Canadian unions, motivated as much by resentment at a lack of union democracy in many American union subsidiaries in Canada as anything else.<sup>78</sup> But this moment of revolt, like many before it, proved relatively short lived.

Around the corner of the wildcat wave of 1965–66 was a growing left workers' challenge. Had it co-joined the youth of the university and the unions, the result could well have reconfigured the nature of twentieth-century Canada. Class difference is a difficult hurdle to leap, however, and as campus youth, women, and Indigenous advocates of "Red Power" joined the unruly workers of the 1960s in an explosive embrace of dissidence and opposition, they did so, ultimately, divided from one another, in separate and unequal mobilizations.<sup>79</sup>

Palmer's next major Canadian book marked a return to the longer view of working-class struggles that marked his survey texts on Canadian labour, though this time with an emphasis on wageless workers rather than skilled, waged workers. *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History*, co-written with Gaétan Héroux, a long-time anti-poverty activist with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, traces the struggles of the poor from the 1830s to the present.<sup>80</sup> The book constitutes a history of Toronto from its earliest days to the present, seen through the lives of its poorest citizens, the reserve army of labour. It underlines the constant resistance of those who have been victimized by the unjust logic of the capitalist mode of production that requires an underclass whose degradation serves to intimidate those in work from fighting for greater power and income within workplaces. The latter are constantly made aware that they could fall into the underclass if they do not mind their Ps and Qs and accept the rule of their supposed betters. But the authors show that cooperation between those in work and those without has been common, particularly when socialist radicals were available to make the link between the interests of those in work and those out of it, in order to work together to fight the capitalists who oppress both groups. Palmer and Héroux demonstrate that the early history of Toronto

and Ontario involved the proletarianization of waves of immigrants and the disciplining of those who demanded worker human rights through carceral means, along with the unemployed. Toronto's House of Industry, with its work test, exemplified the cruelty of capitalism to its victims: it created unemployment and then put the unemployed in a prison-like institution where it forced them to work and live under inhuman living conditions.

But the struggles of the wageless against this mistreatment were constant. Both in 1908 and 1909 there were rebellions involving about one thousand wageless individuals, with the more militant uprising of 1909 being led by socialist agitators. Police and court interventions guaranteed their defeat, but strengthened the cause of the unemployed in the minds of the working class. When the depression of 1913–14 struck, both waged and unwaged workers were left with unlivable incomes. After the war, Communists and other radicals organized the unemployed into a fierce force of opposition to the capitalist system. In more recent years, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty has played a similar, radical role and attempted to unite waged and wageless workers to fight against the capitalist system.



Throughout his scholarly career, Bryan D. Palmer has, in various ways, asked the same questions regarding working people both in Canada and the United States, and to some degree beyond: what were the circumstances of their lives in various periods, how did they assess those circumstances, and what did they do to try to change them? As a Marxist, he has placed his main focus on class struggle, and as a Leninist, he has shone a spotlight on the vanguard of organizers for social change. As a product of the New Left, that spotlight has been a critical one that has assessed whether the leadership that has arisen at various points has been democratic, anti-authoritarian, and sought the full liberation of workers, as opposed to simply reformist change, or change more deep-seated, but with a tendency to favour a bureaucratic, authoritarian, "Stalinist" vision of socialism. In his early writings, under the influence of E. P. Thompson's work, the emphasis is mostly on the strengths of working-class communities in creating resistance to the dictates of capital. Over time, he has provided equal emphasis on capital's ability to impose a degree of ideological hegemony that has weakened the working-class desire for the overthrow of capitalism, but

also the creation of organized socialist movements and parties and their efforts to rekindle that anti-capitalist spirit.

Throughout it all, Palmer has been a fairly lonely voice for real ideological debate among social historians of labour in Canada, many of whom have preferred to avoid or at least understate debates in order to preserve a social circle that their work has created, as well as to provide the appearance within the historical profession of a united front against old guard, bourgeois historians. In the long run, if that spirit of debate can widen, it will save Canadian working-class history from appearing to be a collection of stories, discourses, and personal narratives without clear, connecting threads. Of course, we need to know as much about what was happening among working people in different periods as possible. But mere chronicling, as Palmer has always demonstrated, is not enough. If working-class historians are politically engaged scholars who seek to contribute to a project of creating a socialist society, then Palmer's combination of historical detail, theoretical rigour, and revolutionary commitment provides a model for what our scholarship of the working class needs to build upon. His own optimistic comments in 2018 on the potentialities of working-class historical research and debates provide a fitting ending to this chapter:

Over time, and within any given period of contested class relations, there will inevitably be a diversity of oppositional possibilities, and labour history has always been a field where liberal, social democratic, feminist, Marxist, anarchist and other voices of dissenting analysis clash interpretively. A part of labour history's robust and resilient nature is precisely that it contains this analytic and political diversity, spawning serious debate. This has always leavened and enlivened the intellectual nature of an oppositional field.<sup>81</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985* (St. John's, NL: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1988), 1.
2. Palmer never shies away from controversy, but word limits required some discretion about what controversies to include. So, for example, I have ignored his interesting response to a left-nationalist critique of the English Canadian working class by political economist Daniel Drache, since the

issues debated, while crucial to political debates of the 1980s, have seemed less crucial to recent scholarship. See Bryan D. Palmer, "Listening to History Rather Than Historians: Reflections on Working Class History," *Studies in Political Economy* 20, no. 1 (1986): 47–84; Daniel Drache, "The Formation and Fragmentation of the Canadian Working Class: 1820–1920," *Studies in Political Economy* 15 (1984): 43–89.

3. Bryan D. Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976): 5–31.
4. Bercuson's review appeared in *Business History Review* in 1983. He wrote that *Dreaming of What Might Be* was "dry, boring, and devoid of any feeling for the workers." See Bryan D. Palmer, "Writing About Canadian Workers: A Historiographic Overview," in Bryan D. Palmer, *Interventions and Appreciations*, vol. 2, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 73. At the time, Bercuson was one of several relatively recent labour historians who claimed to lack the ideological and partisan commitments of both the old guard social democrats and the Young Turk, left-minded, social historians of labour. But a decade later, he was a strident defender of neoliberalism and an activist in the Progressive Conservative Party. He became part of the so-called "Calgary school" of influential right-wing professors at the University of Calgary. Thomas Flanagan, the best known member of that school and the campaign manager for Stephen Harper's run for prime minister in 2004 and for the far-right provincial Wildrose Party in 2012, wrote the following of Bercuson and his close colleague, Barry Cooper, in 2015: "For two decades, David and Barry have worked tirelessly to push public opinion in the direction of fiscal responsibility, a strong national defense, close cooperation with our allies, resistance to Quebec separatism, and fair treatment for Western Canada." See Thomas Flanagan, "Legends of the Calgary School: Their Guns, Their Dogs, and the Women Who Love Them," *Voegelin View*, 25 January 2015, <https://voegelinview.com/legends-calgary-school-guns-dogs%E2%80%A8and-women-love/>.
5. In practice, McNaught attempted to make Woodsworth and the early CCFers acceptable to a Cold War audience, as the CCF did itself during the postwar period, by making the party activists and first leader appear to be middle-class reformists motivated by Methodism. James Naylor has suggested that, in fact, the majority in the early days were working-class activists motivated by Marxism. See Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J. S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959); James Naylor, *The Fate of Labour Socialism: The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the Dream of a Working-Class Future* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

6. Kenneth McNaught, "E. P. Thompson vs Harold Logan: Writing About Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review* 62, no. 2 (June 1981): 169.
7. McNaught, "E. P. Thompson vs Harold Logan," 150.
8. Terry Morley, "Canada and the Romantic Left," *Queen's Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 110–19; Bryan D. Palmer, "Working-Class Canada: Recent Historical Writing," *Queen's Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 594–616.
9. Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981), 14.
10. *Ibid.*, 70.
11. *Ibid.*, 71.
12. Palmer, "Writing About Canadian Workers," 80.
13. Gregory S. Kealey, "Editor's Note," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 5.
14. Granatstein's attack was the most definitive. See J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998). Michael Bliss's equivalent denunciation of the efforts of social historians was "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 5–17.
15. Craig Heron and Bryan D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901–14," *Canadian Historical Review* 58, no. 4 (December 1977): 423–58.
16. Craig Heron, "Towards Synthesis in Canadian Working-Class History: Reflections on Bryan Palmer's Rethinking," *Left History* 1, no. 1 (1993): 109.
17. *Ibid.*, 121.
18. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 21.
19. *Ibid.*, 17.
20. Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).
21. Material on this incident is based on my personal files as the book review editor of *Labour/Le Travail* at the time and as a member of the editorial board. I am hardly objective since I took the lead in defending Palmer against what I regarded as an effort to censor a scholar for publishing articles that the editors and reviewers of the other journals had deemed acceptable for publication in a journal other than the one he edited.
22. Bryan D. Palmer, "Historiographic Hassles: Class and Gender, Evidence and Interpretation," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33, no. 65 (May 2000): 106.
23. *Ibid.*, 116.
24. *Ibid.*, 123–28.

25. *Ibid.*, 129.
26. *Ibid.*, 128–41, particularly 130, 132, 134.
27. Lynne Marks, “Heroes and Hallelujahs – Labour History and the Social History of Religion in English Canada: A Response to Bryan Palmer,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 34, no. 17 (May 2001): 171.
28. *Ibid.*, 176.
29. Mariana Valverde, “Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33, no. 65 (May 2000): 59–77. The quotations are from pages 64 and 66.
30. Mariana Valverde et al., “On the Case: Explorations in Social History: A Roundtable Discussion,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (June 2000): 266–92.
31. In the same article where he critiques Marks.
32. I am not suggesting that Palmer could not have been more courteous in the pieces where he dissects the works of Valverde, Marks, and Iacovetta, or that a subsection of feminist scholars were completely wrong in closing ranks to defend their friends. I am, however, lamenting that the substantive scholarly disputes that were involved among the various players were trivialized in the process. Palmer’s critiques of these three scholars are valid, and I find troubling the notion that they should have been spared close, critical analysis of their work because, at least theoretically, they were struggling minority scholars confronted by an alleged icon. Palmer’s attacks on them were little different from his earlier attacks on Craig Heron and other male scholars, and the implicit suggestion that Valverde, Marks, and Iacovetta could not hold their ground because women scholars were still a minority is actually an insult to them. They all defended themselves vigorously and their supporters’ focus on power relations and politeness, rather than on joining the argument and demonstrating what, if anything, Palmer was so wrong about, strikes me as an indication that many Canadian historians of that period embraced the questionable stereotype of Canadian politeness to the point of resisting serious scholarly debates. I do not understand how any field can develop when social relations among scholars and concerns about the career prospects of poorly represented groups in the profession take precedence over uninhibited theoretical and empirical debates.
33. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979).
34. Katz had published a number of articles on his Hamilton work before producing his book on the subject: *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA:



- Harvard University Press, 1975). Palmer's angry critiques of Katz's work began in various CCLH *Bulletins* in 1975, and in 1984 he provided his fullest assault on the methodologies of Katz, who had, in the interim, become interested in structural Marxism; see "Emperor Katz's New Clothes; or with the Wizard in Oz," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 190–97.
35. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xi.
  36. *Ibid.*, xvi.
  37. Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867–1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).
  38. Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 22.
  39. *Ibid.*, 278.
  40. *Ibid.*, xiii.
  41. *Ibid.*, 279.
  42. *Ibid.*, xiii.
  43. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983).
  44. Desmond Morton, *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (Ottawa: Deneau and Greenberg, 1981).
  45. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1983), 16.
  46. *Ibid.*, 370.
  47. Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987), 17.
  48. *Ibid.*, 31.
  49. A recent Canadian defence of the Communists of the 1930s as makers of their own local policies to protect workers, as opposed to puppets of Stalin, is Stephen Endicott's *Raising the Workers' Flag: The Workers' Unity League of Canada, 1930–1936* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).
  50. Palmer, *Solidarity*, 53.
  51. *Ibid.*, 25.
  52. *Ibid.*, 26.
  53. *Ibid.*, 84.
  54. *Ibid.*, 105.
  55. Bryan D. Palmer, "The Ghost of Jack Munro," Review of *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, by Rod Mickleburgh, *The Ormsby Review* 348, 22 August 2018, <https://bcbooklook.com/2018/08/22/bc-labour-movement-history/>.
  56. Palmer, *A Communist Life*, 7.

57. Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994), 93–94; emphasis original.
58. *Ibid.*, 114; emphasis original.
59. Bryan D. Palmer, *Goodyear Invades the Backcountry: The Corporate Takeover of a Rural Town* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 16–17.
60. *Ibid.*, 32.
61. *Ibid.*, 32–33, 102, 104, 128, 132–34.
62. *Ibid.*, 75–77, 82–83.
63. *Ibid.*, 90.
64. See, for example, Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007); Steven High and Lachlan MacKinnon, eds., *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Post-Industrial Places* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); and Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York: The New Press, 1999).
65. Palmer, *Goodyear Invades*, 90.
66. Palmer, "Historiographic Hassles," 115.
67. Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928*, vol. 1 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 361.
68. *Ibid.*, 254–67.
69. *Ibid.*, 361.
70. *Ibid.*, 367.
71. Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1.
72. *Ibid.*, 6.
73. *Ibid.*, 8, 25.
74. *Ibid.*, 68.
75. *Ibid.*, 209.
76. Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 216–17, 219, 221, and 225.
77. *Ibid.*, 229.
78. *Ibid.*, 231–40.
79. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s*, 241.
80. Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).
81. Bryan D. Palmer, "Canada and the United States," in *Handbook Global History of Work*, edited by Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), 127.

## Bryan D. Palmer, Social Historian



*Ted McCoy*

In the first volume of *Labour/Le Travailleur*, published in 1976, Bryan Palmer opened the lead essay with the line, “History has not been kind to Karl Ungling.” Who? Ungling was an unknown printer who died in Detroit in 1859. Palmer thrusts him forward as an example of something larger—as emblematic of an artisan culture and of a struggle to retain tradition, and as a link between the ancient and modern, forged by the pride in craft and the destiny of strife and struggle.<sup>1</sup> In some ways, Palmer’s piece on artisan culture in nineteenth-century Ontario contained all of the elements of labour history that would be derisively attributed to his work by critics. It was a new era for labour history in Canada, and in this brash new journal Palmer appeared as his critics would later cast him: devoted to the obscure, the radical, and the cultural. Palmer’s work has often been mischaracterized in this way that is a distortion of his larger contributions. But in this first illustration of Palmer’s approach to the topics of working-class culture, movement, and activism, we can find the seeds of what would become an essential body of work that has greatly expanded the field of Canadian social history. These are also threads that run through the entirety of Palmer’s work, from his early working-class history through to his groundbreaking cultural history at the turn of the century. There is much to discover in Palmer’s methodology.

This chapter explores Palmer’s social history to argue for a re-examination of his significant contribution and insight as a social historian. What can we learn? Here I highlight the essential relationships between historical materialism and social history throughout Palmer’s writing. Historical

materialism is the theoretical foundation of Palmer's work, and social history is the practice of using it to reveal insights about the formation of the working class, struggle and opposition, and the possibilities for change and liberation. For future students reading Palmer's work, understanding some of the relationship between historical materialism and social history points toward an enduring methodology that still forms the backbone of a critically important way of understanding the past, and one in which students might reinvest future energies. I divide Palmer's scholarship into three distinct eras. These are roughly divided by decades, commencing in 1976 with his first labour histories, moving to cultural critique and analysis, and culminating with the publication of *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]* in 2000.<sup>2</sup> Exploring Palmer's social history in these different eras prompts a rethinking aimed at existing scholars and charts a road map for new scholars who might look to Palmer's work for a sense of how to proceed with social history that is empirically grounded, political, and emancipatory.



For the first decade of his career, Palmer was regarded as a labour historian first and foremost. This was natural given the topics of his early research and his involvement in the early days of *Labour/Le Travail*, and given that his contemporaries and collaborators were other young labour historians, including Gregory S. Kealey, Peter Warrion, Wayne Roberts, and Michael B. Katz. Influences also mattered. Palmer was trained at the formative moment of the emergence of New Left labour history, following in the footsteps of historians David Montgomery, Herbert G. Gutman, and Palmer's doctoral supervisor, Melvyn Dubofsky. As a doctoral student at the State University of New York, Palmer studied craft culture and class conflict in Hamilton in the late nineteenth century (the same research from which the above example was drawn). With this pedigree in both the radical and the *nouveau*, one might expect Palmer's early work to proclaim itself under the banner of historical materialism, but it does not. Palmer did not identify himself in writing as a Marxist historian in this era. He addresses this in the introduction to his 2015 two-volume collection of essays, writing about his commitment during his formative years to movement, discussion, and forceful argument. He continues, "I was nonetheless

reluctant to decisively declare myself a Marxist. I felt I had a lot to learn and needed to earn the right to proclaim myself a Marxist historian.”<sup>3</sup> This is not retrospective humility. Palmer’s early work and his first discussions of historical methodology are restrained on both polemic and politics. Instead, they reveal an attempt to study social history in a way that opens up new dimensions of class struggle and, in turn, working-class experience. Methodologically, they are helpful for the possibility of considering the interchange between labour history and social history.

What is Palmer’s social history? From his earliest work he was confident that social history would advance understandings of Canadian working people by expanding our view of what their lives included. It would also add new insight into where to find the experiences of working people. In a very early piece, Palmer writes, “what is needed in Canadian historiography is a sensitive appreciation of the social and cultural lives of men and women in the obscure and obscured settings of the past . . . For the historian who will probe local sources with diligence and imagination the potential and promise of a richer history slowly unfolds.”<sup>4</sup> This idea is both simple and transformative. Taken on its own, it illustrates the young Palmer as isolated from polemics. He’s not talking here about working-class culture or experience in the ways that would define debates about labour history in the 1980s. The statement simply asks historians to do the work of understanding the lives of their subjects, and it points toward one direction that makes it possible. That Palmer’s critics would later politicize such a prescription says much more about the conclusions this method makes possible than the practice of social history itself. Palmer *did* arrive at different conclusions, and in time he would come to defend them polemically. However, the method is important, and in Palmer’s case it is often overlooked because of perceptions about his motivating ideology and politics. He would have more to say about these later, but in his early work Palmer’s theoretical orientations are more restrained and directed toward moving social history forward. In one of his first key statements on historical materialism, he identifies not this term but the “empirical Marxism” underlying *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (1979). Palmer defines this as a tradition that “takes history itself as the basis of an inquiry that seeks to refine and reformulate theory, rather than positing theory as the basis of an abstract and general history.”<sup>5</sup> This Palmer paired with E. P. Thompson’s

maxim that history not only tests theory, it reconstructs theory.<sup>6</sup> This is the essential and cautious nature of the relationship between theory and history in Palmer's first decade.

Palmer provides a straightforward definition of social history in *A Culture in Conflict*: "Social history, based upon empirical research, uses the sharp detail of limited chronology or restricted region to illuminate the human dimensions of the past."<sup>7</sup> This he contrasts with sociological history, which is larger and concerned with understanding the transformation and social changes taking place on a much larger scale. Social history is more direct, more constrained, and empirical. This is a useful place to pause, as Palmer's narrow approach was often the source of criticism—particularly when other labour historians considered the choices he made about where to direct his focus. In his first monograph, Palmer expands upon the possibilities that social history holds for understanding working-class experience. *A Culture in Conflict* focuses on skilled workers in Hamilton, Ontario between 1860 and 1914. The book has three aims: to establish the importance of skilled workers, to study their culture, and to use this study to understand the emerging patterns of class conflict in Hamilton. Can this goal be accomplished through the study of skilled workers? Palmer offers a compelling defence for his choice at the outset of the book. He writes, "Skilled workers were chosen as the prism through which to view these processes because they tended, in light of their workplace power and organization strength, as well as their history of cultural involvement, to serve as the cutting edge of the working-class movement as a whole."<sup>8</sup> But the possibilities of this social history are larger still. While critics suggested that Palmer was wrongly narrowing his view by focusing on skilled workers, he suggested that social history reaches beyond its focus on the specific. In *A Culture in Conflict*, Palmer argues that skilled workers cannot be analytically isolated from other sections of the labouring population, women, children, and the unskilled. This carries forth themes from his earliest work in which Palmer insisted on finding space to understand both the visible *and* hidden elements of class conflict.

One of the clearest examples of "the hidden" and how it emerged in Palmer's early work is his treatment of women's role in nineteenth-century class struggle. First, the absence of women in his own early working-class histories was plainly evident to Palmer, and he noted this. In "Most Uncommon Common Men," he argues that one significant part of the culture of

skilled craftsmen of the 1820s and 1830s was that it was a male culture and that it was often at women's expense that opposition to the bourgeoisie was expressed.<sup>9</sup> But Palmer's social history was also wide-ranging in this period, and other writing featured women more prominently. A 1978 article on the enforcement of popular standards of morality through charivaris and whitecapping provides a stark contrast to other research from this era about skilled workers.<sup>10</sup> This was a history of the sometimes violent undercurrent of rough culture, and a history that frequently embroiled women and families in conflict and its resolution. Palmer writes about charivari performances that served as a response to wide-ranging transgressions—everything from marital infidelity to domestic violence. Thus, the charivari ritual was in part a performance of moral regulation that both involved women and targeted them as subjects of community protection. Palmer's investigation of these forms of working-class culture shines a light into areas of life that histories of skilled workers, law enforcement, or patrician life cannot reach—what he calls “the obscure corners of everyday life.”<sup>11</sup> Palmer creates space for understanding what can and what cannot be seen. These methodological and historical assertions are a significant element of what Palmer's work accomplishes, have been so often missed by his critics, and can be employed by new scholars. They also point toward the larger importance of his methodology. Social history's limited scope can be used to point to larger conclusions and open new possibilities of understanding. Palmer makes this possible by looking at both cultural and structural forms. In a chapter on paternalist authority in *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980* (1983), he discusses the role of wage labour and family structures. Without using the same vocabulary, Palmer's social history is linked to the separate spheres lens employed by historians Margaret McCallum and Bettina Bradbury and reaches similar conclusions. Understanding wage labour and its effect upon women in the workplace and the home reveals working-class life unfolding in a family rather than individual economy. His recognition of this in the same era that women's history was fighting for space in the Canadian historiographical landscape shows that Palmer was attentive to questions of gender and family. This informed his larger view of how the working class lived. Palmer grounded his analysis of the working class in an understanding of the family as a central component of working-class life, concluding:

It was thus in families both fragile and resilient that the working class reproduced itself over the course of the nineteenth century, families in which cultural attachments and visions, ideals and a measure of autonomy were circumscribed by material realities and the pervasive influence of work. As such, the working-class family was a force that embraced the related currents of conscious human agency and structured social necessity.<sup>12</sup>

How does a social historian move from the specific to the general? There are multiple compelling examples from throughout Palmer's first decade that illustrate his approach. First, an article from 1980 that considers the response of Kingston mechanics to the rise of the Canadian penitentiary in the 1830s.<sup>13</sup> In this piece, Palmer focuses on opposition to the new penitentiary at Kingston as a way to introduce the early history of craftsmen, mechanics, and labourers. It was a first opportunity for working-class people in Upper Canada to express their common interest, and, in turn, develop a very early sign of class consciousness. The mechanics opposed the penitentiary for multiple reasons. They viewed the competition of labourers with convicts and "rogues" as a development to be resisted. It was unthinkable to many that the state should side with criminals and undermine the labour of honest men. In the very contours of this debate, Palmer unveils something about the character of the nascent class conflict of early Kingston. Not only did the issue of convict labour set workingmen against the aims of the Tory aristocracy who promoted the penitentiary, it revealed the divide between the working poor and the underclass they presumed to be the target of the new institution.<sup>14</sup> Why focus on this very specific issue? In part because the history of plebeian life in this era is difficult to reconstruct. Palmer shines a light on a particular movement and political concern that reveals something about the values and behaviours of workingmen, and, in turn, allows for a discussion of class in early Canada. In the case of understanding the anti-penitentiary movement, this involved a painstaking recreation of how the movement unfolded in Kingston and beyond to other settings in Upper Canada. Through newspapers, Palmer tracked the mechanics meeting by meeting, often capturing the essential details of discussions, who attended each gathering, and, ultimately, the momentum that the cause attained. Palmer's analysis of the larger meaning gains a similar momentum throughout the piece. Moving from the specifics of the mechanics' meetings, he links the anti-penitentiary cause



with the arrival of reform politics in Upper Canada and the ways its rise became linked to the penitentiary. And in the larger sense, understanding how and why these meetings took place allows Palmer to suggest the beginnings of an Ontario working-class movement that was larger than the boundaries of specific communities. The anti-penitentiary movement is both a local history and the beginnings of a movement culture that was larger than Kingston. Palmer arrives at these conclusions by connecting one context to another—a key component of his method. The movement was also proscribed by the unique social relations of Upper Canada politics in the 1830s, a history that Palmer analyzes through the lens of paternal authority as a means of coming to a more complex understanding of the larger meaning of the anti-penitentiary movement. Balanced against his account of the mechanics' cause, Palmer details the political machinations of Christopher Hagerman, the Kingston member of the legislative assembly and key proponent of the Kingston Penitentiary. In this portrait of how Tory authorities quelled dissent and accommodated the mechanics, Palmer draws a fuller picture of the unique character of early class struggle and how it was stifled by the dominant social power of paternal authority of early Upper Canada.

Palmer again positions paternalism as a key category in understanding class as it existed in Upper Canada. He moves from the specific to the general by attempting to understand what such political moments said about the emergence of class. While other authors have argued that there was no definitive class structure in this period, Palmer adapts his perspective on paternalism into a deeper analysis that speaks to the *emergence* of class struggle through dissent like the anti-penitentiary movement. He does this in part through a discussion of paternalism as a way of understanding both authority and dissent. Palmer draws on H. Clare Pentland's *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650–1860* and its assertion that productive and social relations before 1850 developed in a particular context of status, hierarchy, symbols, privileges, and loyalties.<sup>15</sup> In *Working-Class Experience*, Palmer argues that paternalism was the dominant form of social relationship in this era:

As a prevailing ethos that defined relations of superordination and subordination in an age of commercial capital and nascent industrialism, paternalism grew out of the necessity to justify exploitation and mediate inherently irreconcilable interests. It rationalized inequality

and provided for a hierarchical order, but did so in diverse ways. In its historical manifestations, it included kindness and affection of superiors toward subordinates, as well as cruelty, harshness, and gross insensitivity. But paternalism's ultimate significance, regardless of its character, lay in undermining the collectivity of the oppressed by linking them to their "social superiors."<sup>16</sup>

In this way, Palmer identifies paternalism not only as an outgrowth of economic relations but as politics itself, as a political practice. His understanding of paternalism is a way to understand resistance and accommodation in all sorts of settings and with groups that were caught in various levels of subordination throughout the nineteenth century.

In spite of the detail he employs in describing the anti-penitentiary movement, Palmer admits a particular ambivalence about what can be achieved in understanding the history of this era. This is a comment on what social history can and cannot accomplish. What does the movement teach us about class in early Upper Canada? Palmer notes that the divergent material conditions of those who opposed the penitentiary call into question their joint class interests. Both journeymen and propertied masters joined in this cause. Thus, according to different views of class, this agitation might look less significant. Those who view class only as a structural category will see these divisions and argue there was no cohesion in the movement. Analysis seeking class consciousness will also find this historical moment lacking. Palmer responds to both with a clear assertion of the meaning of class that he returns to repeatedly throughout his first decade of scholarship: "class emerges out of social cleavage, antagonism, and struggle. It has no meaning apart from the historical experience, and it is conditioned over time, as men and women come to react in class ways to class situations."<sup>17</sup> This active confrontation is partly what defines Palmer's social history and is linked to his understanding of class throughout his first decade of scholarship. Social history can confront class experience by considering both conflict and culture in a historical discussion of class.<sup>18</sup> This is not Palmer using one abstract concept to define another. It marks a return to his early calls for a *sensitive* appreciation of the past. He writes, "social history raises the possibility of a different kind of understanding, a 'feel' for the human context of historical development."<sup>19</sup> This approach advocates for a sympathetic understanding as a way of seeing cultural continuities

and the lives of working people. This directs Palmer toward understanding culture and conflict as essential components of working-class experience.

Seeing class through the methods of social history led Palmer to a deeper analysis of the social and productive relations of early Canada.<sup>20</sup> It would also inform his scholarship when it moved into analysis of the later decades of the nineteenth century and an era in which class divisions became far more pronounced. In 1982, Palmer and collaborator Gregory S. Kealey published *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900*. The book explores the emergence and decline of the Knights of Labor in Ontario, connecting local and international contexts in an examination of a moment of particular struggle and alternative. It is a positive reinterpretation of the accomplishments of the Knights and an attempt to understand and establish its class character and importance in Canadian labour history.<sup>21</sup>

*Dreaming* is curiously inverted, in that its most pressing analytical contributions follow multiple chapters of contextual detail that outline the rise and fall of the Knights in both small-town Ontario and the larger urban centres of Hamilton and Toronto. This establishes the Knights as a movement that seriously challenged the economic and political order of Ontario, even if the challenge was brief and ultimately unsuccessful. But these chapters of the book see the honourable order as something more than fleeting and worthy of celebration. Why? In the eighth chapter, titled “‘Spread the Light!’: Forging a Culture,” Kealey and Palmer unload the big guns and address multiple questions about the role of culture in understanding working-class experience. First, working-class culture becomes the object of historical investigation with the aim of understanding the nature of the opposition that the Knights represented. The title of the chapter speaks to the argument that there *was* a culture to forge and that it is revealed by the success and failure of the Knights. Second, and more importantly, the chapter considers the larger significance of what this culture means. If we are to understand opposition, the authors argue, we must look beyond the political and the economic and into “the sphere of culture.” Culture is essential, they argue, for what it reveals of the tension between the ruling class and its challengers. They write, “For it was there that the dominance of the ruling class expressed itself in a pervasive and generally unquestioned hegemony. A subordinate class must reach toward an alternative hegemony if it ever hopes to dominate the ethos of society.”<sup>22</sup>

This reveals both the nature of bourgeois hegemony and the possibilities of a response from an emerging working class. Kealey and Palmer see the Knights of Labor as forging a *movement* culture. It was an active challenge to ruling-class hegemony. It was a movement culture of alternative, opposition, and potential.<sup>23</sup> Kealey and Palmer write, “The forging of a culture of solidarity and resistance, of alternative and promise, in which a class is drawn together in opposition to another class, thus stands as a point of departure for the revolutionary movement.”<sup>24</sup> The potentiality of the movement is key, because the first half of the book illustrates the multiple ways that the Knights were unsuccessful. But the order held the possibility for alternative and challenge, and thus, for Kealey and Palmer, was at the very core of the making of class in Ontario between 1880 and 1900. The excitement and possibilities of this interpretive connection are palpable in the text as Kealey and Palmer arrive at it, and even forty years on the interpretation is powerful. These arguments about culture are also complex. Kealey and Palmer offer what may serve as a helpful note of caution for other scholars seeking to follow this method. They identify a working-class culture, but one often steeped in ambivalence and contradiction. Culture is complex, and it often reveals itself in ways that demand a dialectical view of how it appears in history. One of the most enduring ideas from *Dreaming* is Kealey and Palmer’s call to seek to understand the old and the new, the relationship between residual class culture and the emergent movement culture.<sup>25</sup>

The insights of Palmer’s early work, and particularly his collaboration with Kealey, were not always received enthusiastically by the labour history community in Canada, an issue explored in several other chapters in this collection. Years later, this is largely immaterial to the success or failure of Palmer’s method, unless we consider his method to be oppositional by design. It was always clear that Palmer courted a certain degree of opposition, or at least expected it as the natural response to his objections in the historiographical realm. Palmer’s critics mischaracterized his work or viewed it in a reductionist fashion, painting him as a “culturalist” or his contributions as “the new labour history.”<sup>26</sup> This point bears some thought as it was deployed against Palmer’s early work to suggest that he was looking in the wrong direction, focusing on the wrong workers, and sending labour history into unimportant areas. Social historians of all stripes will readily recognize such criticisms, particularly those who study women,

marginalized populations, and people of colour. These, too, were identified as the wrong subjects by critics who located important history elsewhere.

Palmer characterized this criticism in a 1986 article in which he felt compelled to respond to attacks upon himself and Kealey. The criticisms did not come from conservatives, but rather from conservative labour historians and social democrats like Kenneth McNaught, who saw Palmer and Kealey as going too far and too fast, and, in effect, as including too much in their analysis of the working class.<sup>27</sup> McNaught argued instead for closer attention to the “smart union leadership” of a later generation that accomplished much of the twentieth-century social welfare program that characterized Canada in the mid-twentieth century. A second broad criticism was levelled by David Bercuson, who argued that the existence of ethnic and gender divisions in the decades covered by Palmer and Kealey negated the existence of a working-class culture.<sup>28</sup> Palmer responded to the notion that divisions of any kind could repudiate working-class resistance and experience as it appears in his work. He wrote, “classes, as structural entities, *exist* in capitalism and, as social and cultural expressions, are made, unmade, and remade in particular historical periods.”<sup>29</sup> Here, Palmer sets aside the presentism of both McNaught and Bercuson and argues simply that their view is not the entire history. What came later, he reminds us, was the dismantling of many of these victories. More importantly, what came before is surely just as important. The exclusivity of McNaught’s criticisms clearly bristled Palmer, who asked what was to be made of those studying other experiences—“the family, the work process, periods when social democratic leadership was not on the agenda.”<sup>30</sup> Some of the many debates between factions of labour historians in the 1970s and 1980s will be of little interest to future social historians. This one matters. Palmer’s stance is a defence of social history itself and what it can reveal to us about the larger working-class experience—an experience that some labour historians have sought to marginalize as unimportant.

A central part of Palmer’s mid-1980s response to his critics drew on themes present through the first decade of his scholarship and that surrounded the methodological goals of totality. It is worth pausing on this concept as it formed the basis of much of Palmer’s responses to how others read his first decade of scholarship, his emergence as a Marxist scholar, and his defence of social history as the historical profession changed in the late 1980s. Palmer ultimately answered his critics and their instincts toward

narrowly defined labour history by pointing at what is possible with a larger view. His work with Kealey, Palmer argued, offered “the promise of a history that can embrace capital *and* labour, production *and* reproduction, struggle *and* accommodation, culture *and* not culture.”<sup>31</sup> This is one clear way to understand totality, a concept that Palmer drew from Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács helped to move historical materialism away from economic determinism toward an understanding of history as the whole over its parts. In a chapter on Rosa Luxemburg, Lukács wrote:

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science.<sup>32</sup>

This passage gives some grounding to Palmer’s historical materialism, which was always interested in the activist, subjective, and cultural elements of history and the discovery of these through a dialectical method of social history.

Social history was changing in the 1980s, and Palmer’s work intersected with this debate in a significant way. Palmer later labelled the explosion of critical theory as a period in which the cultural logic of late capitalism, labelled postmodernism, would strike repeated blows at historical materialism.<sup>33</sup> After *Working-Class Experience*, he engaged in a protracted debate about the “linguistic turn” taken by working-class and social history. This debate began in the pages of *International Labor and Working-Class History* in 1987 in a roundtable discussion centred on an essay by Joan Wallach Scott. In “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History,” Scott proceeds from the simple assertion that, as she sees it, gender has not been taken seriously for what it can provide in a reconceptualization of labour history. How can women be introduced as subject and gender as an analytical category? Scott points to theories of language contained in poststructuralism and cultural anthropology as directions that will bring language and gender forward as a way of understanding the “making” of a working class. Scott’s argument is a significant departure from historical materialism as she positions language as the key to this project. In turn,

she argues, if we can understand how language constructs meaning, it will also be possible to find gender.<sup>34</sup>

Palmer's response to Scott, appearing in the roundtable discussion in *International Labor and Working-Class History*, marks the start of a significant period of objection in his career.<sup>35</sup> First, and in the confines of the roundtable discussion, Palmer notes that Scott's call to attend to the gendered features of language is indisputable. This was consistent with Palmer's own orientation toward gender in his labour history as well as his ongoing support for feminist labour histories in the 1980s. But how to arrive at this goal? Here, Palmer disputes the notion that the origins of class might be found in the language of political struggle because this method will break so fundamentally with historical materialism.<sup>36</sup> Historical materialism has always been attendant to language, and Palmer notes that language plays a role in ordering working-class concepts of politics. But his objection begins with the point that language cannot exist independently of material contexts; it is not a structure unto itself. Palmer states this most effectively in the succinct statement: "To say that language matters is not to say it is *all* that matters."<sup>37</sup> His larger point in the response to Scott is more nuanced, but still only gestures toward the role that discourse might play: "Class is indeed a difficult development to grasp precisely because in both its subjective and objective guises it reproduces the social order at the same time as it challenges it. Language and gender figure in this decisively."<sup>38</sup>

The 1980s was a difficult decade for social history in Canada and elsewhere, and Palmer would build upon his initial reactions to the linguistic turn with a more sustained and influential work of academic dissent. E. P. Thompson's passage on opposition appearing in *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution* nearly perfectly mirrors Palmer's position. Thompson writes: "It is only to be expected that such people will run into misrepresentation of various kinds. This generally awaits those who have the temerity to object within the heart of swollen imperial consensus. Nor should this bother them much, since they know it is one plain part of their business to *be* objectionable."<sup>39</sup> Palmer was moving toward confrontation of a different type of swollen consensus as he confronted the linguistic turn of the 1980s and the ways it was changing social history. There is a pretty direct line between the roundtable response to Scott's piece and Palmer's

next significant contribution, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*, published in 1990.

At the core of *Descent into Discourse* and its engagement with critical theory is a defence of historical materialism that will surely outlast the debates about literary theory that occupied Palmer at the end of the 1980s. This is not to say that the sparring between Palmer and his critics no longer matters, but it is of less utility than the enduring strength of his arguments about language and historical materialism and what future scholars can take as a guide to its methodologies for writing social history. These parts of Palmer's argument in *Descent into Discourse* both look back at the origins of the Marxist approach to language and historical materialism and provide a guide for moving these insights forward. At the core, Palmer argues that historical materialism need not be cast aside to incorporate the insights of discourse analysis into social history. Marx and Engels both appreciated the need to incorporate multiple relations into an understanding of history. This included the political, ideological, and, in the last instance, the economic. Palmer cites Marx writing to Annenkov in 1846: "The social history of men is never anything but the history of their individual development, whether they are conscious of it or not. Their material relations are the basis of all their relations."<sup>40</sup> This Palmer pairs with the essential statement by Marx from the opening statement of "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte":

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.<sup>41</sup>

The point Palmer makes here is that social lives make up history, and our view of what that encompasses must be expansive. Palmer's call is to recover the spirits of the past in our social history, a task he has excelled



at throughout his own work and which he uses to great effect in *Descent into Discourse* to illustrate how language is essential but never enough on its own. In the conclusion of the book, Palmer writes a passage that echoes both Engels and Marx in their famous statements about how men make history, incorporating the question about language into his definition:

Historical materialism has no difficulty accommodating an appreciation of the materiality of texts and the importance of discourse. To the extent that it has always embraced a tension-ridden duality in which human agency and structural determination rub up against each other creatively, historical materialism is rooted in appreciation of the extent to which men and women make history and are made within it.<sup>42</sup>

The specific chapter on historical materialism takes this argument and supports it by pointing to authors and works of historical materialism that accomplish this task. Palmer argues that it is untrue that social historians have avoided a discussion of language in their work.<sup>43</sup> Palmer might have cited his own earlier work more extensively to accomplish this task, but he points instead to C L. R. James and E. P. Thompson. Palmer's discussion of Thompson is particularly useful in working through the role that language played in the social history of historical materialism a generation before the linguistic turn of the 1980s. What Palmer identifies in Thompson's use of language also serves as an ongoing guide to how social historians can use Thompson's insights into language to build their own methodological rigour toward sources and historical subjects.

One oft-cited example from Thompson's work demonstrates the historical-materialist use of discourses and helps to make this point. Thompson's work sought to illustrate in various ways how the language of radicalism contributed to the making of class. The realm of public discourse was essential in this making, and Thompson accented this through attention to tone and the rhythms of speech necessary to convey particular meanings. Language as meaning was also essential to understanding the subtleties of histories of the working class that would otherwise be lost. Palmer wrote about how Thompson's talent as a linguistic historian of eighteenth-century speech allowed him to decode hegemony through the language of the oppressed. This is a point that Palmer would draw into his own work on the Upper Canada of the 1830s and a thread that would follow through to the Knights of Labor at the end of the nineteenth century.

Thompson understood that deference and paternalism, particularly as it was performed and spoken, can encompass resistance and resignation—both conclusions that can only be reached by considering the materiality of texts. A useful passage for understanding this point is the brief passage by a radical in 1834: “Orphans we are, and bastards of society.” Palmer cites this line in two different texts, notable as it is due to appearing on the final page of *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>44</sup> Thompson’s point was that this sentiment signified pride rather than resignation. Palmer reads it as both the evidence of Thompson’s facility with discourse and as the intensely political nature of radical history to stand against the failure of revolution in England. And the larger point in both interpretations stands: that the historical materialist can employ discourse on multiple levels but remain connected to the explanatory power of how class is made and remade.

Finally, *Descent into Discourse* is an emancipatory text because it stood in opposition to a moment in academic politics that desperately required objection. Palmer correctly identified this moment and stood in objection, unwilling to see social history dissolve and coalesce into the centre of the political spectrum. About Thompson, Palmer wrote that he “lived his objections openly,” and this is also a reflection of his own style on the publication of *Descent into Discourse*.

If *Descent into Discourse* was Palmer’s confrontation with post-thought on the terrain of intellectual history, his next objection to the changing directions of historical inquiry played out as a new and significant contribution. Palmer’s social history was swept into a confrontation not only with intellectual changes but with the changing scope of capitalist and imperial power at the end of the 1990s. The result was *Cultures of Darkness*: Palmer’s sprawling and brilliant six-hundred-page exploration of “the night.” The book is Palmer’s overture to understanding marginality and difference and the worlds that exist outside of capitalism’s ever-expanding hegemony. It is a social history unlike any other. *Cultures of Darkness* stands alongside Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* as a towering achievement in social history for pushing us forward again to an understanding of the making of class in radical ways that illustrate the revolutionary and emancipatory possibilities of social history and historical materialism.

In *Cultures of Darkness*, Palmer proves himself to be as adept at cultural analysis and textual interpretation as he was at the particularities of limited

chronology and the restricted region of his earlier work. There is a tremendous irony at work, in that Palmer had made such a polemical objection about post-thought in *Descent into Discourse*, ruffling feathers (to put it mildly) and standing his ground in the world of historical materialism. But in *Cultures of Darkness* there seems to be an abrupt change of course. In the introduction, Palmer signals his intent to bring Michel Foucault and Marx together as a way of synthesizing a larger understanding of marginality. Palmer makes this admission: "What Marx missed was what Foucault, in a way, grasped. Marginality's making was not just externally imposed, but also internally, subjectively, constituted."<sup>45</sup> In this synthesis of the two thinkers, Palmer makes marginality in history something bigger. He argues that it is simultaneously an identity/consciousness and a structure/place. It is both lived as an experience and socially constructed as a representation.<sup>46</sup> *Cultures of Darkness* thus moves past the objections of *Descent into Discourse* and proclaims that Foucault's insights are important but cannot be understood without Marx as our guide. In this duality between Marx and Foucault, it is clear that Palmer's *Cultures of Darkness* is not a departure from historical materialism. The central objection of his critique of post-thought remains, and Palmer leverages this dissent into a methodology for understanding a different way to approach social history. He reiterates the essential argument of *Descent into Discourse* like this: "'post' thought denies the very importance of a systematic center of exploitation's and oppression's causality and issues its clarion call for pluralism and diversity, in which proliferating stories of class, race, and gender coexist in a discursive ensemble of meanings."<sup>47</sup> Palmer builds upon this point as he returns to the ideas that animated much of the debate about his earliest contributions in social history. The post-project, he suggests, had collapsed in a denial of understanding the experiential subject and locating it at what he calls, "the powerfully formative conjuncture of self and society where history is ultimately made and remade."<sup>48</sup> Thus, *Cultures of Darkness* makes a bold promise indeed: to understand identity, marginality, and the subject in the post-thought intellectual climate, but using the perspective and methodologies of historical materialism.

Using this method, Palmer made some fascinating choices about where to touch down in *Cultures of Darkness*. The book was conceived of as a history of marginality and transgression on a much larger scale than Palmer's earlier historical work. The setting is capitalism itself, in seeking to find

the places in which marginality is lived—in the darkness, the nighttime, and the hidden spaces yet untouched by the relentless exploitation of capitalism. Palmer touches on witches and monsters, devil worship, Jacobin revolution, Chicago bomb-throwers, jazz and blues clubs, pirates, and taverns—among many others. The scope of the text is enormous, truly covering darkness from “medieval to modern” and moving through the realms of literature, art, music, and histories, social, economic, sexual, and discursive. Palmer brings all these together with the goal of making “the coerced marginalities of history a viable force of transformative alternative.”<sup>49</sup> This is a bold attempt at a new metanarrative constructed around alternative and opposition. The attempt is Palmer’s definitive objection, on the terrain of social history, to both the fracturing of the field and the theoretical disintegration that he first identified a decade earlier. *Cultures of Darkness* is perhaps the defining moment in Palmer’s social history—a startling intervention that displays all of the historical sensitivity of Thompson, Genovese, and Gutman. It also reveals Palmer as a prodigious reader and interpreter of a stunning array of textual sources that he draws into conversation with his historical interpretation. There is no book like it.

Unique as it is, the book reflects the themes from Palmer’s social history of decades before. First, it asks us, as Palmer did in the late 1970s, to look in new places for the history of struggle and class. He opens the book with commentaries on the metaphorical night, stating simply as an entreaty to enter into this world: “the night is different, its opposition to day marked by darkness and danger.”<sup>50</sup> Here in the realm of the metaphorical night, Palmer takes us far beyond the early debates of union hall versus home, skilled and unskilled, and culture and not culture, and invites us to think about a different plane on which transgression unfolds. He explores transgression, “not just in time and place, but within metaphorical spaces where it is possible to see difference defined and lived, however obscured.”<sup>51</sup> In these spaces, Palmer is reaching for “otherness” in a way that moves past the categories usually identified by post-thought histories of the 1990s dealing with class, racial, and gender exploitation. He gestures toward long histories of resistance and transgression that speak to the cultural interests of his early labour histories. The book introduces cultural histories of possibilities that push back against the constraints of the daytime worlds of capital. Palmer seeks to capture “quietly clandestine histories,” a task he acknowledges will be incomplete, difficult to accomplish, and possible only

with the assistance of witnesses to the nighttime worlds that are hidden from view.<sup>52</sup>

This return to the hidden, a concept so central to his early work, allows Palmer to move in new directions and to arrive at new conclusions. It also illustrates Palmer's ability to use social history for new purposes. Where are some of the hidden realms he uncovers? In some worlds, they exist in the realm of the conceptual, as with the chapter on devil worship. Palmer writes, "To travel from the centers of capitalist accumulation, with their exploitation of factory production workers, to the margins of proletarianization is to enter another world of inequality, subordination, and sociocultural imbalance."<sup>53</sup> In this inequality, Palmer finds the clash of old and new in the use of traditional cultures and "ritualized engagements and occult power."<sup>54</sup> In discussing proletarianization and the collision of colonial power with the underdeveloped world, Palmer expands his view of how capital has ordered the lives of the working class, in new settings that take us far from the heart of capitalist development in the metropolitan centre. In this spot, Palmer identifies devil worship as yet another form of resistance to subordination. Moving from cultural history of this kind, he makes similar conclusions about transgressive sexualities in the fourth part of the book about eroticism and revolutions. The questions Palmer raises about the dangers of eroticism build upon the earlier chapters on the dangerous classes and push our understanding of how to pair identity with the making of class. What are the transgressive possibilities of illicit and hidden sexual subcultures? In a chapter on homosexuality, Palmer traces the long history of gay sexuality in a way that delivers on his promised potentials of literary analysis and social history combined. Operating within the metaphor of night, the chapter illustrates the histories of transgression, resistance, and oppression that gay people struggled within and against through the centuries, ending with 1980's New York City and the conclusion that the darkness is both liberating and oppressive. Palmer writes, "the nurturing darkness also suffocates; it is a night of long birth and slow death. Sexuality, like all sites of oppression, requires nothing less than a revolution to free it from its many fetters."<sup>55</sup>

Palmer's aim to reach for a new metanarrative of alternative may seem like a departure from the limited and specific constraints of his early social history. *Cultures of Darkness* is a big book and its breadth, even in the first handful of chapters, is overwhelming. Part 2 moves from peasant uprising

(tracked over many centuries) through the history of witchcraft and arrives at the pornographic fantasies of the libertine aristocrats of the eighteenth century. While the limited chronology is abandoned, the chapters hold together through the bonds of the metaphors Palmer explores—for example, giving form to the peasantry and recovering their transgressive potential through the exploration of the nights they inhabited that pushed them beyond stoicism and toward bloody uprising. These are both the real and imagined terrors of the night—themes Palmer returns to again in later chapters dealing with monsters in the age of revolution. One can imagine the book, too, as a series of lectures in a course Palmer taught at Queen’s University as he researched and wrote *Cultures of Darkness*. The cohesion of each chapter as a discrete idea is connected to the larger arguments about night and transgression. Other chapters in the book are more concrete still, treading the ground of both ideological construction and the blood-and-guts history of working-class resistance. Take, for example, a chapter on the “dangerous classes,” in which Palmer explores the American class mobilizations of 1886 and returns again to the Knights of Labor in the United States context. Palmer probes the meaning of the construction of the criminalized poor in the nineteenth century. This occurred as the working class made itself and expanded rapidly in urban centres and the bourgeoisie recoiled from the dangerous potential of a homogenized other, one it frequently associated with the darkness. The necessity of darkness is also probed, from the veil of nighttime assumed by strike leaders and labour leaders, and specifically by the Knights of Labor in their secretive associational culture and activities. Palmer follows this potential through to the vanguard of working-class politics in the revolutionary actions of anarchist politics in 1886 and the Haymarket bombing. He also locates the making of the working class in unique settings, including jazz and blues clubs and the beat culture originating in the 1940s. Palmer travels across this terrain, locating the making of culture as an important element in the making of class and a narrative of opposition and alternative. This performance of estrangement, played out in the world of darkness, stood against the conformity of the capitalist day. In both jazz and beat culture, resistance could live in the avant-garde.<sup>56</sup>

*Cultures of Darkness* is also a unique work for how it wields cultural studies to grasp at the same elements of historical change that animate the best works of historical materialism. In this work we see class in new

terms as Palmer pushes the boundaries of how we understand the making and remaking of class. It is a history still devoted to understanding class struggle and seeking to reveal what Palmer later calls “clashing social antagonists embedded in irreconcilable difference.”<sup>57</sup> But it seeks to juxtapose these antagonists in new ways and on different terrains. And in *Cultures of Darkness*, perhaps more than in any other history by Palmer, he attempts to understand those elements of “sensuous practical human activity” that are at the core of historical materialism’s approach to class. The history that unfolds in this work is the history of human agency, resistance, and social life glimpsed in settings that must fall within the lens of social history. Palmer’s sensitivity to all of this, his ability to find and understand those elements of sensuous human activity, is often startling, but is reflective of the interests that have animated all of his writing.

And so, while Palmer ends *Cultures of Darkness* on the following skeptical note, his larger message is ultimately hopeful—as is all of his work. It is in the breakdown of identity politics that Palmer sees a way forward. Hope exists in the opposition to the impulses that capital exhibits in identifying and restricting otherness. There is the seed of something in the spaces created by this impulse. Palmer writes:

This book, then, is no postmodern celebration of fragmentation, ephemerality, and social indetermination. It does not so much champion marginalization and transgression as acknowledge their *coerced* being, explore their cultural resiliencies, and suggest that their historicized presence, constrained limitations, and capacities to articulate a challenge to ensconced power are never islands unto themselves. They are always reciprocally related to the material world of production and exchange, where oppression and exploitation are universal attributes of night’s freedoms and fears as well as day’s more transparent politics of inequality.<sup>58</sup>

Palmer sees difference as a possibility for social transformation, not an end point. Palmer’s social history, enacted on a grand scale throughout *Cultures of Darkness*, points to some of the ways that this transformation has existed in the “caves and crevices of capitalism’s powerful days of oppression and exploitation.”<sup>59</sup> The hope that lies in this text is that Palmer dares to search in the darkness for the possibility for emancipation. If we can look for class in its emergence from struggle, we can continue to reach for multiple

possibilities for freedom. This is the true potential for social history, realized in all of Palmer's work.

#### NOTES

1. Bryan D. Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976): 6–7.
2. While this essay concludes its examination with *Cultures of Darkness* (2000), it was not Palmer's final statement of social history. He would move from the cultural back to the political through the study of American Communist politics, resulting in a book on James Cannon and another related work on the Minneapolis Teamsters strikes of 1934. Both works are addressed in a chapter by John McIlroy and Alan Campbell in this volume. In the midst of this research, Palmer also published *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009) and later *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* with Gaétan Héroux (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).
3. Bryan D. Palmer, "Introduction," in *Interpretive Essays on Class Formation and Class Struggle*, vol. 1, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 3.
4. Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men," 21.
5. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), xiii.
6. Quoted in Henry Abelove et al., *Visions of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 16.
7. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xiv.
8. *Ibid.*, xii.
9. Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men," 10.
10. Bryan D. Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 5–62.
11. *Ibid.*, 59.
12. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983), 84.
13. Bryan D. Palmer, "Kingston Mechanics and the Rise of the Penitentiary, 1833–1836," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 13, no. 25 (May 1980): 7–32.
14. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
15. H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650–1860* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1981).
16. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1983), 14.



17. Palmer, "Kingston Mechanics," 27–28.
18. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xvi.
19. Ibid.
20. Palmer notes in *Working-Class Experience* that H. Clare Pentland's work was one of the few attempts to grapple with the character of social and productive relations in Canada. See Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada*.
21. Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
22. Ibid., 277.
23. Kealey and Palmer attribute this phrase to Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).
24. Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, 278.
25. Ibid.
26. See Daniel Drache, "The Formation and Fragmentation of the Canadian Working Class: 1820–1920," *Studies in Political Economy* 15 (1984): 43–89; Kenneth McNaught, "E. P. Thompson vs Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review* 62, no. 2 (1981): 141–68.
27. Bryan D. Palmer, "Listening to History Rather Than Historians: Reflections on Working Class History," *Studies in Political Economy* 20, no. 1 (1986): 47–84.
28. Bercuson's criticisms appear in David J. Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 7 (Spring 1981): 95–112; and David J. Bercuson, Review of *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900*, by Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Business History Review* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 589–91.
29. Palmer, "Listening to History Rather Than Historians," 54; emphasis original.
30. Ibid., 53.
31. Ibid., 78; emphasis original.
32. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 27–28.
33. Bryan D. Palmer, "Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History: A Dialectical View," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17, no. 2 (2006): 52.

34. Joan W. Scott, "On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (Spring 1987): 3.
35. Bryan D. Palmer, "Response to Joan Scott," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 31 (Spring 1987): 14–23.
36. *Ibid.*, 19.
37. *Ibid.*, 16; emphasis original.
38. *Ibid.*, 22.
39. E. P. Thompson, "Preface," in *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution: Ten Essays*, by Staughton Lynd (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), xi; emphasis original.
40. Cited in Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 53.
41. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Selected Works*, by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 97.
42. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 215.
43. *Ibid.*, 64.
44. Cited in *ibid.*, 78; Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994), 96.
45. Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 8.
46. *Ibid.*, 6.
47. *Ibid.*, 4.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, 13.
51. *Ibid.*, 17.
52. *Ibid.*, 19.
53. *Ibid.*, 257.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, 300.
56. See *ibid.*, chapters 16 and 17.
57. Palmer, "Historical Materialism," 44.
58. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness*, 457; emphasis original.
59. *Ibid.*, 457–58.

## Labour History's Present

An Account of *Labour/Le Travail* Under

Bryan D. Palmer



*Kirk Niergarth*

It is September 1908. In West Virginia, Lewis Hine of the National Child Labor Committee sets up his equipment to photograph Vance, a fifteen-year-old boy employed as a “trapper.” Vance spent ten hours each day opening and closing a ventilation door to allow coal cars to pass through. Vance, in Hine’s image, is unsmiling and faces a mine-shaft wall (see figure 3.1). “On account of the intense darkness in the mine,” Hine would later write, “the hieroglyphics on the door were not visible until [the] plate was developed.”

If we imagine the photograph Hine *thought* he was taking—without the “hieroglyphics”—the viewer would surely have been intended to dwell on the *pathos* of Vance’s working life. This would have suited Hine’s purpose, since he and other moral reformers aimed to shift public opinion against exploitation of children’s labour. Inadvertently, however, Hine made record of Vance beyond his working conditions. The chalk-written “hieroglyphics” offer a hint of how much more there was to Vance’s story than pathos. On the lower right of the door Vance had been practicing his signature. Were the door a canvas, this is where the artist would sign their work, asserting authorship and creative individuality. Like them, thanks to the illumination of Hine’s magnesium flash, Vance left his marks for us to read. That the obligations of his job weighed heavily upon him and constrained his freedom is evident in the note to “SHUT THIS DOOR THAT MEANS

YOU.” But flying around this commandment are whimsical birds that remind us that he was not entirely constrained.<sup>2</sup>

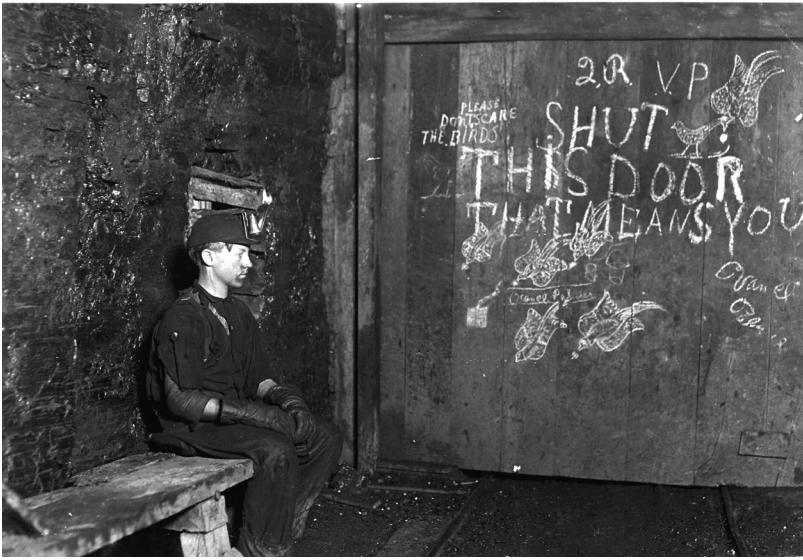


Figure 3.1 Lewis Wickes Hine, *Vance, a Trapper Boy* (1908). Source: National Child Labor Committee Collection, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-nclc-01076.

Insofar as Hine’s photograph of Vance reveals the interplay of structure and agency in a worker’s life, it is an apt metaphor for the aims of labour and working-class history. That Hine did not anticipate this revelation and that it only appeared *ex post facto* also aligns with the aspiration that our research might make legible what was once obscure in the dimness of the past’s present, coupled, in some cases at least, with the hope that what we read among the hieroglyphs will complicate any simple narrative of pathos about yesterday, today, or, indeed, tomorrow.



It is October 2015. I am speaking as part of a panel about labour history in Canada. My talk is on labour history’s present moment, and a pessimistic narrative looms gloomy-faced in the foreground, like Vance on his

coal-mine bench. “Why are fewer historians labeling their work as labour and working-class history?” Christo Aivalis, Gregory S. Kealey, Jeremy Milloy, and Julia Smith asked in a piece published the month before my talk. “Given the fundamental role of work, workers, and class relations to society,” they write, “our understanding of many pressing social issues—why they have emerged, how people have attempted to address them, and what we can do to fix them—requires an understanding of the history of working people and the structures and issues that influence their lives.” More specifically, “understanding these ailments and imagining possible remedies requires a solid historical analysis of class relations and capitalism.”<sup>3</sup>

If there are indeed fewer historians studying class relations at this juncture, there are multiple ironies in this fact. For one, the lessons of labour history, applied to the contemporary academy, make visible the underlying economic logic that has left so many bright, radical history doctorates working precariously or pursuing careers in areas less irritating to neoliberal hegemony than labour history. More broadly, we live in an era in which global capital is particularly rapacious. Obscene inequality and a trajectory toward environmental disaster do not require an advanced academic degree to observe, merely a pulse. The history of capitalism, it is true, has garnered attention in recent years, but what of those dispossessed by it, the movements that have offered resistance to it, the glimpses of counter-hegemonic possibility that the history of the working class affords?

Perhaps, however, there is more to the story of labour history’s present than an apparent pathos. In hopes of seeing some unexpected hieroglyphs on the door, I turn to the Bryan D. Palmer–edited pages of the twenty-first century issues of *Labour/Le Travail*.

*Labour/Le Travail* is a journal that has aspired since 1976 to illuminate the history of the Canadian working class in the full richness and diversity of its experience. Collectively, its contributors have sought, in a variety of ways and contexts, to rescue workers akin to Vance—to borrow a well-worn but not-yet-worn-out phrase—from the enormous condescension of posterity.<sup>4</sup>

If we use Hine’s photograph as a metaphor for *Labour/Le Travail*, the work of its editors might be considered akin to the chalk drawings on the door insofar as their contribution is invisible to the unaided eye. Editors make scholarly journals, but they do not make them under circumstances of their own choosing. The finished products, understandably and

appropriately, foreground the work of authors. Just as Vance was ordered to “SHUT THIS DOOR,” editors are structurally constrained by the submissions they receive, the advice of peer reviewers, and many logistical considerations. And yet, if the pages of *Labour/Le Travail* in recent decades give some indication of the current state and direction of the field of labour history in Canada, they also record, however obscurely, one way in which the editor of the journal for most of these years, Bryan D. Palmer, has left his mark upon the field.<sup>5</sup>

It is not any one thing that sets *Labour/Le Travail* apart from other scholarly journals in Canada, and it is not just the most obvious thing: its focus on working-class history. The articles and review essays encompass many disciplines ranging from quantitative economics to cultural studies with many vantages in between. The book review section is substantial and considers a wide range of titles. There are also reproduced primary documents, poems, paintings, and sections given over to provocations and debates. Authors include established academics but also activists, independent scholars, and students at the outset of their research careers. It is, in short, a difficult journal to summarize.

To mark the turn of the millennium, *Labour/Le Travail* devoted its Fall 2000 issue to a series of retrospective essays surveying the evolution of working-class history in Canada. Desmond Morton’s “Some Millennial Reflections on the State of Canadian Labour History” featured a statistical analysis of the first forty-four issues of *Labour/Le Travail*.<sup>6</sup> Morton sorted articles by theme, geographic focus, time period, and language of publication. In 2015, I repeated Morton’s analysis for the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup> Revisiting my findings briefly here allows me to reiterate their most significant point: the story about labour history the pages of *Labour/Le Travail* tell in the twenty-first century is fundamentally a story of continuity with the journal’s mission and tradition.

Making comparisons with Morton’s findings meant adopting to some degree his categories of analysis. Of these, “language of publication” works reasonably well for comparative purposes. A bilingual journal from the outset, *Labour/Le Travail* has never managed to publish articles in French at a rate proportional to the francophone population of Canada. Morton found only 7.2 percent of articles had been published in French. To some degree, this underrepresentation continued in my sample, in which 12.9 percent of articles were in French. Another way of looking at those numbers

is that there was a significant increase in the journal's francophone content in this period. This reading seems closer to the truth. French Canadian workers feature prominently in several articles published in English, in some cases by French Canadian scholars.<sup>8</sup> The journal signalled its ongoing commitment to making intellectual connections *entre les deux solitudes* with a special issue on Québec history, volume 70.

Numbers, too, say nothing of the quality and the historiographic significance of the articles in question. Peter Bischoff's study of the Knights of Labor in Québec was heralded by Palmer as destined to "remain the classic statement" on the subject (a judgment Palmer is eminently qualified to make).<sup>9</sup> In subsequent issues, the journal has continued to publish important work by French Canadian scholars about French Canadian workers: Robert Tremblay's "La grève générale des charpentiers-menuisiers de Montréal, 1833–1834," published in volume 81, was the winner of the 2019 Best Article Prize of the Canadian Committee on Labour History.<sup>10</sup>

Morton's category "location" was also easy enough to duplicate and to compare to later issues (figure 3.2). The number of articles focused on Ontario and British Columbia have increased significantly in recent years, with relatively less attention paid to the Atlantic region and the Prairies. Yet, as the population distribution statistics displayed on the same chart indicate, the increasingly Ontario-centric focus of *Labour/Le Travail* articles is not disproportionate to Ontario's share of the Canadian population. The same might be said for British Columbia. If Morton's category was "western Canada," rather than separating British Columbia from the Prairie provinces, we would see an almost identical percentage of articles on the region between the early and later *Labour/Le Travail* samples.

Morton's categories, however, are only one way of thinking about the way geographic space is organized in Canada. "Ontario" as a category, to pluck a few examples from my sample, groups together articles about miners in Elliot Lake, children in Toronto, and nineteenth-century African Canadian workers in London.<sup>11</sup> While a few *Labour/Le Travail* articles focus particularly on provincial legislation,<sup>12</sup> the geographic frame of reference for most of the articles is local and these locations are quite disparate. Some are focused particularly on workplaces, others on working-class spaces or neighbourhoods. Some are in metropolises, others on the resource frontier, still others in rural or small urban settings. If I were to make a summary geographic judgment of the Palmer-edited volumes (vols. 51–74), I would

conclude that the Canadian content includes studies ranging from Newfoundland to Victoria with many stops in between: from the border with the United States (and crossing it) to the near north. Like Hank Snow, *Labour/Le Travail*'s not really been everywhere, man, but it is giving it a pretty good shot.

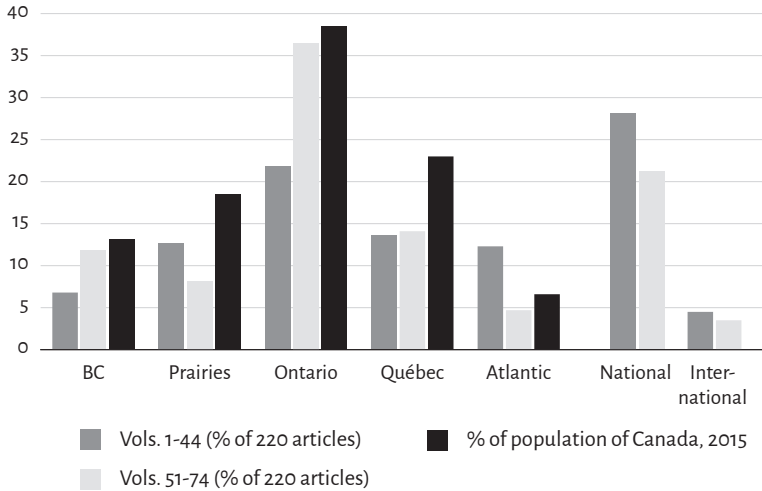


Figure 3.2 Geographic focus of *Labour/Le Travail* articles.

Period was a category where I could not follow Morton's procedure. Morton's work divides the nineteenth century into fifty-year halves, then groups the first twenty years of the twentieth century (1900–20), followed by three decade-long periods (1920–30, 1930–40, and 1940–50), and then two more spans of twenty years. These periods—with their varied lengths and decadal neatness—do not map in a very sophisticated way onto Canadian economic and working-class history. Yet a better periodization would still contain subjective judgments: what year should divide the pre-industrial and industrial era (and surely this varies regionally)? Does 1919 belong with World War I or the interwar period? Does World War II link forward to the postwar settlement or backward to the Depression? Does the neoliberal era in Canada begin in, say, 1973 or perhaps 1988, and has it an internal division to divide it from the present moment? What does one do with articles that cross between one period and another?



To solve the last problem, I took the midpoint of each article’s date range (thus, if an article covered 1919–39, I plotted it at 1929). Then I tried to see if clusters of midpoints would allow periodization to emerge from, rather than being imposed upon, the data. To some degree this worked. Figure 3.3 shows the periods that emerged when I divided them according to the most obvious gaps between midpoint years (the gaps between categories are larger where the number of articles is fewer—such as the eighteen years between 1837 and 1855 as opposed to the three years between 1946 and 1949). Accepting a certain amount of quibbling, one could name these categories: pre-industrial, industrial revolution, second industrial revolution, interwar, Cold War, and neoliberal. The relative focus of *Labour/Le Travail* articles on the interwar and Cold War eras is evident from the distribution, but the coverage across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is also impressive.

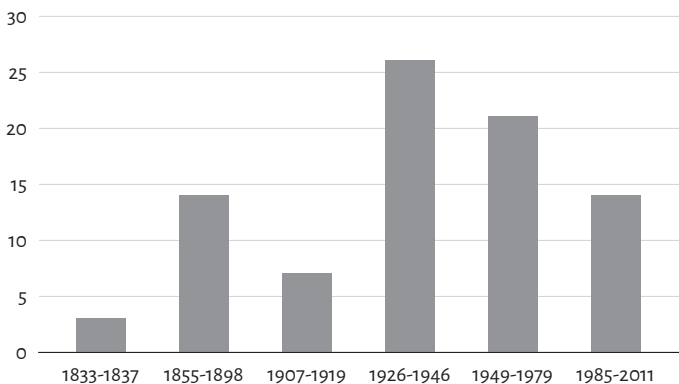


Figure 3.3 *Labour/Le Travail* articles by date range midpoint, vols. 51–74.

Compared to Morton’s findings, if we abandon any attempt at precise periodization and divide the data by centuries, we see that the distribution is almost identical (figure 3.4). This may be connected to editor Palmer’s career-long insistence upon rescuing nineteenth-century workers from posterity’s condescension. Less speculatively, this distribution shows that *Labour/Le Travail* contributors have not marched according to some progressive logic forward in time to “new” periods, but continue to revisit earlier eras and revise previous interpretations.

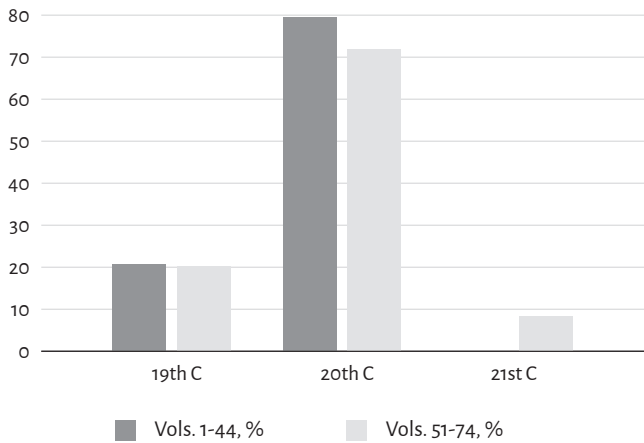


Figure 3.4 Periodization of *Labour/Le Travail* articles based on subject matter.

There is a problem, however, with sorting articles by the midpoint of their date ranges. This procedure gives no sense of the duration considered. By their midpoint dates, both Robert Storey’s “From Invisibility to Equality? Women Workers and the Gendering of Workers’ Compensation in Ontario, 1900–2005,” and John Willis’s “Cette manche au syndicat—La grève chez Dupuis Frères en 1952” get attached to the same year, when they are obviously different kinds of studies. As these two examples suggest, *Labour/Le Travail* articles sometimes have tight focus, aiming to place a particular historical event in context, and sometimes survey a theme or pattern longitudinally. Figure 3.5 shows a reasonably balanced distribution between studies of short, medium, and longer duration.

Thus far, we have seen that articles in *Labour/Le Travail* in the twenty-first century are as varied linguistically, geographically, and chronologically as those in Morton’s twentieth-century sample. If his analysis of the “themes” of the articles he surveyed were accepted, one would have to conclude that more recent issues are much more thematically diverse. Morton surveyed 222 articles in 44 volumes and identified only 7 principal themes.<sup>13</sup> As I worked my way through 85 articles, my jotted list of thematic keywords numbered more than 100. Morton’s 7 categories—including such capacious ones as “working lives” and “industrial relations”—certainly persist in many articles in recent issues, but such broad categorization

understates the scholarly diversity of earlier issues and is completely inadequate for sorting the proliferation of themes I observed.

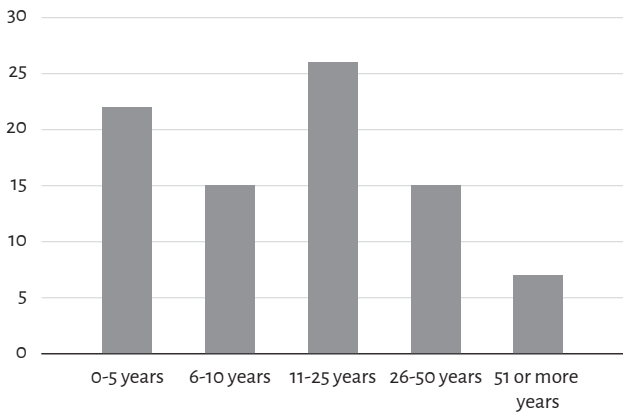


Figure 3.5 Length of time covered in *Labour/Le Travail* articles, vols. 51–74.

If we move, then, from the quantitative to the impressionistic, I think twenty-first-century *Labour/Le Travail* articles are both continuous with and more diverse than earlier issues in terms of topic, theme, method, and theoretical orientation. In volume 61, Jim Barrett and Diane Koenker made a comparison between their 1986 and 2006 syllabus for a co-taught labour history seminar. Their reflection could be aptly applied to *Labour/Le Travail* over roughly the same period: “If the content and topics we cover . . . have changed over these two decades, so too has our incorporation of ‘theory’: class, of course, but also gender, race (including ‘whiteness’), post-colonialism, and aspects of language and discourse. Yet the centrality of class remains the organizing principle . . . We believe that class—however multiple, however manipulated, but always material—still offers a powerful way to interrogate the constitution of identities and collective behaviours.”<sup>14</sup> As Palmer put it in the editorial introduction to volume 50, sustaining *Labour/Le Travail* requires a “willingness to venture into new territory at the same time as older ground is tilled again in different and imaginative ways.”<sup>15</sup> The enactment of this editorial commitment to both new and old questions is suggested by the Palmer-edited theme issues: in addition to the one on Québec already mentioned are issues on

masculinities (vol. 42), race and ethnicity (vol. 47), the Communist Party (vol. 49) and Indigenous labour (vol. 61).

Gender, alongside class, was and remains a key category of analysis in *Labour/Le Travail*. One way Morton did not count articles was by the gender of their authors. I have done so for my sample (in an admittedly limited binary way relying on the pronouns used in the contributors' section). Male authors of articles outnumber female authors by a ratio of roughly five to three. I then looked at the articles divided along these lines to see if an obvious pattern, the difference gender made, was visible thematically. Certainly female-identified authors have written important articles considering aspects of identity: gender, race, ethnicity, religion.<sup>16</sup> Yet there are also examples of articles by women on more traditional labour history subjects, albeit most often with an intersectional or socialist feminist lens.<sup>17</sup> This perspective and these themes are not exclusive to the female-authored articles, but their prevalence among them is notable. Even though they are in the minority, many of the female-authored articles are highly significant and, in some cases, pathbreaking.<sup>18</sup> *Labour/Le Travail* has remained an important venue for the publication of feminist scholarship. It is worth advertising this fact in hopes that it encourages materialist historians of gender to see their work as contributing fundamentally to the journal's mandate to understand the history of the Canadian working class. As Lisa Pasolli and Julia Smith point out in a recent essay, "Feminist historians must remain committed to researching and teaching women's messy and intersectional labouring lives in the past, not just for the sake of better history but for a better analysis of women's working lives in the present."<sup>19</sup>

In volume 50, Verity Burgmann wrote that from the outset *Labour/Le Travail* "understood that the new labour history could never be another specialism like economic history because its subject matter could not be isolated; that it was an all embracing kind of history writing informed by a model of how the different aspects of society were connected, which refused to separate the social and cultural from the material aspects of being, or the political ideas and consciousness of the working class from its living and material environment." In this sense, *Labour/Le Travail* was "born Thompsonian."<sup>20</sup>

*Labour/Le Travail* has remained Thompsonian in several significant ways. Perhaps foremost is the way that *Labour/Le Travail* articles show the interplay of structure and agency in exploring the lives of working-class

people. As Joan Sangster, one of *Labour/Le Travail*'s current editors, explains, "experience" is a "junction concept" between social being and social consciousness.<sup>21</sup> In volume 53, Sangster's study of the 1966 Tilco Plastics strike in Peterborough exemplifies how a historian can achieve the kind of both/and analysis that reveals the dynamics of structure and agency. History "from below" is perhaps the wrong metaphor; it is history with multiple angles of vision, history without blinders.<sup>22</sup>

To highlight another exemplary article in this regard, Sean Purdy's exploration of the Regent Park public housing project in Toronto shows the relationship between public policy, economic restructuring, the discursive constructions of urban "outcast" spaces, and the way residents responded to stigmatization and material deprivation.<sup>23</sup> Dealing with many themes—among them, race, ethnicity, gender, family type, education, and community organization—Purdy's article draws from different kinds of sources: demographic data appears alongside tenant-authored poetry in a way that, in context, seems entirely congruous.

At sixty-four pages, Purdy's article is the longest in my sample, but it had competition. On average, the *Labour/Le Travail* articles I considered were just under thirty-four pages long. In word count, by my estimate, the average *Labour/Le Travail* article is roughly double the length of the maximum that other scholarly journals, such as the *Canadian Historical Review*, will accept for a submission to be sent for peer review (some journals are even more miserly). Should these studies be shorter? It is possible that Nancy Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank, for example, could have made their point about the boisterous aspects of the culture of Hamilton's interwar boathouse neighbourhood without describing the rules of the "unusual, but hilarious" sport of donkey baseball. But, who would wish they did?<sup>24</sup> Concision can be a virtue, but *Labour/Le Travail* affords authors the opportunity to develop arguments with complexity and to present evidence richly.<sup>25</sup> Bucking the trends in academic publishing, *Labour/Le Travail* provides adequate space for range and depth—and in the best cases, both.



The hazard of counting articles in *Labour/Le Travail* was revealed to me in the spring 2019 issue (vol. 83). Here, Fred Burrill claims that over *Labour/Le Travail*'s forty-one-year history, "only 2.5 percent of the total amount

of research articles, notes, and critical review essays . . . pertain in some way to Indigenous issues or settler colonialism.”<sup>26</sup> Burrill’s larger point that labour historians in Canada have not, as yet, adequately integrated and addressed the history of colonialism and Indigenous dispossession is a fair one. It is also true that more work in this vein might have been published in *Labour/Le Travail*. Yet, in calling for scholars to develop a “settler order framework” account of Canadian history, Burrill advises them to “engage more fully with and develop the ideas laid out in Bryan D. Palmer’s important 1996 [*Labour/Le Travail*] article ‘Nineteenth-Century Canada and Australia: The Paradoxes of Class Formation.’”<sup>27</sup> If we look at the issues of *Labour/Le Travail* since the publication of that essay, a period corresponding roughly with Palmer’s term as editor, the picture appears rather different than Burrill’s “2.5 percent” claim would suggest. Burrill’s footnote listing exceptions to his general rule lists thirteen publications from this period. Even were this list complete, and my survey of volumes 51 through 74 has several candidates for addition, this represents more than 10 percent of the journal’s articles in its most recent decades.<sup>28</sup> These include the significant research published in the special issue on Indigenous labour—2008’s volume 61—that was explicitly focused on the interrelationship of colonialism and capitalism in the history of Indigenous peoples.

Burrill is entirely correct that historians of the working class need to continue to explore the material and ideological legacy of colonialism and white supremacy in Canada. Yet, when Burrill cites examples of the kinds of work he admires, he references more *Labour/Le Travail* articles than those published in any other scholarly journal. Being best of a bad lot, perhaps, is not the same as being good—but Burrill’s “2.5 percent” is misleading, even if the argument it supports is valid. The pages of *Labour/Le Travail* have been open to “settler order” studies *and* many more such studies ought to be pursued.

Turn the page in *Labour/Le Travail*’s spring 2019 issue from Burrill’s call for a “settler order framework” and find Bryan D. Palmer’s call for better histories of Canadian Communism.<sup>29</sup> Palmer wants a both/and history of Communism—one that keeps the structuring reality of Stalinism in view without ignoring or dismissing the contributions of Communists to social and union struggles. This essay cannot, by any means, stand in for Palmer’s historical oeuvre as a whole, but let us deploy it nevertheless to compare Palmer in two scholarly roles: Palmer-as-author versus Palmer-as-editor.

There are, foremost, consistencies. Palmer-as-author in “How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism” looks beyond the national and puts Canadian historiography in dialogue with its international counterparts. This kind of range is characteristic of Palmer’s scholarship, but it is also characteristic of *Labour/Le Travail*. The journal was never parochially Canadian, but the tradition of keeping international perspectives in view was clearly continued and expanded during Palmer’s term as editor. The regular section From Other Shores explicitly testifies to the journal’s commitment to publishing work relevant to the study of Canadian labour history not bound by Canada’s borders.<sup>30</sup>

Second, Palmer’s recent essay engages directly and provocatively in a scholarly debate. This is not unusual for Palmer-as-author; yet, vigorous debate has been important to Palmer-as-editor, too. From his introductory editor’s note in 1997’s volume 40, Palmer signalled his intention to ensure the pages of *Labour/Le Travail* provided a forum for this kind of exchange. It was the “variety of approaches, emphases, and frameworks, not to mention the diversities and differences” that made the “analytic community of those approaching working-class studies potentially both explosive and exciting.”<sup>31</sup> Dialogue between those of differing political commitments, Palmer maintained, had driven the development of the field in the past, and Palmer anticipated it would continue to do so. “It bears saying,” Palmer wrote in volume 50, that “many studies published [in *Labour/Le Travail*] were once quite controversial, even to the point of eliciting considerable negative comment,” but by 2002 the same studies were “staples” of the field, reminding scholars that “today’s controversy can quite often become tomorrow’s convention.”<sup>32</sup> The *Labour/Le Travail* section Controversies predates Palmer’s time as editor, but it is safe to say that the risk-taking, provocative tradition of *Labour/Le Travail* did not diminish under his leadership.

Palmer’s essay on Communist historiography reads the articles he engages with closely and critiques them most sharply for not reading other historians’ work (Palmer’s in particular) closely enough. Rigour is a characteristic of both Palmer-as-author and Palmer-as-editor. How many arguments in *Labour/Le Travail* were tightened, how many points buttressed by additional evidence as a result of Palmer’s editorial intervention? I can testify that during my own experience as a *Labour/Le Travail* contributor, my work was considerably and significantly improved thanks to Palmer’s assistance. That this was not unusual is indicated by the number

of times that Palmer has been thanked in the acknowledgement paragraph at the end of a *Labour/Le Travail* article, often with specific mention of how his expertise—which is extraordinarily wide-ranging in this field—improved an author’s evidence and presentation. Palmer’s abilities as a writer—documented abundantly on a shelf at your nearest academic library—transferred to his editorial role and unquestionably bear some responsibility for the fact that much of the scholarly writing in *Labour/Le Travail* is not just competent and lucid but lively and engaging.

Those whose work has been recently critiqued in Palmer’s latest contribution to *Labour/Le Travail* might be more willing to cede to Palmer-as-author the adjectives “fair” and “forthright” than, perhaps, “generous.” But there could hardly be a more apt word for Palmer-as-editor. To understate the case considerably, Palmer did not need to edit *Labour/Le Travail* for eighteen years to pad his curriculum vitae. It was an act of scholarly generosity, to be sure, but also a signal of conviction and commitment. In what turned out to be a slightly premature valedictory editor’s note in 2014, Palmer explained how he and the journal’s founding editor, Gregory S. Kealey, shared “a sense of *LLT* as something *more* than yet another academic publication. We regarded it . . . as having a modest *movement* character” that “resonated with a particular politics attuned to issues of democracy, equality, and social justice.”<sup>33</sup>

One almost feels nostalgic reading, today, 1997’s Palmer writing in his introductory editor’s note about living in a time of “shockingly narrow ideological conformity, through which the presence of class as an analytic category and workers as an historical and political presence are often written out of the past and disregarded in contemporary life.” Our contemporary moment has greater ideological polarization but feels no less “shockingly narrow.”<sup>34</sup> Taking scholarly risks to move debates in new directions seems even more essential. What Palmer-as-editor wrote in 2002 seems no less true today: “it would be a slap in the face of our past and no service to our present and future, if debate was curtailed. Diversity registers itself in bodies, skin colours, and identities, but in thought and ideas as well.”<sup>35</sup> Palmer and Burrill’s pieces in the spring 2019 issue of *Labour/Le Travail*, by scholars at opposite ends of their academic careers, show that the journal remains committed to pushing arguments and analyses beyond comfortable and platitudinous consensus. Both pieces impel us to write better history, to consider new questions, and to revisit old ones



more imaginatively. Both contend that this kind of scholarly work matters. Getting it right matters. Now as much as ever.



It is October 2018. I am at another conference considering the state of labour history. “Re-Working Class: Setting A New Agenda for Canadian Labour and Working-Class History” is sponsored by the Canadian Committee on Labour History (CCLH). I am presenting on working-class delegations to the Soviet Union in the 1930s and playing the part of *Labour/Le Travail*-inspired historian with more conviction than I did in 2015.

Representatives of Palmer’s generation with significant and longstanding connections to *Labour/Le Travail* are here, including current co-editor Joan Sangster, review editor Jim Naylor, and former assistant and review editor Alvin Finkel. Several academics who were doctoral students supervised by the early *Labour/Le Travail* group, including myself, with defence dates from three different decades, are presenting new research. And, most encouragingly, there is a cohort of current graduate students, activists, and representatives of organized labour.

The conference is not large, but it is lively. Sessions are like an issue of *Labour/Le Travail*: a combination of new directions and re-engagement with old questions (including, for example, how we might write better histories of Communism). There are frank discussions about the challenges facing both the labour movement and labour history. The former is the more far-reaching problem, but the difficulties for both stem from a similar neoliberal root. Meaningful and secure full-time employment is an endangered category, both in the academy and beyond. Likewise, the academy parallels the broader economy in the growth of inequality between haves and have nots. Too many of the best minds of the newest generation of labour historians are grinding out a living in precarious adjunct positions. Those still in graduate school look with despair upon the prospect of landing a secure academic job. These problems are real and they are daunting.

It is perhaps worth recalling that there have been few “easy” times for the production of counter-hegemonic history. *Past and Present*, the journal most closely associated with British Marxist historians, was not launched in the days of broad-based anti-fascism during which those

historians were radicalized, but rather in 1952 in the climate of Cold War anti-Communism. Likewise, in 1957, *The New Reasoner*, forerunner of the *New Left Review*, emerged when Khrushchev's revelations and Soviet tanks in Hungary drove the final nails in the coffin of whatever hopes had been invested in the Soviet Union since 1917. *Labour/Le Travail* was inspired by the radicalism of 1968, sure, but it was born in the era of stagflation amidst a battle in Canada over wage and price controls: a historical moment in which both the Keynesian state and the labour movement, at loggerheads with each other, were both soon to be in rearguard positions against an ascendant neoliberal hegemony.

The Palmer generation did not have their influence over the field of Canadian history handed to them—they seized it. The transformation of our understanding of the past that they effected was achieved through struggle, discipline, commitment, and sense of purpose. Presidents of the Canadian Historical Association Joan Sangster and Craig Heron and award-winning holders of prestigious research chairs Bryan D. Palmer and Ian McKay—and this list could be extended—did not glide easily from doctoral defence to tenure-track job. The place in Canadian historiography they ultimately achieved seems natural only in retrospect and would have appeared an unlikely prospect looking forward from 1976. When scholars of that generation captured positions of relative privilege and security, they used the resources available to them to create opportunities for students and peers. *Labour/Le Travail* was a part of this. For all the differences between contributors in the early years, their shared enemy was a complacent orthodoxy. This was not an enemy to be defeated by one voice alone, but by a chorus: a discordant one with a penchant for rough music, but a chorus nonetheless.

There are differences aplenty and of many different kinds at the 2018 CCLH conference in Saskatoon, but there is also comradery and considerable common ground. "Differences need to be championed," Palmer once wrote, "not through a reification of difference, but in the building of programs and perspectives that fly in every way against the impulses and structures of our current varied but connected subordinations."<sup>36</sup> Here in Saskatoon, at a conference with a "modest *movement* character," some building of the kind Palmer was referring to is getting under way.

Ready or not, the flash of the present is upon us. Unlike Vance, we have not been toiling in darkness. The illuminating pages of *Labour/Le Travail*

and the cumulative works of historians, including Palmer, are our inheritance and our guide. If a next era in the writing of Canadian labour history is to be made, those of us who continue to see the significance of class as a category of analysis need to be present at its making. Unless and until “democracy, equality, and social justice” are achieved, our work lies ahead of us.

#### NOTES

1. See the Library of Congress record, “Vance, a Trapper Boy, 15 years old,” at <https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a21704/>. Photographs in the National Child Labor Committee Collection were generally accompanied by cards containing captions. Although the authorship of the captions remains uncertain, it appears that most were either written by or drew on information provided by Hine himself. For further information both about the captions and about Hine’s documentary efforts, see “National Child Labor Committee Collection,” Library of Congress, accessed 16 October 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/nclc/background.html>.
2. Could these birds be Vance’s renderings of canaries in the coal mine, and, if so, could the absence of cages have metaphorical significance? With the available visual evidence, only speculation is possible.
3. Christo Aivalis, Gregory S. Kealey, Jeremy Milloy, and Julia Smith, “Back to Work: Revitalizing Labour and Working-Class History in Canada,” *Active History.ca*, 21 September 2015, <http://activehistory.ca/2015/09/back-to-work-revitalizing-labour-and-working-class-history-in-canada/>.
4. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 12.
5. Bryan D. Palmer took over as the editor of *Labour/Le Travail* in 1998, replacing Gregory S. Kealey, who had edited the journal since its inception. Palmer was editor until 2014 and then returned with Kealey to edit volumes 77 through 79 in 2016 and 2017. For an insightful and more comprehensive history of the journal, see Joan Sangster, “Creating a Forum for Working-Class Histories: *Labour/Le Travail*,” *Scholarly and Research Communication* 9, no. 1 (2018): 1–10.
6. See Appendix A in Desmond Morton, “Some Millennial Reflections on the State of Canadian Labour History,” *Labour/Le Travail* 46 (Fall 2000): 11–36. The essays in volume 46 were also published in book form: Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *Labouring the Canadian Millennium: Writings on Work and Workers, History and Historiography* (St. John’s, NL: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2000). Two years later, to mark the publication of the

- journal's fiftieth issue, two more retrospective essays appeared: see Verity Burgmann, "Labour/Le Travail and Canadian Working-Class History: A View from Afar," and David Roediger, "Top Seven Reasons to Celebrate and Ask More from *Labour/Le Travail*," *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002): 73–88 and 89–99. See also Bryan D. Palmer's introduction to the issue, "Labour/Le Travail at 50," 9–19 (in English and then French).
7. Drawing on the two dozen issues published between the retrospective essays in volume 50 and the end of Palmer's first tenure as editor in 2014, I assembled eighty-five articles to categorize and compare to Morton's sample.
  8. See, for example, Michèle Martin, "Modulating Popular Culture: Cultural Critics on Tremblay's *Les Belles-Sœurs*," *Labour/Le Travail* 52 (Fall 2003): 109–35; Sean Tucker and Brian Thorn, "Railing Against the Company Union: The State, Union Substitution, and the Montréal Tramways Strike of 1943," *Labour/Le Travail* 58 (Fall 2006): 41–70; James Pritchard, "The Long, Angry Summer of '43: Labour Relations in Quebec's Shipbuilding Industry," *Labour/Le Travail* 65 (Spring 2010): 47–73; Jessica van Horssen, "À faire un peu de poussière: Environmental Health and the Asbestos Strike of 1949," *Labour/Le Travail* 70 (Fall 2012): 101–32.
  9. Peter C. Bischoff, "Un chaînon incontournable au Québec: les Chevaliers du Travail, 1882–1902," *Labour/Le Travail* 70 (Fall 2012): 13–59. Palmer's quotation is found in the editor's introduction to that issue, on page 9.
  10. Robert Tremblay, "La grève générale des charpentiers-menuisiers de Montréal, 1833–1834: Réévaluation d'un acte fondateur autour du concept de légitimité," *Labour/Le Travail* 81 (Spring 2018): 9–52.
  11. Laurel Sefton MacDowell, "The Elliot Lake Uranium Miners' Battle to Gain Occupational Health and Safety Improvements, 1950–1980," *Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 91–118; Bryan Hogeveen, "The Evils with Which We Are Called to Grapple: Élite Reformers, Eugenicists, Environmental Psychologists, and the Construction of Toronto's Working-Class Boy Problem, 1860–1930," *Labour/Le Travail* 55 (Spring 2005): 37–68; and Tracey Adams, "Making a Living: African Canadian Workers in London, Ontario, 1861–1901," *Labour/Le Travail* 67 (Spring 2011): 9–43.
  12. See, for example, Robert Storey, "From Invisibility to Equality? Women Workers and the Gendering of Workers' Compensation in Ontario, 1900–2005," *Labour/Le Travail* 64 (Fall 2009): 75–106.
  13. These were industrial relations; working lives; politics; gender; unions; strikes; and ethnic issues.
  14. Jim Barrett and Diane P. Koenker, "The Saga of History 492: The Transformation of Working-Class History in One Classroom," *Labour/Le Travail* 61 (Spring 2008): 181–213.

15. Bryan D. Palmer, "Editor's Introduction: *Labour/Le Travail* at 50," *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002), 12.
16. Examples include Katrina Srigley, "In Case You Hadn't Noticed!': Race, Ethnicity, and Women's Wage-Earning in a Depression-Era City," *Labour/Le Travail* 55 (Spring 2005): 69–105; Carmela Patrias, "Race, Employment Discrimination, and State Complicity in Wartime Canada, 1939–1945," *Labour/Le Travail* 59 (Spring 2007): 9–42; Melissa Turkstra, "Constructing a Labour Gospel: Labour and Religion in Early 20th-Century Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail* 57 (Spring 2006): 93–130; Rhonda L. Hinthner, "Raised in the Spirit of the Class Struggle: Children, Youth, and the Interwar Ukrainian Left in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail* 60 (Fall 2007): 43–76; Brenda Macdougall, "'The Comforts of Married Life': Metis Family Life, Labour, and the Hudson's Bay Company," *Labour/Le Travail* 61 (Spring 2008): 9–39; Aya Fujiwara, "Japanese-Canadian Internally Displaced Persons: Labour Relations and Ethno-Religious Identity in Southern Alberta, 1942–1953," *Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 63–89; Christabelle Sethna, Beth Palmer, Katrina Ackerman, and Nancy Janovicek, "Choice, Interrupted: Travel and Inequality of Access to Abortion Services since the 1960s," *Labour/Le Travail* 71 (Spring 2013): 29–48.
17. For example, Joan Sangster, "'We No Longer Respect the Law': The Tilco Strike, Labour Injunctions, and the State," *Labour/Le Travail* 53 (Spring 2004): 47–88; Lucie Bettez, "Cent jours dans la vie des Campivallensiennes. La grève de 1946 à Salaberry-de-Valleyfield," *Labour/Le Travail* 62 (Fall 2008): 9–50; MacDowell, "The Elliot Lake Uranium Miners' Battle"; van Horssen, "À faire un peu de poussière"; Julia Smith, "An 'Entirely Different' Kind of Union: The Service, Office, and Retail Workers' Union of Canada (SORWUC), 1972–1986," *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 23–65; Heather Jensen, "A History of Legal Exclusion: Labour Relations Laws and British Columbia's Agricultural Workers, 1937–1975," *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 67–95.
18. In terms of new areas of inquiry, see Katrin MacPhee, "Canadian Working-Class Environmentalism, 1965–1985," *Labour/Le Travail* 74 (Fall 2014): 123–49; and Emily van der Meulen, "When Sex is Work: Organizing for Labour Rights and Protections," *Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 147–67.
19. Lisa Pasolli and Julia Smith, "Challenging Work: Feminist Scholarship on Women, Gender, and Work in Canadian History," in *Reading Canadian Women's and Gender History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 288.
20. Burgmann, "*Labour/Le Travail*," 74.

21. Joan Sangster, *Through Feminist Eyes: Essays on Canadian Women's History* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2011), 357.
22. Sangster, "We No Longer Respect the Law."
23. Sean Purdy, "Ripped Off" by the System: Housing Policy, Poverty, and Territorial Stigmatization in Regent Park Housing Project, 1951–1991," *Labour/Le Travail* 52 (Fall 2003): 45–108.
24. Nancy B. Bouchier and Ken Cruikshank, "The War on the Squatters, 1920–1940: Hamilton's Boathouse Community and the Re-Creation of Recreation on Burlington Bay," *Labour/Le Travail* 51 (Spring 2003): 21. Donkey baseball in some places involved playing baseball while riding donkeys. In Hamilton, Bouchier and Cruikshank recount, a more challenging variant was played in which the roles were reversed and players ran the bases while carrying a young donkey on their backs.
25. That *Labour/Le Travail* wants readers to have access to sources—to present the archives of working-class people unmediated—is indicated by the recurrent "Note and Document" section.
26. Fred Burrill, "The Settler Order Framework: Rethinking Canadian Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 177.
27. Bryan D. Palmer, "Nineteenth-Century Canada and Australia: The Paradoxes of Class Formation," in "Australia and Canada: Labour Compared," special joint issue, *Labour/Le Travail* 38 and *Labour History* 71 (Fall 1996), as cited in Burrill, "The Settler Order Framework," 194.
28. In terms of explicit discussion of Indigenous issues and people, the thirteen titles listed in Burrill's n. 18, p. 178 are the most significant publications on the theme, but there are nevertheless related and relevant discussions to be found in other *Labour/Le Travail* articles, including Christina Burr, "Some Adventures of the Boys: Enniskillen Township's 'Foreign Drillers,' Imperialism, and Colonial Discourse, 1873–1923," *Labour/Le Travail* 51 (Spring 2003): 47–80; John-Henry Harter, "Environmental Justice for Whom? Class, New Social Movements, and the Environment: A Case Study of Greenpeace Canada, 1971–2000," *Labour/Le Travail* 54 (Fall 2004): 83–119; Patrias, "Race, Employment"; Brendan Sweeney, "Sixty Years on the Margin: The Evolution of Ontario's Tree Planting Industry and Labour Force: 1945–2007," *Labour/Le Travail* 63 (Spring 2009): 47–78; and Jessica Dunkin, "The Labours of Leisure: Work and Workers at the Annual Encampments of the American Canoe Association, 1880–1910," *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 127–50. On the ideology of colonialism and the social construction of whiteness, Kurt Korneski has made a significant contribution in "Race, Gender, Class, and Colonial Nationalism: Railway Development in Newfoundland, 1881–1898," *Labour/Le Travail* 62 (Fall 2008): 79–107. Finally,

the theoretical position—demonstrating how dispossession is fundamental to capitalism—of Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux’s “Cracking the Stone: The Long History of Capitalist Crisis and Toronto’s Dispossessed, 1830–1930” (*Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 9–62) resonates compatibly with Glen Coulthard’s insight that “the historical experience of dispossession . . . has been the dominant background structure shaping the character of the historical relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state,” as quoted approvingly in Burrill, “The Settler Order Framework,” 191.

29. Bryan D. Palmer, “How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?” *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 199–232.
30. This section first appeared in the journal’s second issue in 1977.
31. Bryan D. Palmer, “Editor’s Note,” *Labour/Le Travail* 40 (Fall 1997): 10.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Bryan D. Palmer, “Editor’s Note,” *Labour/Le Travail* 74 (Fall 2014): 11; emphasis original.
34. Palmer, “Editor’s Note,” (1997): 10.
35. Palmer, “Editor’s Introduction: *Labour/Le Travail* at 50,” 13.
36. Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 4.





PART II



**Experience,  
Discourse,  
Class**



## Bryan D. Palmer and E. P. Thompson



*Nicholas Rogers*

In the 1960s, Edward Palmer Thompson burst onto the historical scene with a monumental history, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Rejecting static sociological depictions of class and those derived from a Marxism that saw class subjects as simply the bearers of productive relations, Thompson defined class as a happening, an active process that owed as much to agency as to conditioning. In Thompson's definition, class experience was largely determined by the productive relations into which one entered at birth and hence involuntarily, but "class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms."<sup>1</sup> This notion liberated history from the passive, adaptive sense of class that littered many textbooks. It brought class agency to centre stage. Class was no longer marginal to history proper, a convenient backdrop to industrial development. It opened up what had hitherto been only a "prehistory" of labour, a prelude to a narrative of union relations. By contrast, Thompson's *The Making* explored modes of collective action ignored and sidelined in orthodox labour history. And in this new enterprise, engagement mattered. Common people were no longer the objects of history; their interventions ruffled feathers and made a difference. In discovering the creative agency of ordinary people, Thompson read the institutional archive "against the grain" to produce a history from below that was irreverent, mischievous, seditious, and sometimes insurrectionary. He brought muscle and vibrancy to popular history in intoxicating ways. One did not have to be a Marxist to appreciate the novelty of the method, especially the re-enactment of

historical social dramas, the confrontations with authority, and the active interventions on the historical terrain. As cultural historian Kathleen Wilson reflected on the fiftieth anniversary of *The Making*, Thompson brought performativity to historical studies before the term was invented.<sup>2</sup>

Thompson's *The Making* was an exemplary model for Bryan D. Palmer's dissertation project, and in an interview with *Left History*, he admitted as much: "When . . . I moved in the direction of graduate studies, I was uncertain about what to study: I had a longstanding and intense interest in race and seriously considered doing what then would have been called black history. But it was relooking at *The Making* that convinced me to do labour history."<sup>3</sup> Although two thousand miles and eighty or so years separated the two subjects, there were many aspects of *The Making* that inspired and informed Palmer's work. To begin with, Thompson located the largest resistance to industrial capitalism among skilled artisans, not factory operatives. He did so because it was not immiseration so much as the challenge to their values, craft pride, and sense of respect and independence that provoked opposition. And indeed, the skilled workers' literacy and associational life, their journeymen's clubs and parish wakes, provided them with the collective resources to struggle against deskilling and the commodification of their labour as the industrial process advanced. Likewise, in Ontario's Hamilton in the era of industrialization between 1860 and 1914, Palmer saw the skilled workers "as the cutting edge of the working-class movement," for similar reasons as Thompson and with similar resources; although, understandably, given the specific development of the steel industry in Hamilton, there was more emphasis on shop-floor control than there was in Thompson's study, where textile industries and small artisanal production dominated the industrial landscape. Even so, echoing Thompson, Palmer stressed the relationship between culture and conflict in the making of the working-class movement in Hamilton, and approvingly quoted Thompson's notion of working-class culture as a "way of struggle" rather than a "way of life," an active process "through which men make their history."<sup>4</sup> This led him to expand the conventional boundaries of labour history—to move beyond a study of strikes to various modes of association life, to informal modes of community control such as white-capping, and to issues of time and work discipline that were broached in Thompson's *The Making* and explored more fully in a premier article in *Past and Present*.<sup>5</sup>

There are, then, some obvious homologies between Thompson's *The Making* and Palmer's study of late nineteenth-century Hamilton, and closer affinities between both authors' exploration of the charivari. Yet beyond this there was the historiographical "state of play" in the 1970s as social history came of age and engaged the attention of more scholars. By then Thompson had emerged as the leading exponent of history from below and one of a notable cluster of British historians, most with former Communist Party affiliations, who wrote from a Marxist perspective. The British Marxists, however, were but one of several "schools" competing for attention in the take-off of social history; among them were the French *Annales*, the historical demographers, and various American advocates of modernization. At stake was the relationship of history to other disciplines in the social sciences, and how explicit model-based social history should be.

Like Thompson, Palmer had little interest in a close marriage between history and sociology, largely because the latter's approach to class was too synchronic and mechanistic and inattentive to the continuous interplay between theory and evidence. In 1979, when *Culture in Conflict* was published, Palmer was uncharacteristically cautious and ambivalent about this, rejecting Althusserian analysis but toying with the usefulness of Levi-Strauss's structuralism as a way of examining culture.<sup>6</sup> One would have thought, given his interest in historicizing culture, Palmer would have dispatched Levi-Strauss as well, since his binaries—*The Raw and the Cooked* and so on—cut through historical specificities in the quest for neat trans or ahistorical paradigms. That aside, in his own work Palmer had to confront alternative readings of social history from Michael Katz, who had a team of researchers delve into Hamilton's social structures through a computerization of the censuses of 1851 and 1861 and allied sources.<sup>7</sup> Katz's project was superbly funded and poorly framed, unable to really tackle the social dynamics of Hamilton's transition to steel town because it ignored the 1871 census when Hamilton was about to enter the heady waters of industrial conflict and demands for an eight-hour day. Useful in recognizing that social hierarchy could co-exist with transiency, and willing to acknowledge the hazards of downward mobility among Hamilton's business class, something American historians largely ignored in their infatuation with upward mobility, Katz agonized over class. He could not find it in his computer cards, not even when he matched occupational

status with property values and household structures. He eventually opted for “status crystallization,” a computerized concept if ever there was one, based on the synchronicity of measurable units, and beyond that a three-tiered class structure. And while some interesting data was disclosed about boarders and the age of leaving home in his demographic research, the sum was a lot less than the parts.

Palmer was dubious that Katz’s modernization venture delivered very much, believing there was more to be gained from traditional sources in illuminating the dynamics and texture of Hamilton’s class struggle. His original comments were terse and muted, but they were a lot more strident four years later when Katz published, along with Stern and Doucet, a sequel called *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism*.<sup>8</sup> This was an auto-critique of the 1975 venture, an admission by Katz that Marx had a point in delineating two fundamental classes, a capitalist and a working class, and that quantitative calibrations of class left much to be desired. Palmer was scathing about the retraction, seeing it as an opportunistic retreat by Katz in the face of trenchant criticism, for Katz still insisted that quantitative methods had much to tell social historians, particularly on the effects of transiency and poverty in creating an acquiescent working class. Palmer was not having it, and his review registered many of the reservations that Thompson and others like Herbert Gutman had levelled and continued to level at American social science history: that it paraded the false verities of quantification as superior to qualitative evidence, that it flattened and played down the volatility of class struggle, and that it was too quick to generalize from undigested or incomplete data, in this case from the gendered nature of production without apt comparisons from different industries.<sup>9</sup> Above all, Katz’s book epitomized the hubris of serial historians who captivated funders with the nirvana of computer-land and social science rhetoric. People whom Richard Cobb would derisively call “historians in white coats.”<sup>10</sup>

Palmer’s more embattled position may have represented his deeper understanding of Thompson’s writing-in-context, for soon after revising his dissertation into a book he embarked on a compact biography entitled *The Making of E. P. Thompson*. This was an attempt to situate Thompson as writer, political activist, and historian, a book on which many later commentators have since drawn and that was eagerly sought upon Thompson’s passing. Palmer claimed it was not written as an “intellectual odyssey,” but in

many senses it was.<sup>11</sup> To begin with, Palmer was the first historian to delve publicly into Thompson's background and reveal the intimate relationship between Thompson's historical writing and his politics; in particular, there was his own participation in World War II, the tragic death of his brother Frank in 1944 when fighting with the Bulgarian partisans, and the heady days of 1947 when he and his future wife helped build a Yugoslavian railway with fellow travellers on the left, an experience Thompson described as the "euphoric aftermath of a revolutionary tradition."<sup>12</sup> As Palmer made clear, Thompson's politics were forged in the Popular Front against fascism, with a commitment to a brand of Communism, socialist humanism, that he retained after his break with the British Communist Party, while working to create an alternative New Left.

Palmer saw Thompson's postwar endeavours as exemplary: a perfect model of the historian-activist who became an important public intellectual, a status accorded to very few as communicative practices switched from radio to television and universities often bottled up or inhibited public debate.<sup>13</sup> Thompson evoked what a social historian should be: not simply a historian with a social conscience, but one whose intellectual work would provoke social change. To begin with, Thompson initially taught history and literature outside the academy not in it, to workers whom he hoped to learn from and mobilize. In a way Thompson, despite his upper-class background, strove to be something akin to an "organic intellectual" whose task, as in Gramsci's political firmament, was to transform customary ways of thinking in radical, revolutionary directions—to begin "the war of position," the "warrening" or undermining of existing institutions necessary for socialist advance. As Thompson himself remarked in the *New Left Review*, the radical intellectual should be "a force which may precipitate a new consciousness and initiate much broader processes."<sup>14</sup> His acknowledged aim in teaching extra-mural classes associated with the Workers' Education Authority was to "create revolutionaries."<sup>15</sup>

This goal was buttressed by intellectual work that dug deep into British thought to recover and reanimate radical traditions that might contribute to a socialist future. This sort of activity was not new. Interwar Communists had embarked on the enterprise in different ways, and Thompson's first task, endorsed by the Communist Party's Historians Group, was to explore the fusion of Romanticism and Marxism in the work of William Morris.<sup>16</sup> After 1956, when Thompson broke with the Communist Party,

he embarked upon political projects that sought to create new spaces for a New Left, such as the launching of a new journal, *The New Reasoner*, and campaigning for nuclear disarmament, a movement (CND) that Thompson always saw as critical to disassembling the Cold War polarities that inhibited any progress to socialism. In his estimation, the Cold War was “the greatest effective cause of apathy, inhibiting or distorting all forms of social growth.”<sup>17</sup>

At times in Palmer’s short portrait of Thompson there is a yearning for the same kind of activity in Canada, where radical thinkers were more marginal and where historiographical conventions stubbornly resisted, and sometimes ridiculed, the new social history. Like Thompson, Palmer’s intellectual genesis occurred outside the academy rather than in it, and like Thompson, Palmer launched a journal that allowed him to promote his vision of history.<sup>18</sup> In 1976, together with his good friend Gregory S. Kealey, the newly minted graduates founded *Labour/Le Travail* in an effort to broaden the vistas of Canadian history in socialist directions, to reinvigorate “class” and “class consciousness” in a country where regionalism and nationalism held sway, and where new immigrant histories often reinforced their own identity politics. Some progress had been made south of the border through the efforts and example of historians like Herbert Gutman, who had been Kealey’s supervisor, Eugene Genovese, and Staughton Lynd; they had begun to tackle the old orthodoxy of American exceptionalism in new ways, often drawing inspiration from Thompson. But one senses that Palmer felt it was an upward battle in the True North, where business-and-politics perspectives held sway and smugness sometimes rained down on the “working-class culture” camp. More to the point, Palmer’s exemplary historian was himself under attack, in ways that Palmer thought potentially detonated a radical social history.

It was inevitable that an intervention like *The Making* would provoke sustained analysis. The first reviews were largely empirical in nature, about whether there was one working class, whether English radicalism at the turn of the nineteenth century was quite so insurrectionary and popularly grounded, and whether Thompson had ignored the popular appeal of loyalism in the protracted war against France.<sup>19</sup> Palmer was not particularly interested in these objections to a book he so greatly admired, although he was not unaware of some of the more searching critiques. In *Objections and Oppositions*, the book he wrote upon Thompson’s death in 1993, he



listed some of the more salient: the privileging of resistance rather than accommodation in working-class experience; the problem of talking about a working-class consciousness when capitalist production was unevenly distributed across the country; the masculine bias of working-class politics and the marginalization of women's experience.<sup>20</sup> He rather belittled the criticisms, be they "Marxist, feminist or mainstream," as picayune. There is an element of polemical sidestepping here, largely out of loyalty to a historian he so greatly admired and who was so often under attack, although Palmer likely thought the sad occasion was inopportune for a sustained critique.

Thompson often talked of working in a Marxist "tradition," by which he meant the body of doctrine he had initially encountered in the British Communist Party. Despite its Stalinist determinisms and reductions, the party tolerated and sometimes encouraged the exploration of radical democratic impulses within British thought. In this respect Thompson inherited a body of thinking, often referred to as the Good Old Cause, that was articulated by authors like A. L. Morton and Christopher Hill.<sup>21</sup> The influence of this tradition—Protestant, antinomian, millenarian, libertarian—flows through the early chapters of *The Making* and forms part of Thompson's rebuttal of Anderson and Nairn in "The Peculiarities of the English," where he refutes their claim that Britain lacked a bourgeois revolution by suggesting that from a stadial perspective the multiple challenges to absolutist rule in the seventeenth century decisively broke the constraints of neo-feudalism. This victory over royal powers, carried out by a mélange of progressive landowners and mercantile arrivistes, consolidated capitalism as the dominant mode of production, however undramatic it might appear to those schooled in the French Revolution.<sup>22</sup> It also generated new challenges to the propertied order through the agency and vision of Leveller soldiers and religious sectarians, an impetus brilliantly analyzed a little later by Thompson's ally, Christopher Hill.<sup>23</sup> This quest for a British-born radicalism was central to the goals of the historians within the British Communist Party. It is there at the beginning of Thompson's work, in his efforts to marry Morris to Marx, and very explicitly at the end, in his study of Blake, *Witness Against the Beast*, when Thompson declares himself something of a "Muggleonian Marxist."<sup>24</sup> As Palmer rightly remarked, Thompson's study of Blake situated him in "an antinomian tradition reaching back to the seventeenth-century ranting

impulse of dissent,”<sup>25</sup> a historicist exercise that did not go down well with scholars reared on Northrop Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry*, where Blake’s visionary symbolism soared to the biblical and capital C “Cultures” of the literary imagination.

Yet the literary influences on Thompson—he studied and taught literature as much as history—certainly modulated his Marxism. They always made it humanist rather than scientific, a quality that marked him off from some other members of the Communist Party Historians’ Group, such as Eric Hobsbawm, who even in his more cultural ventures such as *Primitive Rebels*, controlled them by apt comparisons. Thompson’s literary strain emerges most clearly in his rejection of economic determinism and the base–superstructure model of explanation favoured by many Marxists.<sup>26</sup> This brand of Marxism he considered sterile, reductive, and disabling to class agency. Thompson preferred the co-determination of social being and social consciousness, mediated by experience. This formulation left room for history and historically nuanced forms of class action, whereas highly economistic versions of Marxism reified class and treated human subjects as Pavlovian dogs reacting to contradictions between the mode and relations of production. “When William Morris brought the romantic and the Marxist critique together,” reflected Thompson, “and wrote of the ‘innate moral baseness’ of the capitalist system he did not indicate a moral superstructure derivative of the economic base. He meant—and he abundantly demonstrated his meaning—that capitalist society was founded upon forms of exploitation which are *simultaneously* economic, moral and cultural.”<sup>27</sup> Thompson’s insight brought a freshness and originality to his study of eighteenth-century custom, where common rights were both economic and legal issues, inseparable from one another.<sup>28</sup> It spawned new insights into the operations of the law in vindicating and more often than not criminalizing those customary rights and privileges, perks that provided the plebeian classes with critical sources of extra-market, non-wage income. In effect, the law was brought to bear on the problem of primitive accumulation in fruitful ways. This was an advance on the Hammonds, who did a lot of spadework on what they termed the “social” (not moral) economy, yet stressed the erosion of custom rather than the embattled defence of it.<sup>29</sup>

When Thompson talked of the relationship between social being and social consciousness he often did so in terms of a clash of values. In his

discussion of Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution*, for example, he followed Alasdair MacIntyre in suggesting that while the mode of production and productive relationships determines cultural processes in the epochal sense, there is a kernel of human relations that produces a moral as much as an economic logic, transmitting, say in the nineteenth century, patterns of "acquisitiveness, competitiveness and individualism." In a reductive moment, Thompson argued that the working-class movement of that century might be seen as "a movement of resistance to the enunciation of economic man."<sup>30</sup> This conceptualization allowed for literary treatments of class struggle. In many ways, they enriched Thompson's historical narratives. They brought the intuition of the poet to working-class struggle. Romanticism and revolution get written into *The Making*; Blake haunts its pages. In *Whigs and Hunters*, it is the turn of the Tory satirists, Pope and Swift, the satirists of Walpolean corruption.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, this literary lens opened up problems in Thompson's analysis. The resistance of workers in *The Making* is persistently related to the ideologies of utilitarianism and political economy, not to productive relations or interactions with sections of the governing class. In his deployment of the term utilitarianism, Thompson often gestures to the literary vision of F. R. Leavis, an influential figure in literary circles when Thompson was at Cambridge, who cast literary endeavours as efforts to transcend the doctrine's philistinism. Yet on other occasions utilitarian represents the ingrained attitudes of a Gradgrind in Dickens's *Hard Times*, or the professional ethos of Jeremy Bentham and company. And if Thompson's concept of utilitarianism is a little slippery, his notion of political economy is over-generalized. In the period 1790–1830, there were significant mutations in political economy in its market imperatives. Adam Smith is not David Ricardo; and some sections of the ruling class—Tory radicals and JPs in grain counties, for example—were a lot more paternalist than others. Under popular pressure, they mitigated the drift to laissez-faire economics.

Focusing upon ideology often works in highlighting the battle of ideas and attitudes over capitalism, but it opened Thompson to the charge of "culturalism," to the allegation that his class struggles were situated in the superstructural terrain and ignored the economic determinants of class interaction. Palmer rightly rejected this charge, noting that Thompson never denied the importance of material factors and remained focused on the dialectic between culture and non-culture, on how material experiences

were handled in cultural ways.<sup>32</sup> “Those propositions of historical materialism which bear upon the relation between social being and social consciousness, upon the relations of production and their determinations, upon modes of exploitation, class struggle, ideology, or upon capitalist social and economic formations, are (at one pole of their ‘dialogue’) derived from the observation of historical eventuation over time,” Thompson wrote. They emerge from the historical record by tracing regularities as evidence of systematic social formations. But they could not be frozen, as some sociologists would want, Thompson argued, because they were really in process, moments of being and becoming, “with contradictions and liaisons, dominant and subordinate elements, declining or ascending energies.”<sup>33</sup> To the hard nuts of Marxian political economy, this was loosely formulated, lacking the necessary precision of a mode of production and its contradictions. Some suspected Thompson was a romantic socialist, not a real Marxist, while others were troubled by the status of “experience” in Thompson’s writings, a crucial concept that was invariably tilted toward the positive and emancipating, not the numbing weight of oppression and marginalization. Even in his eighteenth-century studies, where Thompson was more preoccupied with the equilibrium of social relations than he was in *The Making*, the stress was on counter-hegemonic strategies rather than impenetrable, enclave cultures.<sup>34</sup>

In *Arguments within English Marxism*, Perry Anderson noted the singular absence of any quantitative measures of industrial populations, whether factory or artisanal, and believed this handicapped Thompson’s exploration of the new industrial landscape.<sup>35</sup> The criticism is theoretically apt, though of a tall order, because at the time *The Making* was written, very little work had been done on capital formation and factory concentration. Stanley Chapman’s exploration of insurance registers as an index of capital formation didn’t emerge until 1970, seven years after *The Making*. François Crouzet’s book came out two years beyond that, and David Levine’s research into the demographic dynamics of industrial populations was only published in 1977.<sup>36</sup> Anderson was really asking the impossible. Thompson, it should be said, was aware of the problem. Alongside the polemic about the standard-of-living controversy of the industrial revolution, there were three chapters illustrating the differently paced modes of exploitation in key industries. Even so, as Palmer has suggested, there is not enough about surplus extraction in Thompson’s account of exploitation. Thompson was

more preoccupied with the loss of rights in the language of John Thelwall and other Jacobins.<sup>37</sup>

The tendency to define struggles in the language of contemporaries also meant Thompson sometimes glossed the structures of power in Georgian society. While he offered a substantive critique of the prevailing notions of paternalism offered by people like Harold Perkin and Peter Laslett, his analysis of political power at the top was sometimes impressionistic.<sup>38</sup> I can agree with Palmer that he was aware of the importance of political power and the role of the state, but I do not think he really delved into them, save in his understanding of the role of the law in handling property relations and customary rights.<sup>39</sup> For example, in *Whigs and Hunters*, Thompson followed Pope and Swift in castigating Sir Robert Walpole as a politician who brought unparalleled levels of corruption to Britain's oligarchy.<sup>40</sup> Yet he failed to recognize the degree to which Walpole melded the gentry and the monied interest into a powerful bloc that proved the bedrock of political stability, reducing direct taxes to benefit landlords and reordering the National Debt to suit the financiers. The result was that despite the cronyism that plagued high politics, the Georgian state proved a sufficiently efficient tax collector, geared itself for war and imperial trade, and boosted its industries through protective tariffs and a navy that kept the lanes open for commerce.<sup>41</sup> Old Corruption, the radical Whig construction beloved of Tory satirists, the Romantic radicals, and Edward Thompson, will not explain the emergence of Britain as a world power in the eighteenth century.

Similarly, Thompson fell short in delineating the political crisis over the Reform Bill that forms the apogee of *The Making*. Thompson asserted the revolution was a possibility, especially during October 1831 when urban riots indicated "a deep disturbance at the foundations of society."<sup>42</sup> Yet the largest riots in Bristol ran the gamut of protest and pillage without any radical political direction, and elsewhere anger against the Lords did not translate into a threat to the regime. It is difficult to see Britain "within an ace of a revolution,"<sup>43</sup> especially when middle-class unions mediated the conflict. In "The Peculiarities of the English" Thompson had another opportunity to address this problem. Here he elaborated on the British structure of power before 1832, noting that the victory of an agrarian capitalist class, the gentry, was blighted by a parasitic congeries of interests at the top, Old Corruption, which was shaken by the American war and

finally undermined in 1832. Thompson noted that the rhetoric of revolution was used by the Whigs to intimidate the monarch and the Tories in power, and again gestured that it was almost the real thing. I would argue not, because crucial sections of the ruling bloc, the gentry and the financial bourgeoisie, remained intact throughout the crisis, and popular opposition to old oligarchy articulated at best a militant constitutionalism, not revolution.

So, there are grounds for saying that Thompson's particular brand of romantic, almost apocalyptic socialism, with its strong literary referents, sometimes glossed the historical relationship between political and economic power. The same criticism could be levelled against his assessments of contemporary politics. In linking past and present, Palmer has suggested that Thompson was attempting to "come to grips with the explanatory puzzle of the failure of revolution in nineteenth-century England and its relationship to more contemporary failures of the left."<sup>44</sup> I am not sure the link was that strong, unless one draws historical parallels between the scaremongering politics of British counterrevolution in the 1790s and the Cold War crisis of the 1950s and early 1960s. In fact, if Thompson's essays in the *New Left Review* are any indication, he was cautiously optimistic about the prospects of the New Left as he was writing *The Making*, sensing real possibilities in opening up a new political space with the coming of CND, while harnessing the energies of the New Left clubs around the country. In this respect, it is worth comparing Thompson's articles on "Revolution," by which he meant bringing a Gramscian "war of position" to socialism, with Stuart Hall's reflections on the post-1956 initiatives, published later in 1989.<sup>45</sup> Here one gets a keener sense of the cross-currents—generational, regional, aspirational—that proved difficult to navigate and in the end made the New Left more of a milieu than a movement, even before Perry Anderson assumed the editorship of the *New Left Review*. Hall's reflections, in fact, call for a reassessment of political conjuncture of the 1960s, and by extension challenge the claim that Anderson's editorial coup at the *New Left Review* was responsible for the failure of the New Left and a flight from politics into theory. The social bases of the New Left were precarious to begin with; it never developed strong roots in the union movement, save in Fife. Unions were a key area of conflict in the postwar era as workers dug in and acquired a larger share of the national income. The post-tax rate of profit in British industries actually fell from 8.1 percent

in the early 1950s to 3.2 percent in 1969 and pushed Capital to the wall.<sup>46</sup> This was the crucial context for Thompson's hopes of "Revolution." And the *New Left Review* did not simply fly into the stratosphere of theoretical Euro-Marxism. Between 1964 and 1971, there were articles on British politics, the future of the novel, the American blues singer Robert Johnson, American civil rights, decolonization, and the crisis of British capital.

The charge of "culturalism" levelled at Thompson came largely from structuralists eager to read for the right Marx. They found Thompson wanting. Thompson retorted with a blistering attack on the main guru, Louis Althusser, in *The Poverty of Theory*, in which he defended historical inquiry and historical materialism and cast Althusser's theoretical interventions as an "orrery of errors," mechanical and in essence idealist.<sup>47</sup> In the Ruskin conference on "People's History and Socialist Theory" in 1979, he turned on the structuralists and castigated them for overlooking the fact that he had been a critic of the culturalism offered by Raymond Williams in the early days of the New Left. Thompson adamantly refused the charge of "culturalism" on political and theoretical grounds, noting that his brand of Marxism was forged in the vortex of 1956, as a protest against Stalinism and its reductive character. Against his detractors, he insisted that his notion of "experience" was "determining, in the sense that it exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness" and proposed new questions. If people wanted to differentiate between lived experience, what one initially encounters in structured life situations, and perceived experience, what one makes of it in political practice, a definition soon to be echoed by Perry Anderson in *Arguments within English Marxism*, so be it. But Thompson was not going to give ground to a structuralism that he saw as deleterious to Marxist or marxisant historical practice.<sup>48</sup>

Palmer has been sympathetic and defensive of Thompson's position. He, too, has found Althusserian Marxism and subsequent poststructuralisms to be profoundly ahistorical. He has lauded postwar English historians like Thompson for making rich contributions to historical materialism, fusing history and theory. "Far from refusing theory," writes Palmer "this historical writing is poised at the fruitful juncture of conceptualization and empirical explorations of the admittedly problematic evidence generated out of the past, a practice that demands the integration of structure and agency, being and consciousness, past and present, subject and interpretation, and the self-reflective elaboration of [those] relationships."<sup>49</sup> True,

Palmer does not necessarily agree with Thompson's reading of Marx. He does not endorse the notion of an epistemological break in Marx's writings, from the youthful Marx to the more clinical inquiries into political economy in volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital*, as Thompson seemed to do in his critique of Althusser's structuralist Marxism, believing that from the *Grundrisse* onwards, Marx's thought was "locked inside a static anti-historical structure."<sup>50</sup> This suggests that Palmer is not a wholehearted advocate of Thompson's socialist humanism, however much he admires Thompson for his stalwart defence of historical materialism. In fact, we know Palmer endorses the importance of a vanguard as a socialist strategy in a way Thompson never did, at least after his break with the Communist Party in 1956. Palmer is openly dubious that Thompson's libertarian Communism or Marxism is enough to transcend existing capitalist structures.<sup>51</sup> His recent studies of James P. Cannon and the Minneapolis truckers' strikes of 1934 have confirmed his belief in the importance of revolutionary vanguard cadres.<sup>52</sup>

After the Ruskin conference, Thompson turned away from discussions of historical materialism. "Within a few short years," writes Palmer, "this longstanding commitment to Marxism would soften, weaken, and ultimately fade away."<sup>53</sup> Perhaps. One should note that the publication of old and new essays in *Customs in Common* in 1991 shows no definitive departure from historical materialism. Whether this withdrawal from theoretical debate was a strategic retreat or one diverted by Thompson's deep involvement in the campaign for European nuclear disarmament (END), remains open. Palmer, in sensing a drift away from Marxism, would argue the latter, perhaps wondering whether Thompson's notion of "exterminism," the self-generated escalation of the arms race by America and Russia, an isomorphism that stamped its presence on society rather than a military-industrial complex within it, was sufficiently grounded in materialist considerations.<sup>54</sup>

While Thompson was campaigning for END and attempting to disable the Cold War by creating links between East and West European peace activists, his historical work was subject to a somewhat different structuralist critique than that of Althusserian Marxists. The battle at Ruskin had been as much political as historical, a battle about the future of the British New Left, which had lost momentum. The battle over the "linguistic turn" was not without its politics, particularly with respect to



the feminist movement as Palmer makes clear in *Descent into Discourse*, but it was more broadly historiographical. Originating with the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and moving in poststructural directions of contingency and indeterminacy under Jacques Derrida, literary scholars fixated on the materiality of language. They charged historians with strip-mining texts without attending to their mediations and narrative tropes. The charge was not without its merits, as Palmer acknowledges: “Poststructurally inclined historians rightly stress the need for closer attention to language and representation, demand scrutiny of the unreflective construction of analytical categories within the master codes of dominant ideologies both past and present, and justifiably call for research into the discursive categories that surround the social space of class and consciousness.”<sup>55</sup> Social science historians devoted to number crunching were often extremely cavalier with literary texts, reading unreflexively for illustrative evidence to bolster the “real” evidence they found in the census or some equivalent series. Literary evidence was often handled mimetically or was seen as marginal to real historical processes.

The charge was levelled at Thompson, despite the nuanced literary character of much of his historical work and his sensitive reading of texts that anticipated reception theory, how texts were received by audiences. This is patently clear in his discussion of Paine and Cobbett in *The Making*.<sup>56</sup> Even so, critics accused Thompson of shoehorning texts into class statements. Didn't Thompson “read through” many radical statements about popular rights and interpret them as class rather than populist texts? Didn't he adopt reflectionist strategies when it suited him? Why should the 1832 Sadler Committee's inquiry into the factories have “an authenticity which compels belief” when the Factory Committee of 1833 is dismissed as partisan?<sup>57</sup> Why should one privilege the account of the 1818 Manchester strike by a fictive “journeyman cotton spinner” in the radical *Black Dwarf* as exposing the realities of capitalist exploitation?<sup>58</sup> Thompson would reply, following the historical procedures set down by R. G. Collingwood, that every text has to be interrogated for its biases and purpose, but that one can find “structure-bearing” evidence that summarizes the quintessential social relations of the time. This, he admitted, was a controversial move.<sup>59</sup> In his eighteenth-century work, Thompson privileged a conversation between a magistrate and an intransigent weaver because it disclosed the contradictory tensions within paternalism, in that the weaver is deferential to the

JP but defensively insistent on his contractual rights with his employer.<sup>60</sup> The historical move would send someone like Roger Chartier into paroxysms, so devoted as he is to the strict context and genre of texts. This is because the conversation is part of an anecdote set within a pamphlet written by Daniel Defoe on the insubordination of “servants.” For Chartier, Thompson short-circuits the text in unconscionable ways, just as Robert Darnton did in his *Great Cat Massacre*.<sup>61</sup>

Another dimension to the linguistic attack of Thompson came with the rise of new subjectivities in historical writing, often defined by anti-humanist conventions. For these critics, language preceded and shaped consciousness, not the other way around, and for the deconstructionist critic, it was necessary to attend to silences and alterities of the text—not simply what was said, but what was suppressed, hidden, and sutured. Within these contexts Thompson’s definition of class came under attack. To begin with, Thompson’s emphasis on the primacy of class had to contend with the proliferation of new identities: gender, race, and ethnicity. Why wasn’t there more on women in *The Making*? Where were the Irish, the targets of sectarian riots in 1745, 1780, and beyond, especially in Liverpool and Manchester? And what about race and empire? Some of Thompson’s own students took him to task on that score. In one assessment, Peter Linebaugh argued that Thompson’s *The Making* was the history of the “English working class, but not the working class in England,”<sup>62</sup> meaning that he ignored seafarers and the “motley crew” that visited and sometimes settled in the island’s ports.

Thompson admitted some of the deficiencies. One historian cannot do everything, and Thompson’s own analysis of the eighteenth century was rooted in the problematic set out by people like Tawney, Polanyi, and Dodd—namely, the long transition to capitalism and the stubborn resistance to it. In conceptualizing the eighteenth century in terms of a patrician-plebs polarity, Thompson admitted he would “pass over a great deal of what lies in between: commerce, manufacture, London’s luxury trades, overseas empire.”<sup>63</sup> This is a lot to pass over, and it begs the question of the relationship of the state to class power, and at a secondary level, the relationship of parish to landed society, especially since middling tradesmen and farmers were directly responsible for the administration of basic welfare, the poor law.

The essays in *Customs in Common* were written as feminist history was unfolding and understandably show a greater sensitivity to gender relations than *The Making*, a book written before feminist history really developed. The latter is not without its reflections on women's rights, as Sheila Rowbotham's *Hidden from History* makes clear,<sup>64</sup> and it features some helpful reflections on the tensions within industrial households with the inflow of women into the mills, reflections other authors would follow and develop. Indeed, *The Making* was not incompatible with Marxist or marxisant brands of feminism, as Anna Clark's *Struggle for the Breeches* proved,<sup>65</sup> even if it diminished the heroic narrative Thompson wrote and made it more tragic. The same could not be said about radical feminism in a deconstructionist vein. Joan Scott argued that Thompson didn't simply marginalize women in *The Making*, he defined class in gendered terms, so that class action in the public sphere privileged rational men, while women were consigned to the expressive, domestic sphere.<sup>66</sup>

Palmer reacted strongly to this suggestion. In a close reading of *The Making*, he argued that Scott's gendered binaries—men/women, political/domestic, rational/expressive—simply didn't hold up under scrutiny, particularly with respect to authors like Mary Wollstonecraft, a rational radical nonconformist who strove to reanimate political motherhood and dissuade women from a politics of coquetry.<sup>67</sup> While not disputing the usefulness of gendered discourses in history, Palmer argued that Scott's appraisal tilted "too problematically towards the determining power of discourse" and erroneously claimed "there is no social experience apart from people's perception of it."<sup>68</sup> Everything gets wrapped up in discourse, a troubling formulation for Marxists interested in historical processes bearing upon individuals—in Thompson's terms, the pressures of social being upon social consciousness. The formulation would be unacceptable to cultural Marxists like Mikhail Bakhtin, who argued for the multivocality of many texts, the heteroglossia, the deviant voices of the margins. And even to poststructuralists like Derrida, depending on how self-contained the definition of discourse proved to be, since Derrida's notion of *différance* means to defer as much as differentiate, adding elements of indeterminacy to the linguistic formalisms of de Saussure.

Palmer does not reject discourse theory out of hand. He recognizes that historians should try to assimilate some of its insights, such as its emphasis upon the materiality of language. This would make social history

more prismatic and attentive to its investigative procedures than it often has been. His reservations echo Thompson's remarks on Althusserian Marxism, that discourse theory too readily abandons process for structure, that it ignores the determining processes of history, particularly the notion of determination in historical materialism. Palmer's critique of poststructuralism centres on the incessant play of discursive subjectivities to the occlusion of any consideration of capitalist forms of exploitation and oppression. A radical discourse theory in a structuralist mode would evacuate the "social" for the "social imaginary," historical actors for subject positions. It would produce a historical word game with reality effects, a world of simulations in the manner of Jean Baudrillard. Like Ellen Meiksins Wood, who advanced the same criticisms of discourse theory and its use by historians,<sup>69</sup> Palmer believes linguistic structuralism will deliver a bad politics. It will only encourage pessimism and fatalism. At best it will look for semi-autonomous spaces within capitalism, like Foucault's heterotopias.<sup>70</sup>

Palmer's critique of poststructuralism in *Descent into Discourse* was followed up by his own exploration of historical "difference," a key concept in the linguistic turn. Tracking night's transgressions in a series of "travelogues" through the ages, Palmer reveals the marginal lived and imagined lives beyond the estranged and disempowered rhythms of everyday capitalism.<sup>71</sup> In one sense, this is an exploration of the long resistance to capitalist development that echoed and emulated the work of Thompson in terms of customary practices and work discipline. In another, it is an astute intervention into the debate over the "linguistic" or "cultural" turn, taking on his opponents on their own ground. By examining the antinomies of lightness and dark, work and play, orthodoxy and heterodoxy over six centuries, Palmer shows it is possible to draw out the rich allegorical meanings associated with the dark, the illicit, the repressed, *without* losing sight of the social and economic determinations that drive and shape people's lives. In what is a brilliantly imaginative book, Palmer delves into the "dark cultures of the night," from the *benandanti* or "night walkers" of sixteenth-century Friuli to the Jacobin societies of the 1790s, to the jazz clubs, to the queer and race riots of twentieth-century American cities. It is a wonderful panorama of hopes, fears, and transgressions that at a meta-level offers a conversation between Marx and the guru of discursive orders, Michel Foucault.<sup>72</sup> Palmer has managed to explore the social imaginaries of the past without losing

sight of the social. He offers a cultural materialism that grounds the traffic in metaphors that absorb, even obsess, historians of representation.

Palmer situates the advance of structuralist linguistics in the self-regarding, self-contained silos of the academy. This seems to me to be only part of the story. As Mark Poster has argued, part of the popularity of the linguistic turn has stemmed from the fact that we live in a world of proliferating signs, in a world where communicative practices penetrate more deeply into private lives and households than ever before.<sup>73</sup> Semiology, the study of signs, and by extension language, mattered in unravelling this new universe. Whether we believe the new state of affairs constituted a mode of communication or not, it is certainly clear that the mobilization of signs added to the allure of consumer capitalism, while also disaggregating working-class communities, a development Richard Hoggart anticipated and feared in *The Uses of Literacy*.<sup>74</sup> In political terms, social critics had to wrestle with the fact that the crisis of British capital in the 1960s had moved to capital's advantage by 1980, and the subsequent onslaught on organized labour and deepening inequality produced no major challenge to the dismantling of the welfare state and neoliberal reform.

Complicating this new political map was the influx of Commonwealth immigration after 1950, a feature that shaped the crisis and, in Althusserian terms, overdetermined it. Thompson never addressed this head on. As Palmer makes patently clear, his politics were forged in the resistance to Nazism and Popular Front politics, and he was far more at home debating whether social democratic ventures could be pushed toward socialism, and what that might entail in terms of "educating desire," than dealing with the politics of retreat in a declining imperial nation. Thompson had no truck with consumerism and underestimated its appeal. And curiously, for a man reared on anti-imperial sentiment through his father, Edward John Thompson, he had little to say about postcolonial problems and race in Britain. Perhaps, as Robert Gregg suggests, his familiarity with empire made him blind to it.<sup>75</sup> Within the New Left, it was left to people like Stuart Hall to probe the paradoxes of the unfolding crisis, which he did in essays like "The Great Moving Right Show," deploying an eclectic range of theory from Althusser, Gramsci, Laclau, and others.<sup>76</sup>

One argument Hall advanced was that the shift to the right could not be explained in terms of false ideology or the scapegoating of immigrants. He argued that Thatcher and company had successfully articulated and

reworked ideas about the nation, character, liberty, and independence that were part of the doxa of Britain's protestant national heritage. The Blue Machine's promotion of these ideas was quite successful, particularly during and in the wake of the Falklands War; it was "a bizarre episode" wrote Thompson, "a sudden flush of imperial nostalgia, as if Britain had suddenly fallen through the time-warp into the 18th or 19th century."<sup>77</sup> Given his extraordinary historical talents, it is a pity Thompson didn't say more about this squalid struggle in the South Atlantic, which drew plaudits from the mainstream press about brave British boys taking on a tin-pot dictator, and even drove some leading Labour politicians into compliance with Thatcher's little war. Rather Thompson devoted his energies to the peace movement in the strife-ridden days of Thatcher, opening the Trafalgar Square demonstration for nuclear disarmament in 1981 with a Blakeian flourish: "Against the kingdom of the beast, we witness shall rise."<sup>78</sup> Christopher Hitchens winced, while others were downright puzzled. But Edward heaved to the task with apocalyptic fervour, telling voters in 1983 that this was "the most important general election to be fought in Britain in *this century*."<sup>79</sup> Liberty or Death by nuclear fission.

I am not suggesting Thompson was out to lunch, but I sometimes wonder whether he was always in touch with his public despite his personal charisma. His other crusade in the 1980s, when Thatcher's security state moved into gear to address the IRA protests and bombings, was to campaign against the erosion of British civil liberties, a line of argument consonant with his claim in *Whigs and Hunters* that the law was never only the prerogative of the rich but a potential resource for the powerless. Did his perorations in praise of the British jury strike a chord with black Britons who had been consistently over-policed and under-protected under Thatcher and New Labour? According to the Macpherson inquiry of 1997, black people were seven and a half times more likely than whites to be stopped and searched and four times more likely to be arrested. In London and in the northern cities close to where Thompson first worked, the proportion of arrests was even higher; perhaps 20 percent of all black males over the age of ten had a brush with the law. This racial profiling carried over into sentencing, where the proportion of black people sent to jail was four to seven times above the national average. No wonder people like Stuart Hall became a little frustrated about Thompson's admiration for the cherished principle of British liberty. During one session Hall chaired

at the Ruskin conference in 1979, he said he was tired of hearing about the Englishman's birthright. He "didn't give a damn about it," he said, an outburst that was edited out of the conference proceedings.<sup>80</sup>

Edward Thompson was a crusader, a visionary, a man of remarkable talents. Eric Hobsbawm, who did not always agree with him, either politically or historically, remarked that "he was the only historian I knew who had not just talent, brilliance, erudition and the gift of writing, but 'genius in the traditional sense of the word' . . . he was a man showered by the fairies at birth with all possible gifts except two. Nature had omitted to provide him with an in-built sub-editor and an in-built compass."<sup>81</sup> Palmer would not worry about the first, because he is almost as prolix as his friend and mentor, thoroughly absorbed by his projects. Like Thompson, he can write late into the night and sometimes through it. He would, I imagine, be more circumspect about the second, if only because he takes the Althusserian episode far more seriously than Hobsbawm, who thought the Althusserian fad was close to the "sell-by date" when Thompson blew up about it. That debate, carried on with electrifying passion by Thompson in an unheated Methodist Hall on Walton Street, Oxford, carried a subtext of political exclusion, of marginalization from a younger generation of historians. The years 1944, 1947, 1956, 1979, and 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, were milestones in Thompson's career as a historian and public intellectual. Palmer admires him for being true to his convictions, an outsider who never capitulated to capitalism even if he did not always bring the crowd with him, a man who captivated a generation of historians and shaped the launching of anglophone social history, a man who was the perfect counterpoint to *Academicus Superciliosus*, a man who hated cant and would not brook an academy attuned to business. Palmer has charted Thompson's life and his struggles with insight and sensitivity, and for this we are in his debt, for we shall never see the likes of E. P. Thompson again.

#### NOTES

1. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1968), 9–10.
2. Kathleen Wilson, "Class and Condescension," *History Workshop Journal* 76 (August 2013): 254.

3. A. M. Givertz and Marcus Klee, "Historicizing Thompson: An Interview with Bryan D. Palmer," *Left History* 1, no. 2 (1993): 111–12.
4. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), xii, xiv.
5. Thompson, *The Making*, 337–38; E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present* 38, no. 1 (December 1967): 56–97, reprinted in E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), 352–403; Bryan D. Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 5–62.
6. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, xiii; Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
7. Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).
8. Michael B. Katz, Mark J. Stern, and Michael B. Doucet, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); Bryan D. Palmer, "Emperor Katz's New Clothes; or with the Wizard in Oz," *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 190–97.
9. Thompson and Gutman did on occasion count, but Gutman in particular took the cliometricians to task for not adequately contextualizing quantitative data, most famously in Herbert Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), and his response to Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974).
10. Richard Cobb, "Historians in White Coats," *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 December 1971.
11. Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981), 20.
12. *Ibid.*, 34.
13. On the latter in America, see Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). Palmer endorses the argument of the book, particularly the idea that left intellectuals have become prisoners of their own esoteric language within the university and are unable to relate to broader audiences. See Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 203–4.



14. E. P. Thompson, "Revolution Again! Or Shut Your Ears and Run," *New Left Review* 6 (November–December 1960): 29.
15. Peter Searby et al., "Edward Thompson as a Teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick," in *Protest and Survival: The Historical Experience: Essays for E. P. Thompson*, ed. John Rule and Robert Malcolmson (London: Merlin Press, 1993), 3.
16. Raphael Samuel, "British Marxist Historians 1880–1980: Part One," *New Left Review* 120 (March–April 1980): 21–96, especially 26–28, 37–43, and 51–55.
17. E. P. Thompson, "Revolution Again," 18.
18. On Palmer's early intellectual odyssey in New York, see Givertz and Klee, "Historicizing Thompson," 111. Thompson's *New Reasoner* was explicitly a post-1956 left intervention, but it featured Thompson's early essays on radical and working-class history.
19. Thompson answered these criticisms in the postscript to the 1968 edition of *The Making*; see 916–37. These were ongoing issues, as Thompson's review of *Britons* revealed. See E. P. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics* (London: Merlin Press, 1994), 321–31.
20. Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994), 93–95.
21. Thompson is not always linked to A. L. Morton, but they were both profoundly interested in the traditions of radical dissent and William Morris. See A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1938); A. L. Morton, *Freedom in Arms: A Selection of Leveller Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1975); A. L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970); A. L. Morton, ed., *Political Writings of William Morris* (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1973).
22. E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 46–47.
23. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1972). E. P. Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (London: Allen Lane, 1975) is dedicated to Hill as the "Master of more than an old Oxford College."
24. Peter Linebaugh, "From the Upper West Side to Wick Episcopi," *New Left Review* 201 (September–October 1993): 24.
25. Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions*, 161–64.
26. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Falling Through the Cracks: E. P. Thompson and the Debate on Base and Superstructure," in *E. P. Thompson: Critical*

- Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1980), 125–52.
27. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 84; emphasis original.
  28. This emerges most clearly in his talk to the Indian History Congress in 1976, “History and Anthropology,” reprinted in *Persons and Polemics*, 202–27.
  29. J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Town Labourer 1760–1832: The New Civilization* (London: Longmans, Green, 1917), and their *The Skilled Labourer 1760–1832* (London: Longmans, Green, 1919). The term “social economy” is found in the second book, p. 3.
  30. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 84, 120.
  31. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, 29, 31, 138, 160, 164, 183, 211–18, 221, 269, 283–94.
  32. See Michael Merrill, “Interview with E. P. Thompson,” *Radical History Review* 3 (1976): 4–25.
  33. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 239.
  34. Although never entirely. Thompson’s charivaris contained elements of both, and in his original essay on patrician society and plebeian culture, he stressed the distance between patrician and plebs outside the servant economy. See Thompson, *Customs in Common*, chapter 8, and E. P. Thompson, “Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture,” *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 4 (1974): 384–89. For a good example of an impenetrable, rebellious plebeian culture, see David Rollison, “Property, Ideology and Popular Culture in a Gloucestershire Village,” *Past and Present* 93 (1981): 70–97.
  35. Perry Anderson, *Arguments with English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), 34–36.
  36. Stanley D. Chapman, “Fixed Capital Formation in the British Cotton Industry, 1770–1815,” *Economic History Review* 23, no. 2 (August 1970): 235–66; François Crouzet, *Capital Formation in the Industrial Revolution* (London: Methuen, 1972); David Levine, *Family Formation in an Age of Nascent Capitalism* (New York: Academic Press, 1977).
  37. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 73–74.
  38. Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965); Harold J. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780–1880* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).
  39. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson*, 74.
  40. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, 197–200.
  41. Among the key texts here are P. G. M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England* (London: Macmillan, 1967); Colin Brooks, “Public Finance and Political Stability: The Administration of the Land Tax, 1688–1720,” *Historical Journal* 17, no. 2 (1974): 281–300; Peter Mathias and Patrick

- O'Brien, "Taxation in England and France, 1715–1810: A Comparison of the Social and Economic Incidences of Taxes Collected for Central Governments," *Journal of European Economic History* 5 (1976): 601–50; John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688–1783* (New York: Unwin Hyman, 1989). *Whigs and Hunters* was published just before Mathias and O'Brien's important findings on British taxation.
42. Thompson, *The Making*, 896–99. On Bristol, see Steve Poole and Nicholas Rogers, *Bristol from Below: Law, Authority and Protest in a Georgian City* (Woodridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2017), 325–52.
  43. Thompson, *The Making*, 898.
  44. Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions*, 97.
  45. Stuart Hall, "The First New Left: Life and Times," in *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, ed. Sally Davison, David Featherstone, Michael Rustin, and Bill Schwarz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 117–41.
  46. Andrew Glyn and Bob Sutcliffe, *British Capitalism, Workers and the Profits Squeeze* (London: Penguin, 1972).
  47. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 204, 275–76, 290–95.
  48. Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 396–408, quotation on 406; Anderson, *Arguments*, 25–29.
  49. Bryan D. Palmer, "The Poverty of Theory Revisited: Or, Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism," *Left History* 1, no. 1 (1993): 79.
  50. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 252–53, 375–77.
  51. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson*, 121–22, 132–33.
  52. Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
  53. Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions*, 121. See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), 215–16.
  54. E. P. Thompson, "Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization," *New Left Review* 121 (May–June 1980): 3–31.
  55. Palmer, "The Poverty of Theory Revisited," 94.
  56. Thompson, *The Making*, 97–110, 820–37.
  57. *Ibid.*, 371.
  58. *Ibid.*, 218–22.
  59. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 221–22.

60. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 37–38; Thompson, “Patrician Society,” 384. Palmer cites the conversation to illustrate its potentially different voices in Thompson’s texts. See Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 69.
61. Roger Chartier, “Text, Symbols, and Frenchness,” *Journal of Modern History* 57 (December 1985): 682–95; Roger Chartier, *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), chapter 2.
62. Peter Linebaugh, “Edward Thompson (1924–1993),” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 7, no. 4 (December 1994): 364.
63. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, 17. Thompson never explicitly cites Karl Polanyi, though some have argued his sense of the long eighteenth century bears similarities. See Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 161–64.
64. Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History* (London: Pluto Press, 1973), 21–22, 31–35.
65. Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
66. Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), chapters 2 and 4.
67. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 81–85.
68. *Ibid.*, 85, 180.
69. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New “True” Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986); Ellen Meiksins Wood, “Edward Palmer Thompson: In Memoriam,” *Studies in Political Economy* 43 (Spring 1994): 26–31.
70. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 22–27.
71. Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
72. See the illuminating review by Geoff Eley in *Left History* 8, no. 1 (2002): 106–12.
73. Mark Poster, *Foucault, Marxism and History: Mode of Production versus Mode of Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).
74. Richard Hoggart, *The Use of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), especially chapter 7. On the crisis of British capital, see Glyn and Sutcliffe, *British Capitalism*.
75. Robert Gregg, “Class, Culture and Empire: E. P. Thompson and the Making of Social History,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 11, no. 4 (December 1998): 449. See also Edward John Thompson, *An Indian Day* (London: Knopf, 1927).

76. Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show" in Davison, Featherstone, Rustin, and Schwartz, *Selected Political Writings*, 172–86. See also John Solomos, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones, and Paul Gilroy, "The Organic Crisis of British Capitalism and Race: The Experience of the Seventies," in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Routledge, 1982), 9–46.
77. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, 103. For Hall's reflections on the Falklands War, see Stuart Hall, "The Empire Strikes Back, 1982," in Davison, Featherstone, Rustin, and Schwartz, *Selected Political Writings*, 200–6.
78. Thompson, *Persons and Polemics*, 69.
79. Peter Linebaugh, "Edward Thompson," 365; emphasis original.
80. I was present at the session. On racial profiling, see Huw Benyon and Lou Kushnik, "Cool Britannia or Cruel Britannia? Racism and New Labour," in *Fighting Identities: Race, Religion and Ethno-Nationalism*, ed. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (London: Merlin Press 2003), 232–38.
81. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 215.



## On Polemics and Provocations

Bryan D. Palmer vs. Liberal Anti-Marxists



*Chad Pearson*

Historians in general, and radical scholars in particular, are deeply indebted to Bryan D. Palmer's body of engaged scholarship. Together, his works have done much to help us understand the past and, for those of us with polemical impulses, have served as indispensable tools of intellectual ammunition in scholarly and political debates. Simply put, Palmer has educated countless readers about labour and leftist movements in Canada, the United States, and beyond. Combining a Marxist worldview with an imaginative, Thompsonian approach to the study of the working classes, Palmer has explored their many struggles both in and outside of workplaces. That he continues to write insightful and original studies exploring the many dimensions of class struggles decades after earning his doctoral degree is noteworthy. It is striking, above all, when we compare his impressive scholarly output, his wide-ranging historiographical and theoretical fluency, and his principled political commitments to many others in the profession. Palmer, a proud and unapologetic Marxist, has never sought to follow the latest academic trends for careerist reasons or to achieve institutional respectability.

It is in this spirit that Palmer has entered, and sometimes sparked, scholarly and political controversies. He has done so for honourable reasons, and has continuously taken strong positions, which has helped to clarify many issues of importance. This chapter examines how Palmer has challenged various studies that have downplayed the significance of

class and class struggles since the late 1980s, a decade marked partially by the development of an avalanche of anti-Marxist interventions from mostly liberal quarters. First, I will explore the nature of these debates, highlighting both the issues raised by Palmer's detractors as well as his critical responses. In this period, he sought to defend Marxist positions against the emergence of the so-called cultural/linguistic turn. Its rise, and the popularity of cultural studies generally, was clear in numerous academic departments throughout the 1980s, and the practitioners and promoters of these scholarly tendencies, characterized in large part by the widespread enthusiasm for mostly French theorists, have tended to downplay, or reject altogether, Marxist approaches to the study of the past. In response, Palmer has offered unyielding and thorough responses that have been widely read and digested by numerous scholars.

The excessively theoretical tendencies found in the 1980s were less present in history departments at the turn of the latest century. But a climate characterized by a general dismissal of radical interpretations of the past, combined with a broad discomfort with Marxism, has persisted. The second part of this chapter focuses on Palmer's studies of left activists and the limitations of establishment liberalism in the US, and I highlight the tensions between Palmer and others in the US. We can identify this influence in places where even some labour historians have marginalized class as a category of analysis; compared to their peers in other parts of the world, US historians are a relatively conservative cohort, often reluctant to place class struggles at the centre of their studies even though the nation itself witnessed some of the most dramatic conflicts and eruptions of corporate and state repression. Many have insisted that late nineteenth-century workers were principally interested in defending a pre-industrial form of artisanal republicanism, at a time when wage earners enjoyed greater dignity and control over the labour process. Historians focusing on the twentieth century have shown similar tendencies; they continue to downplay cases of class radicalism and combativity, contending that workers wanted, as prominent historian Lizabeth Cohen maintained in her study of Chicago during the 1930s, "moral capitalism."<sup>1</sup>

While much of Palmer's scholarship reveals its debt to the so-called "new labour history," as a scholar-activist, he has not been satisfied with merely exploring oppositional forms of working-class cultural activities in communities or informal acts of resistance in workplaces. Furthermore,



with respect to politics, Palmer's inspiration comes not from the spirit that guided the Popular Front of the 1930s or from the rise of social welfarism in the post-World War II years, but from the classical Marxist tradition that takes seriously the revolutionary activities of working-class movements. This tendency respects the practice of socialism from below; it means honouring working-class struggles and achievements carried out by workers themselves. It is best expressed by the Russian revolutionaries in 1917. In a stark alternative to the prevalent liberal anti-Marxism found in the academic world, Palmer wrote forcefully about their accomplishments in 2003, noting the important "contribution of Lenin and Trotsky in actually implementing a Marxist program, advancing theoretical premises in a changed 20th-century context, building a revolutionary movement and, above all, a disciplined party capable of establishing the proletariat in power, holding, for a time, the transitional reins of state power." This minority position cuts sharply against the grain of popular academic opinions, and Palmer is well aware of his relative isolation: "Almost nobody in academic circles in the year 2003 is willing to stand the ground of the original Bolshevik tradition."<sup>2</sup> One could make the same claim today.

How have non-Marxist historians responded to Palmer's studies? Simply put, some have engaged with his work in good faith while others have not. Many have overlooked him. But we do not need to look far to find debates that Palmer helped to launch and intervene in during the late 1980s and early 1990s. These debates generated illuminating and often heated exchanges at conferences and in the pages of academic journals. In this period, he made interventions that had a meaningful impact on the profession. In general, his readers, including many of his critics, took his scholarship seriously; in many cases, critics have replied fairly, engaging with his arguments constructively. On other occasions, his detractors have been somewhat dismissive, faulting him for the supposed misdeed of embracing Marxism, while unfairly suggesting that he has failed to appreciate non-class related identities and divisions. As I demonstrate below, Palmer's hard-hitting examinations of postmodernist scholars, complementing the work of other critics, may have played a part in slowing down the production of postmodern scholarship. Indeed, few of today's historians embrace the once fashionable discourse theories.

While Palmer participated in a series of often lively and sometimes prickly debates with fellow scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, his scholarship

has been subject to less back-and-forth in more recent times. Over the past couple of decades, fewer scholars have written as postmodernists, but many have made their peace with institutional liberalism while continuing to demonstrate discomfort with various strains of Marxism. Some have re-discovered political economy by labeling themselves political historians, while others identify as “new historians of capitalism.” But most of these historians have shown little appreciation for Marxism or even labour struggles. This is unfortunate for the profession, since Palmer’s studies of labour and politics clearly illustrate the shortcomings of establishment liberalism and the cruelties embedded in industrial capitalism. Palmer’s 2013 analysis of the dramatic 1934 Minneapolis strikes, which I discuss in the second part of this chapter, demonstrated the anti-union actions taken by self-identified labour supporters, including the Minnesota Farmer–Labor governor as well as President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Palmer’s descriptions of cases of liberal anti-unionism have been met with mostly silence from professional academic quarters. Presumably, many of today’s scholars of twentieth-century politics have preferred to ignore rather than to engage, showing little interest in underscoring independent forms of working-class radicalism and Democratic Party treachery.

Academic trends and the allure of increasing one’s professional status may provide an answer for the overall lack of engagement in recent years. Over the past quarter century, numerous US historians, including one-time labour historians, have opted to focus chiefly on official politics, illustrating the various conflicts between the two mainstream political parties. Rather than explore the intensity and rawness of class conflicts inside workplaces or on picket lines, these scholars have shown a sustained interest in the so-called “rise and fall” of the New Deal order.<sup>3</sup> In general, these historians embrace an all-too-common and rather orderly narrative about the history of the twentieth-century US, one that primarily involves conflicts between liberals and conservatives. It goes something like this: a cross-class coalition of liberal reformers secured major reforms in the Progressive era, the World War I period, the 1930s, and during World War II. While conservative forces undermined labour movements following World War II, ordinary people nevertheless experienced another round of victories during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. But right-wing forces were well organized, ultimately leading to a series of frontal assaults on labour and social welfare programs during the presidency of Republican Ronald

Reagan. This marked the high time of neoliberalism, which has been characterized by privatization schemes, the decline of high-paying unionized jobs, and a growing gap between the rich and poor.<sup>4</sup>

While Palmer likely agrees with the broad outlines of this basic narrative, he is considerably more critical of establishment liberals than many of the US's most prominent historians.<sup>5</sup> He has pointed out the very real tensions between liberal politicians and militant working-class activists, which are illustrated in his treatment of the so-called Progressive era and his analysis of the repressive activities of the so-called "friends of labour" politicians in the 1930s. Above all, he has kept his eyes on class tensions, recognizing that the ruling classes, not simply "the right," have been the chief impediments to working-class emancipation. While many of the US's political historians have shown an almost-obsessive interest with right-wing organizations, activists, and politicians, Palmer has cast a much wider net by demonstrating the ways conservative *and* liberal forces have often lined up on the same side to undermine the interests of the working-class masses. His studies, expressed most plainly by his examinations of strikes, Marxist-inspired labour activists, employer thuggery, and state repression in the first few decades of the twentieth century, reveal there is very little that is "moral" about capitalism.

### Confronting the Anti-Marxist "Linguistic Turn"

In the 1980s, a decade when Palmer established himself as a prolific labour historian, a growing number of others began to question the overall usefulness of class as a unit of analysis. This critique was most pronounced outside of history departments, but plenty of historians, including those who had established their careers writing about labour, began to embrace a new wave of hyper-theoretically infused cultural studies that were mostly dismissive of labour and class. Writing in 1990, Palmer was rather blunt: "Few terms elicit the skepticism and condescension reserved for *class* in the 1980s."<sup>6</sup> He wrote that this decade was distinctively hostile to traditions of historical materialism: "What is new in the 1980s is the wholesale retreat from class among those ostensibly linked to the socialist project."<sup>7</sup> His targets—many of whom were comfortably situated in tenured positions at expensive universities—had argued that class analysis and historical materialism were somehow unfashionable and lacked explanatory power.

In his view, they were guilty of focusing on textual analysis without properly evaluating material conditions. Palmer has called this “the linguistic turn, or, more polemically, the descent into discourse.”<sup>8</sup>

*Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*, a polemical, six-chapter book published in 1990 in response to what the late historian Ellen Meiksins Wood called the “retreat from class” within academic departments in Western Europe, Canada, and the US, provoked much debate and discussion in the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for those interested in obtaining lessons in the ways academic departments in the 1980s were shaped by this trend, there is perhaps no better guide than Palmer’s critical examinations. During this period, scholars questioned the relevance of Marxism as an analytic tool and incessantly labelled the Western working classes as hopelessly reactionary. Numerous social science and humanities departments had become echo chambers, places where one frequently heard comments that Marxists were too narrowly focused, unable to properly explain a variety of historical events, such as the dynamics of the French Revolution or the characteristics of the Western working class. Some insisted that Marxists were simply insufficiently attentive to other divisions and identities, including gender, race, and culture in general. Based on Palmer’s critical engagement with an array of sources, this book serves as a useful model for those interested in understanding and confronting these academic assaults.

But first we must ask: did the postmodernist/cultural studies advocates, including former labour historians, have a point? It is worth considering the larger context both in and outside of the academy. For those traditionally interested in finding inspiration from the industrial working classes, conditions in the advanced industrialized countries seemed rather bleak in the 1980s. Thatcher and Reagan were in positions of power, and both had played their own reprehensible roles in fighting labour movements and shattering livelihoods in their respective countries. Plant closures across the industrialized world led to high levels of unemployment and wage cuts, generating profound feelings of despair in many working-class circles. Some, including auto workers, responded xenophobically, lashing out at people of Japanese descent and at Japan itself, a country whose auto manufacturing sector was becoming dominant. And far too many labour leaders, the majority of whom were white men, promoted a nationalistic “buy American” narrative rather than encouraging working-class mobilizations

against bosses.<sup>10</sup> In this context, numerous veterans of 1960s-era social movements began to write off the working classes, which many implicitly defined as white men in unions.

A few high-profile labour history controversies also contributed to a backlash against class analysis. The most meaningful ones broke out at a 1984 conference held at Northern Illinois University. Here, dozens of historians engaged in a series of debates that, according to reports, led to more heat than light. Scholars interested in gender history expressed a sense of frustration, annoyed that prominent labour historians had not recognized or prioritized gender relations. Writing about the conference as a participant, Alice Kessler-Harris noted that “tensions in the group rose high whenever the issue of gender entered the conversation.”<sup>11</sup> In short, labour history, some critics charged, had a gender problem. Others accused it of having a race problem.<sup>12</sup>

Academic tensions lingered into the late 1980s, when a steady stream of once radical scholars began to embrace discourse theory and reject class analysis. In this context, Palmer played a critical part in promoting the enduring significance of Marxism. In the pages of *Descent into Discourse*, Palmer makes a strong case for taking class analysis seriously without losing sight of other divisions, including gender, race, and political institutions. In his view, many critics had gone too far, and he points out that the academics behind attacks on historical materialism, combined with their marginalization of class analysis, have not always acted in good faith. Some have insisted that Marxists have traditionally been inattentive to language and cultural forces in general, a claim that Palmer, reminding us of the work of Christopher Hill, Asa Briggs, E. P. Thompson, and influential Trinidadian Marxist C L. R. James, demonstrates is simply untrue. James, for example, was an important literary voice, cultural critic, and historical materialist who, Palmer points out, “has received so little attention from the critical theory community.”<sup>13</sup>

Some anti-Marxist critics have challenged the new labour history popularized partially by E. P. Thompson, inarguably one of the most significant twentieth-century historians and an important influence on Palmer’s intellectual development. Consider the case of Joan Wallach Scott, a one-time labour historian and the scholar who Palmer suggests has gone further than any other gender historian in “advocating the value and importance of borrowing from poststructuralist thought.”<sup>14</sup> Her influential articles,

especially "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," which was first published in the *American Historical Review* in 1986 and then republished two years later in *Gender and the Politics of History*, are filled with theoretical references and in places suffer from her overuse of the passive voice.<sup>15</sup> A theoretically infused gender analysis, she has maintained, "is at once threatening and difficult." Incorporating gender, in her view, is difficult because "it requires the mastery of philosophically complex, often abstruse, theories and a willingness to shift the way one thinks about history."<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to radically revise our approach to the study of labour history in particular, she has offered a stinging critique of Thompson and the scholarly tradition he helped to establish, including studies of Chartism, the English workingmen's movement from the late 1830s and 1840s. Inspired by Gareth Stedman Jones's controversial study of Chartism, Scott has declared that "there is no social reality outside or prior to language."<sup>17</sup> Historian Lenard R. Berlanstein understood the stakes involved: "Scott struck at the heart of the new labor history by arguing that political language and ideas shaped the Chartist movement far more than did industrial experience."<sup>18</sup>

Palmer has been especially pointed in his evaluation of what he calls "The Scott Files." In his view, Scott's problem is not merely that she overstresses the importance of language, though, in Palmer's eyes, this is a shortcoming. She has also not been fair to her targets. Palmer reminds us that Scott challenged Thompson for the sin of gender blindness, but she herself was mostly silent on gender-related matters in her own earlier studies. "It is," Palmer writes, "more than a little unsettling to see her address Thompson's problematic account of women and class formation without once alluding to her own writings of the 1970s and 1980s, which were, if anything, far less attentive to realms she now regards as pivotal than was *The Making of the English Working Class*."<sup>19</sup> Here he compares Scott's labour history scholarship to Thompson's magnum opus, reminding us of her selective approach in an essay she co-wrote with the late historian Eric Hobsbawm: "the words *wife* or *woman* appear three times—in passing—in the text, while *he/his*, *craftsmen*, *tradesmen*, and *journeymen* are marched through the pages incessantly."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Palmer points out that it was unfair that she had challenged Thompson for failing to properly assess gender years before the emergence of the second wave feminist movement. Scott's critique of Thompson, as Palmer puts it, "rests on a troubling method of

selective instancing that is itself undercut further by obvious misreading and overt distortion.”<sup>21</sup> Above all, “Scott’s appraisal of women in *The Making of the English Working Class* thus tilts too problematically toward the determining power of discourse.”<sup>22</sup>

*Descent into Discourse* reveals some of the ways that Scott’s anti-materialist and hyper-theoretical tendencies extend beyond criticisms of Thompson. Palmer assesses much of Scott’s work, including her numerous papers published in *American Historical Review*, *Feminist Studies*, and *International Labor and Working-Class Studies*. From Scott, we encounter the eyebrow-raising claim, “There is no social experience apart from people’s perception of it.”<sup>23</sup> Palmer has little tolerance for such claims, maintaining that one cannot honestly accept the “reduction of historical process to the perception of meaning.” Scott is guilty of, in Palmer’s words, a “problematic reading of power as language.”<sup>24</sup> Above all, Palmer has criticized Scott for “overstating language’s importance.” Overall, “she has left aside too much, spiraling downward in the descent into discourse.”<sup>25</sup>

Palmer’s painstaking critique of Scott is found in the chapter called “Gender.” This chapter, with its 154 endnotes, examines much more than what he considers Scott’s excesses. Here he makes a case for the enduring importance of gender as a category of analysis, reminding us of the relationships between feminist movements and the various scholarly works that have helped us understand these developments. But the explosion of poststructuralist scholarship, he explains, represented an unwelcome departure from those radical traditions. Scott’s focus on “identity” and personal experience are no substitutes for confronting what Palmer has called “structures of oppression.”<sup>26</sup> He concludes by calling for more rigorous and materialist gender studies, concluding that “Gender, like politics and class and their respective, related relations to discourse, demands a different interpretive agenda.”<sup>27</sup>

Palmer has identified somewhat similar problematic trends in US labour historiography, though these historians have generally shown less interest in adopting excessive forms of poststructuralism. More than a few have distanced themselves from Marxism, downplaying the radical and class consciousness of the country’s working classes, while overlooking what he calls “an almost elementary appreciation of material life and its structures.”<sup>28</sup> This has been especially true of historians’ approaches to labour politics from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. We are

reminded that numerous US labour historians, many of whom show a debt to Thompson, have displayed little interest in classical Marxism. Palmer illustrates at least two trends that have helped to marginalize the topics of class and class consciousness: a tendency to overstate the enduring significance of republicanism in the consciousness of the working classes, and labour historians' inclination to uncritically champion Popular Front forms of social organizing.

Consider the case of the "many supposedly radical historians" who have argued that US workers have historically been more inclined to embrace republican ideas and patriotism than to think in class terms. Palmer has strenuously disagreed with these interpretations, pointing to contradictory evidence and thus challenging these historians for abandoning "class consciousness as a meaningful historical process and presence."<sup>29</sup> "The language of labor republicanism," Palmer points out, "has been read at its word, accepted as a positive force mobilizing American labor on its own cultural terms."<sup>30</sup> But we can also locate evidence of more radical language employed by wage earners. Palmer mentions the inconsistencies of his targets, noting, for example, that growing numbers of urban-based labourers in the 1880s, inspired by Marxist and anarchist ideas, sometimes spoke the "language of revolution." Such evidence has been frequently ignored by a cohort of "new" labour historians more interested in highlighting examples of labour's struggle for "dignity" in the workplace than in showing its revolutionary potentials.<sup>31</sup>

Palmer could have extended his critique further, documenting how many scholars have marginalized the roles of powerful forces in suppressing expressions of working-class radicalism. After all, the language of republicanism and patriotism has been most vehemently used by bosses and their agents in the context of labour struggles. Throughout much of the early twentieth century, employers demanded that working-class people honour the American flag in the context of union-busting activities and during wartime. The most antagonistic anti-labour activists in the Progressive era in the US celebrated the aggressive picket-line activities of scabs, calling them heroic figures similar to the American revolutionaries.<sup>32</sup> During World War I, employers demanded that immigrant labourers take part in hyper-patriotic Americanization campaigns, and some working-class flag-wavers showed deeply reactionary tendencies: they flew the American flag during brutal vigilante campaigns against socialists of various stripes.<sup>33</sup>



After World War I, employers launched a highly repressive open-shop campaign under the banner of “the American Plan.” These were thinly disguised class movements from above designed to destroy labour and leftist campaigns.

These are not the types of labour-related dramas—high-stakes disputes that pitted class-conscious workers against repressive flag-waving bosses, scabs, and vigilantes—that liberal historians generally like to tell. For them, America’s ethnically diverse working classes viewed the nation warmly, believing that it offered its citizens many promises. These historians have found virtues in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Popular Front years, when sizable numbers of working and middle-class Americans supposedly embraced New Deal-style liberalism at home while championing anti-fascist movements abroad. Consider the case of Michael Kazin, who initially established his career as a labour historian but now identifies as a scholar of politics. Kazin has routinely gone out of his way to lecture leftist activists about how, in his view, social movements can succeed while marginalizing class as a category of analysis. He has repeatedly insisted that other divisions are more explanatory when considering US politics and the history of activism. For Kazin, American protesters have historically seen themselves as “representatives of the American ‘people,’” rather “than as members of a class.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet the rich historical record of labour-management confrontations—which have been exceptionally violent in the US context—contains numerous stories of struggling class-conscious workers, various expressions of radicalism, and militant socialist organizing. One must be honest about this history, and Palmer has shown little tolerance for what he considers Kazin’s inexcusable omissions and interpretative selectiveness, pointing out that one of his articles “is nothing more than a highly selective, one-sided reading of the episodic contours of American labor politics.”<sup>35</sup> Why might one suppress such evidence? Palmer suspects that Kazin’s selective readings have more to do with his own academically ambitious career goals and desire to achieve institutional respectability than with honestly assessing the extensive evidence of class struggles: “Kazin’s proclamation of the death of class is little more than an advertisement for himself, an intellectually dishonest misrepresentation of the history of the working class aimed at promoting a politics of classlessness orchestrated by the new social movements and their often university-ensconced proponents.”<sup>36</sup>

Palmer's hard-hitting critique of Kazin, made in 1990, has held up considerably well over the last several decades, reinforced by other labour historians. In his 2019 analysis of the language most frequently used by late nineteenth-century union members, Kim Moody, for instance, discovered overwhelming evidence that nineteenth-century rank-and-file unionists, in fact, saw themselves in unmistakable class terms, recognizing that they had separate interests from their bosses, and sometimes even from their union leaders. Moody is rather pointed: "The term that was most commonly used to describe this new social reality was 'wageworker.' Michael Kazin is mistaken when he argues that the word most used in the rhetoric of the Knights of Labor was 'producer.'" Complementing Palmer's scholarship, Moody has not only highlighted what workers said, he has also demonstrated their involvement in militant, class-based conflicts on the rails and inside the factories and mines.<sup>37</sup>

Why were so few scholars writing honestly about such struggles in the 1980s? Palmer seeks to make sense of the reasons for the widespread popularity of discourse theories and the abandonment of historical materialism in *Descent into Discourse's* conclusion. Here we are treated to his wittiest, most piercing, and most memorable phrases. He first offers a few parting provocations: "Much writing that appears under the designer label of poststructuralism/postmodernism is, quite bluntly, *crap*, a kind of academic wordplaying with no possible link to anything but the pseudo-intellectualized ghettos of the most self-promotional avant-garde enclaves of that bastion of protectionism, the University."<sup>38</sup> This statement helps us to identify this cultural phenomenon and the motivations behind what Palmer has observed as its most shameless architects and advocates. The overall retreat from historical materialism found in many quarters in conjunction with their embrace of language as its substitute offers what Palmer has called "certain conveniences, practical and political."<sup>39</sup> What does he mean by conveniences? This probably refers to access to professional opportunities, including securing posts at prominent higher educational institutions and grant money. Whatever the case, the passages above signal the work of a historian who prioritizes evidence gathering and truth telling over practicing the academic rules of decorum.

Palmer's provocative book has generated much attention, and the initial responses to it were predictably mixed. Writing in the widely read liberal publication, *The Nation*, Jane Caplan was largely unimpressed, suggesting

that the book would likely only be read by a “limited circle of Marxist historians.”<sup>40</sup> Others were more charitable. David Hollinger, a leading intellectual historian and no Marxist, praised Palmer for discussing ideas in ways that were “cogent, accessible, and honest.” “What makes *Descent into Discourse* fun to read,” Hollinger continued, “is Palmer’s frank display of his own delight in telling certain of his historian colleagues that their theoretical presuppositions are dangerously close to being, as he puts it with characteristic rhetorical calculation, ‘crap.’”<sup>41</sup> Another prominent intellectual historian, Thomas Bender, was also somewhat complimentary, recognizing the book’s timeliness: “Such a critical view is much needed just now, and one cannot but profit from Palmer’s scholarship.” Yet Bender was more critical than praiseworthy, challenging Palmer for employing an angry tone, for showing, in Bender’s opinion, very little “playful curiosity” about non-historical materialists, and for the supposed sin of lumping too many dissimilar texts together.<sup>42</sup> And the late European labour historian Lenard R. Berlanstein—recognizing that “Palmer is always feisty and, occasionally, strident in defense of historical practices to which he is deeply committed”—saluted Palmer for respecting “his opponents” and showing a sincere desire to “reason with them.”<sup>43</sup>

Interest in the book was not limited to reviews in scholarly and liberal publications. A couple of years after its publication, the Organization of American Historians (OAH) annual conference featured a roundtable about it. Speaking before a standing-room-only crowd, Palmer sparred softly with a few notable fellow panel members, including Linda Gordon and one of his targets, Michael Kazin. Gordon, according to a report of the meeting, “supported a ‘weak program of Poststructuralism.’”<sup>44</sup> An audience member, Marjory Murphy, later wrote that Gordon “was kind yet direct in condemning Palmer’s understanding of discourse theory and discussing how this theory had introduced new ways of understanding women in history.” Apparently, Palmer was subdued in this setting, which surprised Murphy. She was taken aback by his relatively mild replies to what was a generally hostile reception by the panel’s mostly tenured liberals, explaining that he “seemed remarkably agreeable, uncharacteristically semi-apologetic, and notably uninspired by the debate.” Murphy added, “Personally, I missed the old Bryan Palmer.”<sup>45</sup>

This 1992 OAH panel helped to provoke much interest in the debate. Shortly after, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* featured an article about

poststructuralism and its critics, including Palmer. Reporting on the popularity of discourse theory, Palmer repeated the book's core arguments in his interview, noting that numerous historians remained "hostile to historical materialism and to class as a subject of study." And while Palmer highlighted the ways anti-Marxists "have a theoretical cover for their hostility in discourse theory," he nevertheless admitted that "historians can gain something from reading discourse theory." The central point he wanted to convey, both in *Descent into Discourse* and in his *Chronicle* interview, was that he had no tolerance for the extremes of numerous poststructuralist writers. "There is nothing to be gained," he insisted, "by claiming that everything is discourse."<sup>46</sup>

Interviewed in the same *Chronicle* essay, Linda Gordon, somewhat of a fence-sitter on the question of discourse theory, lashed out at Palmer for what she viewed as his failure to take gender seriously. Here she implied that Palmer was partially responsible for flirting with anti-feminism: "There is an anti-feminist theme in a lot of these attacks." She went on: "To people like Bryan Palmer, the left should be concerned with class and Marxism, but I would argue that the left is changing, and feminism is a central part of its core."<sup>47</sup> This is an ill-informed statement, one that reveals Gordon's highly selective reading of *Descent into Discourse*. Historians must base their assessments on evidence, and the record is clear: Palmer did not place feminism outside of the left, and he never rejected discourse theory altogether. In this context, Gordon refused to recognize Palmer's nuanced approach to the topic of gender, especially his call for a "different interpretive agenda"—that is, he called for *more* studies that grapple with gender issues, though he meant studies grounded in historical materialism. Needless to say, discourse theory is not synonymous with feminism, a point that someone who occasionally identifies as a socialist feminist must certainly understand. It is unfortunate that Gordon, one of today's most accomplished professional historians, put forward such an easily disprovable statement.

While Gordon expressed hostility, others found the book explanatory, and it attracted scholars working in and outside of labour and social historiography. Robert Buzzanco, a US historian of diplomacy, for instance, has found the book valuable for his own critiques of cultural historians of US foreign policy. Palmer, together with fellow historian E. M. Wood, Buzzanco informed readers of the journal *Diplomatic History* in 2000, has

produced “effective and powerful rejoinders to [the new cultural history] in the academy.”<sup>48</sup> More significantly, surveyors of general historiographical trends routinely engage with *Descent into Discourse*, another sign of its importance. Indeed, the sizable crowd at the 1992 OAH roundtable, the attention it received in the *Chronicle*, and the broad engagement with it from different historical subfields reveals the incorrectness of Jane Caplan’s 1990 prediction that the book would only appeal to a “limited circle of Marxist historians.” Historians from many subfields, including Marxists and non-Marxists, have engaged with this book.<sup>49</sup>

Cited in more than five hundred scholarly works, *Decent into Discourse* has aged well decades after its release. Reading Palmer’s take-no-prisoners critiques of the different scholars responsible for dismissing class, while insisting that one can substitute discourse theories for historical materialism, is a rewarding experience for those of us who have found his targets disconnected from reality, arrogant, and, frankly, silly. A glance through its pages reveals the intellectual labour of a principled scholar intolerant of an academic culture plagued by fuzzy thinking, incomprehensible prose, shallow careerism, and self-important posturing. And although it is hard to measure with any degree of certainty, it is probable that, given the book’s role in sparking many feisty debates and discussions, its release helped to gradually slow down the pace of the unintelligible, theory-driven scholarship found in many departments throughout the 1980s. Palmer seems to agree. In his 2010 survey of Canadian labour historiography, he observed that “the linguist turn, while certainly influential, has perhaps slowed of late.”<sup>50</sup> Seven years later he was more emphatic, writing that “postmodernism” has been “downgraded to a post-status.”<sup>51</sup> This seems true. After all, what was academically fashionable in the 1980s is today no longer trendy.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, the publication of *Descent into Discourse* did not mark Palmer’s last involvement in this controversy. In the mid-1990s, when hardcore post-structuralists continued to disseminate their fashionable theories, Palmer made another scholarly intervention. Seven years after the publication of *Descent into Discourse*, Palmer reminded us, in an essay in an edited volume called *In Defense of History*, of the enduring significance of class divisions and the importance of Marxism for deepening our understandings of the base–superstructure relationships. The stubborn postmodernists uncomfortable with the topic of class, he illustrated, needed reminding that “Marxism has always been attentive to the relationship of ideas,

dominance, and social transformation.”<sup>53</sup> There was, he declared at this moment, a political urgency to take more radical interpretations of the past seriously; this was a time characterized by unrelenting capitalist offensives and working-class retreats. History offered a guide out of the mess by illustrating the emancipatory possibilities of confident and combative working-class movements: “The legacy of Marxism in general, and of historical materialism in particular, is to challenge and oppose this obfuscation, providing an alternative to such material misreadings, building an oppositional worldview that can play some role in reversing the class struggle defeats and weakening of the international workers’ movement that has taken place as capital and the state have been in the ascent over the course of the last thirty years.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Writing About Capital, the State, and Revolutionary Class Struggles in a Liberal Historiographical Climate**

Palmer’s statement about capitalism and the state in the above paragraph is significant. Following the classical Marxist tradition, Palmer has never viewed the state as a “neutral” player; rather, he perceives it as allied with the ruling class. These close connections are clear in the context of countless numbers of labour–management confrontations throughout world history. While social activists can certainly win concessions from the state, Palmer’s scholarship reminds us that we must not lose sight of its sinister roles during heightened periods of class struggles. And such repression does not merely emerge at times when conservative politicians hold office. Importantly, Palmer has spotlighted many cases of liberal establishment duplicity, showing that nominally progressive politicians have often used pro-labour language in election seasons, though they have acted in ways that have harmed the working class during confrontational periods. Above all, the rich history of class struggles that scholars such as Palmer have shed light on illustrates the rather outlandishness of the claims made by others, including American labour and political historians, that class and class struggles have been marginal to the country’s history. Over the last two decades, Palmer has continued to provide academics and activists with useful tools in debates with anti-Marxist liberals, a cohort that continues to hold considerable sway in the profession. His interventions here are not as polemical as he demonstrated in *Descent into Discourse*, but they

nevertheless cut against the grain of dominant historiographical trends. Sadly, too few scholars have sought to debate Palmer or Marxist scholars in general in recent years.

Why is this the case? How should we categorize life in the humanities and social sciences? Historians appear much less interested in postmodernist theories, but many remain intolerant of radical interpretations of the past. Labour history as a topic of study, for instance, took additional hits in the 1990s and 2000s. Jobs have remained scarce and conferences have been poorly attended. Above all, prominent academics have continued to downgrade class as a category of analysis, with many choosing to simply ignore, rather than engage with, Marxist historians. The result has been the development of new scholarly echo chambers, where leading historians—most of whom are slightly left-of-centre politically—have established relatively narrow research agendas. While Marxists played crucial roles in launching and participating in debates before the 1990s, they became increasingly marginalized after that decade. In this atmosphere, Palmer felt some nostalgia for earlier periods, when, as he explained in 2008, “Marxism and its meaning was seldom far from the surface of these interpretive dialogues, which never reached any satisfactory conclusion or resolution.” He has bemoaned this loss, writing that debate “ceased in the 1990s.”<sup>55</sup>

Palmer’s comments here are a bit overstated, though there is some truth to them. Historians continue to debate matters of significance, though Marxists, and radicals more generally, remain in the minority. For example, the US-based journal *Labor*, established in 2004, contains a regular section called Up for Debate that features book symposiums and reflections on meaningful anniversaries, including a roundtable about the significance of the Russian Revolution published in 2017.<sup>56</sup> Other signs suggest that Palmer may be on firm ground. The recent buzz about the so-called “new” history of capitalism, generated at conferences, in the pages of academic journals, and even in the mainstream press, features few Marxists or self-identified labour historians. This is unfortunate because labour scholars, including Palmer, had demonstrated much interest in matters related to political economy, broadly defined, decades before Harvard and the *New York Times* decided that the subject deserved widespread attention and approval. Most of its most boosterish practitioners have distanced themselves from the Marxist label, though some have admitted that they find Marx and Marxist writers illuminating.<sup>57</sup>

The contrasts between Palmer and the profession's more centrist scholars are as clear today as they were when he published *Descent into Discourse*. This is illustrated when we consider his approach to the intersection of class and politics. While Palmer insists that we must focus on the ways capitalists and governmental officials have collaborated with one another at the expense of the working classes, many of today's historians take a narrower and less radical approach, emphasizing the ways conservative politicians and programs have hurt ordinary people and halted the progress of liberalism. A number of both self-identified labour historians as well as those who examine the topic in passing have embraced what Ira Katznelson called "the new institutionalism."<sup>58</sup> Rather than focus on class or labour, they have devoted most of their attention to the dynamics of the state, showing how mainstream political forces have shaped it. Their studies of high politics seek to demonstrate that the state has functioned in benevolent ways under liberal administrations, while playing a punishing and nefarious role under conservatives. This scholarly tendency represents a fundamental break from the Marxist-oriented "history from below" style of scholarship that once inspired so many.

Some, having internalized Katznelson's 1994 call, became political historians, and many of these scholars identify as liberals or social democrats. In the US case, they continue to romanticize earlier periods, including the Progressive era and the mid to late 1930s, when labour-liberal coalitions and Popular Frontism emerged, helping to shape official policies and the character of American political culture more broadly. They often tell a basic rise-and-fall narrative, which starts with a labour movement that secured social reforms in the first decades of the twentieth century. After facing major defeats in the 1920s, organized labour went on to win extraordinary victories in the 1930s. This was a time, the story goes, when ethnically diverse workers joined highly inclusive organizations and demonstrated a sincere respect for American institutions; these were, numerous historians have told us, reformers not revolutionaries, and some embraced what one historian has called "working class Americanism."<sup>59</sup> And they supported the New Deal state, one headed by Democratic President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a supposedly visionary leader who offered needed relief to millions of ordinary people. Roosevelt was, these interpretations generally insist, an imperfect friend of the working man, someone willing to challenge the captains of industry and endorse labour rights, such as union organizing



and collective bargaining. This was, these scholars believe, “moral capitalism” in practice.

Palmer rejects these core assumptions, and he has produced much scholarship since releasing *Descent into Discourse* demonstrating why. From him, we learn about the successes and failures of labour and leftist movements, the conniving activities of the ruling classes, and the disruptive—rather than ameliorative—role of the state in the context of social unrest. Above all, Palmer has produced studies that reveal the clear limitations of liberalism, broadly defined. We learn that Keynesian economic policies, Popular Frontism, and even Farmer–Labor Party politicians have all failed to provide genuine emancipatory paths forward for ordinary people.<sup>60</sup> In fact, Palmer’s scholarship teaches us that institutional liberals have actively stood in the way of struggling workers. Importantly, Palmer’s role in documenting these tensions is not a matter of left-wing sectarianism; instead, it is about properly assessing the historical record at key moments of class struggles.

Take Palmer’s voluminous scholarship about working-class Marxists and labour conflicts in the US. Here, he not only outlines the limits of liberal interpretations, but also distances himself from a variety of studies written by unrepentant Cold Warriors, bemoaning what he has called “the historiographical overproduction” of conservative-oriented spy scholarship on the history of American Communism. Yet, he is not chiefly interested in the American Communist Party; rather, he has focused primarily on the ideas and conflicts of its revolutionary rivals, Trotskyists.<sup>61</sup> Palmer’s interest in the set of ideas developed and articulated by Russian revolutionary and theorist Leon Trotsky contrasts sharply with others motivated by an assortment of New Left social movements; they have shown, as Palmer puts it, a general “indifference” to the history of the Trotskyist movement in North America.<sup>62</sup>

Identifying a historiographical entry point and harbouring an urge to intervene politically, Palmer stepped in, producing a near-encyclopedic account of socialist James Cannon’s formative years, a book about the Trotskyist-led 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strikes, and numerous articles for academic and popular audiences. His 500-plus-page and award-winning *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928*, which explores Cannon’s drama-filled life in the years before his involvement in the establishment of US Trotskyism, reveals

much, including the oppressive and exploitative climates of the so-called Progressive era, when a young Cannon—a “working-class autodidact” in Palmer’s words—developed class consciousness and revolutionary commitments after learning about the government’s relentless crackdowns on members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which he joined in 1911.<sup>63</sup> Cannon was also troubled by what he saw as the widespread monotony and joylessness that characterized daily life in industrial America, what Palmer calls “the harsh rigors of alienating labor.”<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Palmer provides a step-by-step account of the economic forces, the various local political climates, and the colourful personalities that influenced Cannon’s worldview, which, taken together, convinced Cannon to become “a professional revolutionary.”<sup>65</sup> “Long live the revolution!” Cannon exclaimed to a crowd of Duluth, Minnesota strikers in 1913.<sup>66</sup>

Cannon’s commitment to class struggle unionism, illustrated partially by the revolutionary ideas he articulated on picket lines, reveals that he was no American labour reformer yearning for some harmonious artisanal republicanism from the country’s early national period or that he sought to defend a patriotic form of “working class Americanism.”<sup>67</sup> Palmer’s evidence points instead to a principled activist, reflective thinker, and budding Marxist, a genuine revolutionary with an eye toward building a future society based on working-class justice and power. And many around Cannon found his words and activities inspiring. This was true both before and after the Russian Revolution, an event that captured the imaginations of capitalism’s most passionate adversaries throughout the world. Class-based anger and a desire to follow in the footsteps of the Russian revolutionaries, Palmer shows, was present in left-wing activist circles in many parts of the nation, a critical point that sizable numbers of American historians have ignored or failed to appreciate. Palmer tells us that “Cannon hailed labor’s triumph in creating a workers’ republic in Russia and called for sustained resistance against the capitalist offensive, in which Chambers of Commerce, Employers’ Associations, and the courts had launched a wage-cutting initiative and an open-shop drive.”<sup>68</sup>

Neither Cannon nor Palmer considered the twentieth century’s first couple of decades “Progressive.” This period saw the expansion of racist Jim Crow laws throughout the South, the escalation of US imperialism, numerous deadly industrial accidents, the emergence of the employer-led open-shop movement, and a state that reliably protected employers during

disputes by arresting, beating, and even preventing labour activists from giving public speeches. It was a time when high-profile labour militants faced imprisonments, beatings, and, in the case of the IWW's Frank Little, murder. Palmer has no illusions that the state or the era's prominent middle-class reformers offered any sort of meaningful solutions for the majority of the country's residents.

Furthermore, neither Cannon nor Palmer viewed American political leaders or high-profile reformers during the World War I period as genuine champions of the nation's working classes. The reason is obvious: policy-makers used wartime as an excuse to unleash a wave of repression against an assortment of syndicalists and socialists. Palmer is unambiguous on this point, noting that the period saw "a blurring of officially sanctioned state repression and informal, 'citizen's committee' actions that created a climate of lynch-mob coercion directed against all forces of the Left, particularly the scapegoated Wobblies."<sup>69</sup> The class conflicts continued in the immediate postwar period, and Palmer, reinforcing the observations of labour historian David Montgomery, notes the naked reality of "class conflict in the United States in the period from 1916 and 1920."<sup>70</sup>

To find an example of liberation, one needed to look outside the US borders. Cannon found it in Russia, where he participated in Comintern meetings, highly stimulating activities that allowed him to rub shoulders with revolutionary leaders, including Leon Trotsky. 1922 Russia was a very different place from the US during the same year, when business leaders and the state had joined forces to crush a major railroad strike.<sup>71</sup> And a few years earlier, US authorities had deported thousands of immigrant anarchists and socialists as part of the Palmer raids, named after US Attorney General A. Mitchel Palmer (no relation to Bryan). Russia was a place that showed the potential for emancipation, and the individuals in the vanguard of that movement deeply impressed Cannon. He viewed them, Palmer tells us, as "the most enlightened cosmopolitan thinkers and doers."<sup>72</sup> Palmer succinctly captures the significance of Cannon's deepening relationships with fellow revolutionaries: "This was his apprenticeship in revolutionary internationalism."<sup>73</sup>

Cannon, profoundly inspired by the Russian Revolution's far-reaching achievements, played a critical role in leading the revolutionary socialist movement in the US. Cannon went on a series of speaking tours, introducing audiences to revolutionary ideas, including lessons he learned while

visiting with the Russian revolutionaries. He spoke to hundreds of workers in various union halls and on picket lines, and audiences received him well; in many circles, there was a generalized thirst for class politics that extended beyond the confines of narrow trade unionism. At the same time, Palmer describes the difficulties of building a mass revolutionary party, in light of the presence of spies at meetings and what he calls “the fragility of the revolutionary ranks, who were spread thin and had insufficient roots in the organizations of the working class.”<sup>74</sup> This should hardly surprise us given what we know about the brutal fierceness of the far-reaching open-shop onslaughts of the immediate post-World War I period. These repressive activists were the most passionate flag-wavers, insisting that people across class lines embrace the reactionary “American Plan.”

Palmer never loses sight of the larger global forces that confronted revolutionaries in the years after the successful Bolshevik Revolution, informing us about the forces of repression that beat back socialist movements in the Western world. Anti-revolutionary movements and tendencies came from many corners, and Palmer describes the particularities of American conditions and the rise of Stalinism following Lenin’s death in 1924. Factional debates were commonplace. A sober reader of events, Palmer is not uncritical of his subject, suggesting that Cannon often “adopted rather easily and uncritically the Comintern directives, paying little attention to the price that would be paid in an intensified labor anti-communism.”<sup>75</sup> In the US, revolutionary socialism competed with other ideas and organizations, including the presence of moderate forces in politics and in the trade union movement. In this context of international and domestic tensions, the Communist leadership expelled Cannon, and soon he became one of the most committed Trotskyists.

Palmer’s biography combines fascinating details about Cannon’s dynamic political life with penetrating insights into his personal pursuits. It is a useful guide to a time when a committed core of activists discovered Marxist ideas and sought to put them into practice, a point often overlooked by many US-based labour historians. And it is a captivating story of enormous struggles followed by minor victories and serious defeats in the face of a ruthless ruling class and its governmental allies. Palmer takes these struggles seriously, acknowledging the relentless cruelty of early twentieth-century capitalism, not simply the regressive activities of institutional conservatives.

While the 1920s marked a low point for working-class struggles in the face of ruling-class and state-generated forms of propaganda and repression, the 1930s witnessed some of the century's most important victories. And Palmer has written an important account of labour conflicts in 1934. In this year, strikes in San Francisco, Toledo, Minneapolis, and up and down the East Coast rocked the nation, forcing Americans of all classes to take seriously what Palmer has called an "explosion of class-resentment."<sup>76</sup> *Revolutionary Teamsters*—put out by two different publishers, Brill and Haymarket—tells the extraordinary story of the roles played by Trotskyists, a group that far too many historians have written off as disconnected from trade union politics and working-class struggles, in Minneapolis. Palmer is somewhat defensive about this point, noting that such powerful work stoppages challenged popular assumptions "that Trotskyists were ineffectual in the real world of politics and labour-struggles because they could only relate to workers as abstract agents of revolutionary-transformation." This was obviously not the case, he points out, noting that "the coming together of teamsters and Trotskyists in Minneapolis in 1934 provides a concrete case of just what can be accomplished by workers guided by those who have a revolutionary perspective, even if the outcome achieved was never conceived as revolutionary."<sup>77</sup>

The Minneapolis victories are especially impressive when we consider the broader context. These revolutionary teamsters, organized in Local 574, helped to shut down commerce in "a city," Palmer explains, "that was infamous as a bastion of the open shop."<sup>78</sup> Defended by the most economically powerful individuals, open shop promoters sought to ensure that trade unions lacked power in politics and at the point of production. Established in 1903, the Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance was one of the nation's most uncompromising anti-union organizations. Modelling itself on similar employers' and citizens' associations in Chicago, Cincinnati, Detroit, Evansville, and others, the Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance remained a long-term foe of the working-class masses: it fired union supporters, maintained a blacklist of activists, established tight relationships with police and local officials, and coordinated with union fighters and strikebreaking agencies in other parts of the nation.<sup>79</sup> The seasoned class warrior James P. Cannon called this city "the worst scab town in the Northwest."<sup>80</sup>

Palmer introduces us to revolutionaries such as Farrell Dobbs, Swedish immigrant Carl Skoglund, and the Dunne brothers—all of whom looked

to the working-class masses, rather than to the American Federation of Labor leadership or to the emerging liberal New Deal state, as venues for transformative social change. They had confidence in themselves, calling for, as Skoglund put it in May 1934, a broad movement involving “all the sections of the trucking industry acting together.”<sup>81</sup> The city’s working class overwhelmingly supported the Trotskyist-led strikes. In the words of one, “We couldn’t have done it without a disciplined revolutionary party.”<sup>82</sup>

These revolutionaries recognized the necessity of mobilizing large numbers, including women activists, against the 166 trucking bosses and the region’s ruling class. One of Palmer’s strongest chapters explores the activities of the Women’s Auxiliary. This organization was greeted by some men with skepticism, since, in Palmer’s words, “They wanted their ‘night out’ with the union-boys to be untainted by women’s presence.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Palmer is honest about the presence of casual forms of sexism, but he points out that strikes offered important opportunities to address gender issues in progressive ways. Several of Minneapolis’s women activists made their cases to the male strikers, noting that they could, as Palmer explains, employ “their domestic and occupational skills” for the cause.<sup>84</sup> The result was the formation of more progressive gender relations within the local, since men and women discussed strategies and struggled together. Plenty of women walked picket lines, where they enjoyed the pleasures of class solidarity and experienced the pains of police repression. As one activist proudly stated, a woman’s place “was ‘Into the Class Struggle.’”<sup>85</sup> And male activists recognized their critical roles. Cannon was especially clear: “To involve the women in the labor struggles is to double the strength of the workers and to infuse it with a spirit and solidarity it could not otherwise have. This applies not only to a single union and single strike; it holds good for every phrase of the struggle up to its revolutionary conclusion.”<sup>86</sup> Women activists were fully committed to this struggle, which was expressed in meetings and on picket lines. As one Women’s Auxiliary speaker explained, they would “fight side by side with the men to the finish.”<sup>87</sup>

With an eye to detail, Palmer’s accounts of picket-line scuffles and the strategic decision-making activities that occurred at strike headquarters give us a profound sense of the strike’s difficulties. This was far from a non-violent conflict, and those who had experienced police and Citizens’ Alliance repression recognized the necessity of self-defence. They were

unwilling to back down, which, on one particularly important occasion, resulted in the retreat of the police from a major centre of the city. By late May, workers in other industries had declared their support and staged sympathy strikes. At one point, more than twenty thousand workers, many of whom were armed with lead pipes and baseball bats, assembled at the city market in an excellent show of solidarity. Here the protesters fought bravely, which led to clear results. As Farrell Dobbs observed, “there wasn’t a cop to be seen in the market.”<sup>88</sup> “The Battle of Deputies Run,” as the strikers famously called it, was a bloody, but ultimately successful, confrontation, illustrating the enormous power of disciplined and well-organized protesters.<sup>89</sup> Seeking to put a stop to the turmoil, the bosses offered many concessions, leading to de facto union recognition in some workplaces and significant union growth; the General Drivers’ Union’s membership reached seven thousand.<sup>90</sup> Their inspiring examples of solidary and militancy illustrate, most significantly, the continuing importance of “history from below” as well as the indispensable role of Marxists in Minneapolis’s labour movement.

These revolutionary teamsters won a key battle but continued to face formidable challenges. Most employers remained committed to the open-shop principle, and Minnesota’s Farmer–Labor governor, Floyd Olson, wanted to see the re-establishment of industrial peace; genuine justice for the workers was *not* at the top of the governor’s priority list. In this context, Cannon came to Minneapolis, where he offered insights and illustrated an unwavering commitment to building the most inclusive form of working-class unity possible. This was necessary, since stubborn employers provoked another skirmish in July. We learn that the Trotskyists were consistent: they built strong militant unions, prevented scab trucks from moving, and rejected the idea that the liberals in government were sincere allies. Palmer quotes from the Trotskyist newspaper, *The Militant*: “the workers involved [in the strike] received a valuable lesson and gained a real understanding not only of what the role of the capitalist state is—and more specifically the capitalist state with a farmer-labor governor—but they also received a lesson and an understanding in the first fundamentals of how to begin to cope with that state.”<sup>91</sup>

*Revolutionary Teamsters* challenges several tendencies present in contemporary academic circles. The first is the somewhat commonplace failure to properly identify the tensions between union leaders and rank-and-file

members. Historians were far more inclined to highlight these distinctions in earlier periods.<sup>92</sup> The extraordinary strikes of 1934 showed many conflicts between the head of the Teamsters, Dan Tobin, on the one hand, and the local Trotskyist leadership and rank-and-file activists in Minneapolis on the other. Tobin, as Palmer explains, “had never wanted Local 574 to organize all of those involved in the trucking industry.”<sup>93</sup> The Teamsters hierarchy even punished Local 574 after the strike by revoking its charter and establishing a rival local. Meanwhile, Tobin attacked Dobbs for staging “strikes for racketeering and propaganda purposes” and anti-Trotskyists aligned with Tobin physically attacked Local 574’s leadership.<sup>94</sup> The militants pushed back and received a renamed local, Local 544. During these internal conflicts, the Trotskyist leadership understood Tobin’s regressive roles, denouncing him at one point for “helping the bosses.”<sup>95</sup> The takeaway from these internal struggles is clear: we must not assume that top level union leaders reflected the rank-and-file’s interests.

Second, Palmer’s study contrasts starkly with those who have insisted that American protesters were, above all, deeply patriotic, supportive of capitalism, and profoundly uneasy with Marxist ideas. Some protesters carried American flags and held on to anti-Communist ideas. But the thousands who joined with the Trotskyist leadership, even during periods of intense, employer-generated, red-baiting actions, demonstrate that many were, at a minimum, open to Marxism. It has become somewhat popular in a few circles to claim that anti-Communist ideas, broadly defined, were developed and popularized from below. This was certainly not the case in Minneapolis. Importantly, Palmer explains that the anti-Communist campaigns had little influence, noting, “the Red-scares concocted in the midst of intense class-struggle had so little effect on rank-and-file teamsters and their supporters.”<sup>96</sup> The point cannot be made strongly enough: one of the most important labour breakthroughs of the decade was led by unapologetic anti-capitalists committed to building working-class power.

Additionally, *Revolutionary Teamsters* demonstrates that the American Communist Party, an organization that has captured the attention of many, was far from the only important Marxist organization in this decade. In fact, Palmer shows that, unsurprisingly, its members were largely hostile to Trotskyists, including those in Local 574. In numerous areas, its members, as Palmer explains, employed “tactics of physical disruption” designed to break up Trotskyist meetings.<sup>97</sup> Most damaging was the American



Communist Party's support of the government's clampdown on Minneapolis Trotskyists under the banner of the Smith Act in 1941, a year after it was passed.<sup>98</sup>

The passing of the Smith Act in 1940 with Franklin D. Roosevelt's support, often ignored or downplayed by many historians fixated on the rise of conservatism, is an important development that further shows the tensions between establishment liberalism and radical unionism. Named after Virginia Congressman Howard Smith—a long-time friend of members of the open-shop National Association of Manufacturers—the draconian act was an anti-sedition law that criminalized radical speech articulated by both the far right and the far left. Leftist organizations bore the brunt of the repression. The first victims were twenty-nine members of the recently formed Socialist Workers Party, including those who had played a critical part in the 1934 Minneapolis strikes.

While many historians would like us to direct our attention to the anti-unionism expressed by conservatives in power, which has found the sharpest political formation in the Republican Party, Palmer's discussion of the Smith Act's repressiveness illustrates evidence of the clear limitations of the Democratic Party's progressiveness. Franklin D. Roosevelt was no friend of those most active in Minneapolis's labour movement. Lengthy books about Roosevelt and the New Deal often minimize, or leave out altogether, his involvement in fighting these and other militant labour activists. Consider the prize-winning book *Fear Itself* by Ira Katznelson, a writer who called on labour historians to take political institutions seriously in 1994. *Fear Itself* and *Revolutionary Teamsters* were published in the same year and both cover the New Deal state—but they are very different studies. Katznelson's book identifies very few conflicts between Roosevelt and organized labour: Roosevelt never lacked "ambition or interest" in advancing "union interests."<sup>99</sup> That state authorities under Roosevelt helped to undermine the most committed union activists by enforcing the Smith Act is perhaps something that Katznelson and his liberal fellow travelers would rather not highlight. *Fear Itself*, like numerous other recently published books about Roosevelt and the New Deal, illustrates the acceptability of spotlighting conflicts within the relatively narrow parameters of mainstream politics, while largely *ignoring* the liberal state's involvement in weakening radical movements, the regressive roles played by union officials, and the short-lived accomplishments achieved by revolutionary Marxists.

The limits of progressivism in high politics were especially apparent in Minneapolis during the summer of 1934. Minnesota's Farmer-Labor governor, Floyd Olson, for instance, often employed pro-worker language, but his actions during periods of labour unrest were far from radical. Olson, Palmer writes, "was committed to keeping the lid on explosive class-relations, using moderate reform to effect 'orderly constructive change.'"<sup>100</sup> In the face of rising class conflict, this so-called friend of labour declared martial law and dispatched National Guardsmen in July, seeking to, as he put it, make the city streets "as quiet as a Sunday School picnic."<sup>101</sup> This meant a ban on mass picketing and the arrests of Trotskyist leaders Max Shachtman and Cannon—both of whom were in town to observe and write about this class conflict—for the "crime" of "vagrancy." By late August, 167 picketers had been held in a military stockade, which some called "Olson's Resort."<sup>102</sup> Needless to say, the Farmer-Labor governor hardly acted like a champion of working-class emancipation.

Coming to terms with Olson's betrayals was a hard and quite literally painful lesson for those injured by state violence. "Bloody Friday," a case of police thuggery during a very hot day in July, constituted the harshest expression of such repression. Unlike the Battle of Deputies Run, police here had the upper hand, and aggressively shot protesters. Local 574 executive committee member Harry DeBower explained that the police "went wild. Actually, they shot at anybody that moved . . . There were several pickets in the truck and they all got shot."<sup>103</sup> Picketers were forced to defend themselves, engaging in hand-to-hand combat with the police. Dozens of strikers and supporters received injuries, including DeBower. And the police killed one striker, Henry B. Ness, a father of four.<sup>104</sup> The police and militia repression illustrates the fiction that the state behaved "neutrally" or "autonomously" in the context of labour-management relations. Protesters, Palmer explains, viewed "the state as an instrument of class-domination."<sup>105</sup>

Palmer reveals that level-headed activists, who were indeed victims of state terrorism, understood that Olson was primarily an adversary, someone who, in practice, was little different from the most reactionary anti-union ideologues behind the local open-shop movement. At a mass rally in early August, union leader Bill Brown called the Farmer-Labor administration "the best strikebreaking force our union has ever gone up against."<sup>106</sup> In a meeting with the governor in August, one strike leader asked Olson

sardonically, “Why don’t you start a school for strikebreaking governors?”<sup>107</sup> These were rather sharp assessments of the liberal establishment, especially coming from those who had experienced many confrontations with the far-right Citizens’ Alliance and fascists in earlier years. These observations, learned in the context of industrial struggle, are important to contemplate at a time when many present-day scholars are inclined to overlook the involvement of powerful liberals in fighting organized labour, while focusing most of their attention on right-wing organizations and individuals. Olson’s activities demonstrate that the conservative establishment was far from organized labour’s only opponent.

Did *Revolutionary Teamsters* receive the same level of attention that *Descent into Discourse* earned? From the perspective of the academy, not even close, and Palmer must have been disappointed by the ways that university-based political and labour historians responded. The book simply failed to spark meaningful discussions at conferences or in the pages of journals, even though many remain deeply interested in the tumultuous and transformative events of the 1930s. While reviews in left-wing and scholarly journals have been largely favourable, few historians of labour and politics in the early to mid-twentieth century have grappled with Palmer’s core discoveries and analysis.<sup>108</sup> This 2013 book, according to a Google Scholar search conducted in late 2020, has been cited a mere seventeen times. The contrast with *Descent into Discourse*, which triggered enlightening and sometimes rancorous debates in various academic settings almost immediately after its release, is rather stark.

We can speculate about why this is the case. The decision of many historians to largely disregard *Revolutionary Teamsters*, while overlooking Marxists like James P. Cannon and paying only scant attention to the intense class conflicts of 1934, Roosevelt’s use of the FBI against leftists, and the repressive Smith Act, make sense when we consider that Palmer’s evidence of liberal duplicity unavoidably muddles their efforts to write orderly narratives about the disputes between official political parties. For most historians—who have stubbornly chosen to view establishment liberals like Roosevelt and Olson as flawed progressives, not as proponents of capitalist stability or as occasional strikebreakers—the era’s principal villains were obvious: employers’ associations and right-wing politicians, the menacing figures responsible for mounting sustained ideological and political assaults against the New Deal order. Many undoubtedly share

the opinion articulated by prominent historian Jefferson Cowie, who proclaimed in a 2017 interview, “I am a big fan of the New Deal.”<sup>109</sup> For writers like Cowie and the large cohort responsible for bombarding us with studies about the historical ills of right-wing ideas and organizations, the New Deal state was a progressive triumph and rare instance of “moral capitalism” in practice—a period they want us to remember for offering needed protections to society’s most vulnerable citizens, including the working classes. But, as Palmer has shown, for labour activists forced to endure blows to the head from police and National Guardsmen and incarceration stays, the state, even during periods when it was led by organized labour’s so-called friends, remained “an instrument of class-domination.” Many workers understood this point even as they elected to vote for politicians like Olson and Roosevelt.<sup>110</sup> Moreover, the New Deal labour and welfare-related reforms were rather modest, amounting to, at best, what Palmer called in 2019 “an incomplete welfare state.”<sup>111</sup> When considering the evidence, we must conclude that many historians are guilty of viewing New Deal era policymakers and the modest reforms they enacted through rose-tinted glasses.<sup>112</sup>

While not mentioning the general silence that greeted *Revolutionary Teamsters*, Palmer has continued to express irritation about the overall lack of debate in academic settings. In 2019, echoing his 2008 words, Palmer made a strong case for researchers to abandon their comfort zones by challenging popular interpretations and “questioning research orientations and the relationship of evidence and argument.”<sup>113</sup> He noted that, regrettably, attempts to take up debates continue to be met “with the nonchalant rejoinder, ‘why bother?’”<sup>114</sup> On this point, Palmer could have been more forceful, recognizing that some of those who make the “nonchalant” rejoinders are out to protect their brand and remain fundamentally allergic to the intrusive Marxists responsible for documenting hard truths about their liberal heroes. Far too many early twentieth-century US labour and political historians have failed to grapple fairly and honestly with the well-documented examples of liberal treachery and Democratic Party limitations. Rather than confront examples of liberal complicity in undermining popular labour and left-wing movements, many have instead retreated to their echo chambers and safe spaces, reassured by exaggerated claims about Roosevelt’s progressiveness made by both scholars and left-leaning politicians, including self-identified socialists like Bernie Sanders. Unfortunately, the

“big fans” of the New Deal routinely pass up opportunities to spar with the “big fans” of the Russian Revolution.

While numerous academics have ignored Palmer’s scholarship out of what appears to be professional convenience, popular socialist publications have found his insights worth disseminating. The lessons we learn from his study of Minneapolis Trotskyists in the 1930s—the thuggery of Communist Party members, the de-radicalizing actions of trade union bureaucrats, and the repression of the liberal state—stand out. Above all, Palmer wants today’s socialist activists to learn from this labour history. Writing in the popular left publication *Jacobin*, Palmer explains that the Trotskyist union activists won the respect of large numbers of workers by engaging in “actual battle with the bosses” and creating “an infrastructure that could nurture and sustain rank-and-file militancy.” Repression, which was unleashed most pointedly by local police forces, was met “not with submission, but with resistance.”<sup>15</sup> We can see some echoes of these types of struggles today. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement against unaccountable police abuses and the expansion of teachers’ strikes, often conducted without the approval of official union leadership, illustrate the enduring power of working-class resistance.

## Conclusion

Palmer’s work is a refreshing alternative to much mainstream scholarship. It teaches us a great deal: the value of working-class combativity, the explanatory power of Marxism, the limitations of institutional liberalism and social democracy, and the impossibility of genuine emancipation under capitalism—even its “moral” versions. Palmer has taught these invaluable lessons in the context of occasionally hostile and often indifferent academic and political climates. His interventions over the last several decades have been met with mixed results. In the 1990s, he pushed back strongly against the excesses of cultural and linguistic approaches, compelling defenders of discourse theories to engage with him. We can appreciate this time for its informative and often bitter back-and-forth dialogues, in which cultural theorists and their defenders were forced to contend with Marxist ideas. Decades after these exchanges, the once fashionable discourse theories have mostly vanished from history departments. Though it would be an overstatement to suggest that Marxism and rigorous debates have also disappeared,

most observers would likely agree that today's academy is not especially hospitable to radical interpretations of the past. Careerist-oriented scholars, many of whom are drawn to official politics, continue to downplay the history of class conflicts, insisting that working-class Americans were deeply patriotic and respectful of the nation's political institutions. Many also ignore Palmer and radical scholarship that exposes the revolutionary possibilities of working-class activism, the class collaborationist instincts of trade union leaders, and the repressive role of the state—irrespective of what political party leads it. How much longer can sizable sections of the profession continue to overlook this history? It is difficult to predict, but what we can say is that Palmer has played a principled role in challenging those who have suggested that class oppression, class consciousness, and class struggles have been only marginal to North American history or that Marxist activists were unimportant to the labour movement. Above all, Palmer's politically engaged scholarship offers vital lessons about how today's workers and leftists can respond to the demands of our current period—one shaped by precarious employment options for many, growing class inequality, and rising class struggle.

#### NOTES

1. Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). A group of mostly liberal historians have found the phrase “moral capitalism” useful. See Robert H. Zieger, *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 6; Michael B. Katz, *The Price of Citizenship: Redefining the American Welfare State* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 174; and Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 277.
2. Bryan D. Palmer, “Communist History: Seeing it Whole. A Reply to Critics,” *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 204. Contrast Palmer with Meg Jacobs, a scholar of consumerism, labour, and official politics. Writing in 2005, Jacobs said that the Russian Revolution illustrates that sometimes “labor could go too far.” See Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 53.
3. This tendency is most forcefully articulated in a 1989 collection of essays written by two scholars who first established themselves as labour

- historians. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).
4. It is almost impossible to keep up with this always-growing body of literature. For an analysis and critique of it, see Chad Pearson, “Scholarship on the Rise of the Right: Liberal Historians and the Retreat from Class,” *Monthly Review* 70 (February 2019): 40–55.
  5. He has drawn contrasts between what he calls the “meaner and leaner agenda” of the conservative Stephen Harper government and more progressive moments in Canadian history. See Bryan D. Palmer, “Imagining Politics,” *Labour/Le Travail* 73 (Spring 2014): 235.
  6. Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 120; emphasis original.
  7. *Ibid.*, 121.
  8. *Ibid.*, 3.
  9. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New “True” Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986). Also see Neville Kirk, “In Defense of Class: A Critique of Recent Revisionist Writing Upon the Nineteenth-Century English Working Class,” *International Review of Social History* 32 (1987): 2–47; Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990); and Alex Callinicos, “Whither Anglo-Saxon Marxism?” in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 84–85, 91.
  10. Dana Frank, *Buy American: The Untold Story of Economic Nationalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
  11. Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 137.
  12. Nell Irvin Painter, “The New Labor History and the Historical Moment,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2 (1989): 367–70.
  13. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 56.
  14. *Ibid.*, 172.
  15. Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91 no. 5 (December 1988): 1053–75; and Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
  16. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 67.
  17. *Ibid.*, 56. On Jones, see Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

18. Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Working with Language: The Linguistic Turn in French Labor History. A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33 (April 1991): 428.
19. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 79.
20. Ibid.; emphasis original. See Eric Hobsbawm and Joan W. Scott, "Political Shoemakers," in Eric Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 103–30.
21. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 85.
22. Ibid.
23. Scott quoted in *ibid.*, 180.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 183.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 186. As a young activist in New York City, years before completing his undergraduate degree, Palmer showed an interest in a variety of different feminist publications, including those written by Kate Millet and Shulamith Firestone. See Bryan D. Palmer, *Interpretive Essays on Class Formation and Class Struggle*, vol. 1, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 2.
28. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 117.
29. Ibid., 113. Palmer mentions a number of scholars who embraced this tendency. See Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 21; and Leon Fink, "Labor, Liberty and the Law: Trade Unionism and the Problem of the American Constitutional Order," *Journal of American History* 74 (December 1987): 904–25. Also see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Richard Oestreicher, "Urban Working-Class Political Behavior and Theories of American Electoral Politics, 1870–1940," *Journal of American History* 74 (March 1988): 1257–86.
30. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 117.
31. Ibid., 115.
32. Several anti-labour union figures, including novelist and Citizens Industrial Association of America member Owen Wister, labelled scabs as being as heroic and patriotic as the American revolutionaries. See Owen Wister, "The Land of the Free," *Saturday Evening Post*, 29 October 1904, 7.
33. Consider the case of Robert Paul Prager, a German immigrant murdered at the hands of reactionary flag-waving miners for embracing socialism and opposing the US's intervention in World War I. See Carl R. Weinberg,



*Labor, Loyalty, and Rebellion: Southwestern Illinois Coal Miners and World War I* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

34. Kazin quoted in Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 122.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*, 124. This was not the first time Palmer challenged Kazin. A year earlier, Palmer criticized him for writing “a methodological and political mess” of an essay. See Bryan D. Palmer, “The American Way of Seeing Class,” *Labour/Le Travail* 24 (Fall 1989): 245.
37. Kim Moody, *Tramps and Trade-Union Travelers: Internal Migration and Organized Labor in Gilded-Age America, 1870–1900* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 30.
38. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 199; emphasis original.
39. *Ibid.*, 205.
40. Jane Caplan, “The Point is to Change It,” *The Nation* (13/20 August 1990): 174.
41. David A. Hollinger, “Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History,” by Bryan D. Palmer. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990),” *Journal of American History* 77, no. 4 (March 1991): 1320, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2078265>.
42. Thomas Bender, “Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History,” by Bryan D. Palmer. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990),” *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 407–8, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/25.2.407>.
43. Berlanstein, “Working with Language,” 438.
44. Gordon quoted in John Pettegrew, “From Radicalism to Perspectivalism: US Feminist History, 1970–2010, and the Example of Linda Gordon,” *Journal of Women’s History* 30 (Spring 2018): 137. Gordon was once a Marxist, but has since abandoned the radicalism of her youth. We can track the stages of her mild shifts to the right by comparing her statements over the course of decades. In 1981, she was an unambiguous Marxist scholar: “Frankly, I cannot grasp how one can learn to think historically without reading Marx”; see Linda Gordon’s interview with Carol Lasser from June 1981, titled “Linda Gordon,” in *Visions of History*, ed. Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Schneer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 78. Close to a decade later, Gordon expressed some sympathy for the theoretical approaches adopted by Scott, writing in 1990, “I remain unconvinced by Scott’s most ambitious theoretical claim.” Yet, she nevertheless expressed “admiration for [Scott’s *Gender and the Politics of History*]”; see Linda Gordon, “*Gender and the Politics of History*. Joan Wallach Scott,” *Signs* 15, no. (Summer 1990): 858. More recently, in 2016, Gordon made a case

for rejecting Marxism in light of major economic changes: "Identifying classes in the Marxian sense is difficult if not impossible today, in the USA in particular, as deindustrialization and union-busting have decimated a working class and forced so many workers into a precariat of casual, impermanent jobs." See Linda Gordon, "Intersectionality, Socialist Feminism and Contemporary Activism: Musings by a Second-Wave Socialist Feminism," *Gender and History* 28 (August 2016): 348. It is difficult to understand her logic, especially when we consider the massive size of the international working class and the uninterrupted history of employer-led union-busting throughout the industrial world. In fact, Marxism *can* help us make sense of these developments.

45. In addition to Kazin and Gordon, the panel included Lawrence Levin, John Diggins, and Nancy Isenberg. Diggins was a conservative historian; the others are liberals. See Marjorie Murphy, "Chicago Before the Flood," *Radical Historians Newsletter* 66 (May 1992): 13. My thanks to Jim O'Brien for providing me with a copy of this document.
46. Palmer quoted in Karen J. Winkler, "Debate Among Historians Signals Waning Influence of 'Discourse Theory' Outside Literary Studies," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 38 (22 April 1992), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Historians-Debate-the/78879>.
47. Gordon quoted in *ibid*.
48. Robert Buzzanco, "Where's the Beef: Culture without Power in the Study of US Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 24 (October 2000): 631.
49. For a sampling, see Robert Gregg, *Inside Out, Outside In: Essays in Comparative History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Joel Pfister, *Critique for What? Cultural Studies, American Studies, Left Studies* (London: Routledge, 2016).
50. Bryan D. Palmer, *Interventions and Appreciations*, vol. 2, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 92.
51. Bryan D. Palmer, "'Mind Forg'd Manacles' and Recent Pathways to 'New' Labor Histories," *International Review of Social History* 62, no. 2 (August 2017): 9.
52. Consider the evolution of Joan Wallach Scott. Decades after championing poststructuralism as an alternative to historical materialism, Scott spent much of the 2010s producing clearly written articles and books defending

- the principle of academic freedom, which has been especially needed at a time when administrators, responding to outside pressures, have fired scholars for voicing anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist views. Scott has been a principled champion of these victims. See Joan Wallach Scott, *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
53. Bryan D. Palmer, "Old Positions/New Necessities: History, Class, and Marxist Metanarrative," in *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*, ed. Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 67.
  54. Palmer, "Old Positions/New Necessities," 72.
  55. Bryan D. Palmer, "Fin-de-Siècle Labour History in Canada and the United States: A Case for Tradition," in *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, ed. Jan Lucassen (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 218.
  56. See, for example, Suzi Weissman, "One Hundred Years since October," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 14, no. 3 (September 2017): 11–16; Tony Michels, "The Russian Revolution and the American Left: A Long View from the Twenty-First Century," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 14, no. 3 (September 2017): 17–21; and John D. French and Alexandre Fortes, "Jacobins, Bolsheviks, and the Dream of Revolution: October 1917 in the Trajectory of a Brazilian Metalworker of African Descent," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 14, no. 3 (September 2017): 23–34.
  57. Important labour historian David Montgomery, an influence on Palmer, wrote in 1981 that he was chiefly interested in the "history of capitalism"; see Mark Naison and Paul Buhle, "Interview with David Montgomery," in *Visions of History*, ed. Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Schneer (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 176. None of the participants in the *Journal of American History* roundtable on the topic mentioned Montgomery's influence. See Sven Beckert et al., "Interchange: The History of Capitalism," *Journal of American History* 101, no. 2 (September 2014): 503–36.
  58. Ira Katznelson, "The 'Bourgeois' Dimension: A Provocation about Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labor History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 46 (1994): 7–32.
  59. Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Almost two decades after dismissing the importance of class and class struggle in US history, Michael Kazin teamed up with historian Joseph McCartin to make a case for the progressiveness of liberal flag-waving. In their words, "In our opinion, the ideals of Americanism deserve not just to endure but

- to be revived and practiced as the foundation of a new kind of progressive politics"; see Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, "Introduction," in *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal*, ed. Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 16.
60. Palmer and co-writer Gaétan Héroux have exposed the limitations of Keynesianism in addressing poverty in Canada in *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 250.
  61. Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 10. A number of liberals and leftists have written important studies of the American Communist Party. See Roger Keeran, *The Communist Party and the Auto Workers Unions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); and Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–35* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).
  62. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 18.
  63. *Ibid.*, 44–45.
  64. *Ibid.*, 49.
  65. *Ibid.*, 56.
  66. Quoted in *ibid.*, 73.
  67. Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*.
  68. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 148.
  69. *Ibid.*, 87–88.
  70. *Ibid.*, 93.
  71. Colin Davis, *Power at Odds: The 1922 Railroad Shopmen's Strike* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
  72. Quoted in Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 153–54.
  73. *Ibid.*, 154.
  74. *Ibid.*, 174.
  75. *Ibid.*, 228.
  76. Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 25.
  77. *Ibid.*, 4.
  78. *Ibid.*, 3.
  79. In 1903, the secretary of the open-shop National Metal Trades Association, Robert Wuest, sent O. P. Briggs of the Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance

eleven different sets of booklets and bylaws authored by different union-busting employers' associations. See Robert Wuest to O. P. Briggs, June 29, 1903, Citizens' Alliance of Minneapolis Records, 1903–1953, M465, Roll 1, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota. For a comprehensive treatment of the Citizens' Alliance, see William Millikan, *A Union Against Unions: The Minneapolis Citizens Alliance and Its Fight Against Organized Labor, 1903–1947* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).

80. Cannon quoted in Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 33.
81. Skoglund quoted in *ibid.*, 66.
82. Unnamed teamster, quoted in *ibid.*, 73.
83. *Ibid.*, 76.
84. *Ibid.*
85. Quoted in *ibid.*, 79.
86. Cannon quoted in *ibid.*, 80.
87. Quoted in *ibid.*, 145.
88. Dobbs quoted in *ibid.*, 102.
89. *Ibid.*, 101.
90. *Ibid.*, 110.
91. Quoted in *ibid.*, 118.
92. Art Preis, *Labor's Giant Step: The First Twenty Years of the CIO: 1936–55* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1964); Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Boston: South End Press, 1972); Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, eds., *Rank and File: Personal Histories by Working-Class Organizers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973). There are, of course, recent exceptions. See Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).
93. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 129.
94. Tobin quoted in *ibid.*, 228.
95. *Ibid.*, 145.
96. *Ibid.*, 179. Contrast Palmer with Jennifer Luff's central claim that trade union anti-Communists practiced "common sense." See Jennifer Luff, *Commonsense Anticommunism: Labor and Civil Liberties Between the World Wars* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). And in her study of the Smith Act trials, Donna T. Haverty-Stacke makes a case for the significance of anti-Trotskyism from below. There was indeed a movement, though it constituted a very small percentage of the local, roughly 1 percent. See Donna T. Haverty-Stacke, *Trotskyists on Trial: Free Speech and Political Persecution since the Age of FDR* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

97. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 277.
98. *Ibid.*, 240.
99. Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2013), 399. Also see Robert Dallek's most recent book about Roosevelt. He, too, ignores the 1940 Smith Act. See Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Political Life* (New York: Viking, 2017).
100. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 64.
101. Quoted in *ibid.*, 179.
102. Quoted in *ibid.*, 215–16.
103. Quoted in *ibid.*, 162.
104. *Ibid.*, 165.
105. *Ibid.*, 133.
106. Quoted in *ibid.*, 187.
107. Quoted in *ibid.*, 193.
108. Consider the case of Joseph Fronczak's article about fascism, which includes examples of anti-unionism in Minneapolis. Fronczak devotes a couple of pages to the fascist strikebreakers in Minneapolis during the 1934 strikes, but he ignores how the fascists complemented the work carried out by the liberal government. And he ignores Palmer's study. See Joseph Fronczak, "The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the US Modern Right," *Journal of American History* 105 (December 2018): 571–72.
109. Christopher Phelps and Jefferson Cowie, "Taking Exception," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 14 (May 2017): 98.
110. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*, 133.
111. Bryan D. Palmer, "The New New Poor Law: A Chapter in the Current Class War Waged from Above," *Labour/Le Travail* 84 (Fall 2019): 57.
112. A few contributors to the 1989 Fraser and Gerstle collection re-grouped more than a quarter century later and released a collection of essays reflecting on the original book's significance as well as scholarship released since it came out. In the introduction, the editors simply ignore books, including a number published in recent years, that highlight the ways New Dealers, Roosevelt, and the Democratic Party generally undermined the interests of labour. To be fair, they mention the significance of the rise of the carceral state in the late twentieth century, but are silent about examples of labour repression during the 1930s and 1940s. See Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Alice O'Connor, "Introduction," in *Beyond the New Deal Order: US Politics from the Great Depression to the Great Recession*, ed. Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Alice O'Connor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019): 1–14.

113. Bryan D. Palmer, "A Left History of Liquorice: What It means to Write 'Left' History," *Left History* 23, no. 1 (2019): 15.
114. Ibid.; and Bryan D. Palmer, "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?" *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 232.
115. Bryan D. Palmer, "Red Teamsters," *Jacobin*, October 14, 2014, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/red-teamsters>.





**Bryan Douglas Palmer, Edward Palmer  
Thompson, John le Carré (and Me)**

**Workers, Spies, and Spying, Past and Present**



*Gregory S. Kealey*

In 1970, after graduating from the University of Toronto, I decided to pursue graduate studies at the University of Rochester. I chose Rochester to work with Herbert G. Gutman, whose work in what was then termed “the new labour history” had come to my attention via his essays in collections of revisionist social history attractive to the New Left.<sup>1</sup> About two years later, but not known to me, Bryan Palmer was making a similar trek from London, Ontario to Binghamton, New York to study with Melvyn Dubofsky, another key figure in the emerging field of labour and working-class history.<sup>2</sup>

As Doug Hay has argued, the writing of history “is deeply conditioned not only by our personal, political, and moral histories, but also by the times in which we live.”<sup>3</sup> The 1960s, of course, provide the context of Palmer’s and Kealey’s parallel treks to American graduate schools to pursue the study of Canadian working-class history. Kealey, slightly older, as Palmer enjoys pointing out frequently, followed a more conventional path to grad studies, while the latter dropped out of the University of Western Ontario after one frustrating year to tackle life on the left in New York City in the heady days of 1970. Studying at Alternate U and running with a New York University Progressive Labor Party (PLP) affinity group provided an exciting and stimulating introduction to both labour activism and labour history.<sup>4</sup> He returned to London one year later and completed his BA at

Western in record time before departing for Binghamton. Our respective “personal, political, and moral” experiences of childhood and adolescence in London and suburban Toronto have been explored in essays elsewhere, but it is striking to me that we shared major breaks with families rooted in modest postwar, conventional success (“philistine domicile” in Bryan’s memorable term), albeit precarious at best.<sup>5</sup> Doug, Bryan’s Willy Loman-like travelling hat salesman father, would probably not have got along with Frank, my Irish Catholic brewery foreman father, but they certainly might have shared a few pints if they had ever met.<sup>6</sup>

The choices we each made to study in the United States despite a commitment to researching and writing about Canada derived from mutual recognition that Canadian historians in the 1960s were slow to respond to the new challenges of social history. “History from below” or, in Jesse Lemisch’s more striking term, “from the bottom up” was still something available only elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> The enthusiastic desire to learn how to write such history drove English Canadian scholars to study in the United Kingdom or the US with the practitioners of the new social history, hence Rochester and Binghamton in our respective cases.

After two stimulating years at Rochester apprenticing as a historian with Herbert Gutman and Christopher Lasch, and perhaps more importantly a cadre of New Left graduate students studying there for similar reasons, I returned to Toronto in 1972 to conduct my thesis research on that city’s late nineteenth-century workers.<sup>8</sup> I first met Bryan there a year or two later, while he was working on his Hamilton PhD thesis research.<sup>9</sup> Peter Warrian, a former president of the Canadian Union of Students and then a PhD student in History at the University of Waterloo, who had met Bryan in London while the latter was completing work on that city’s late nineteenth-century working class, suggested the meeting.<sup>10</sup> The Toronto encounter resulted in Bryan contributing an essay derived from his London work to a joint Kealey–Warrian collection of articles on Canadian working-class history. Coterminous with the editorial process leading to *Essays* was the development of the first issue of the Committee on Canadian Labour History’s (later Canadian Committee on Labour History) annual journal, initially named *Labour/Le Travailleur*.<sup>11</sup> And again Bryan stepped up to the plate with the lead article, an overarching view of artisanal culture in the early transition to industrial capitalism based not only on his empirical Canadian work but also derived from a broad

reading of American, British, and European studies and an eclectic mix of social theory.<sup>12</sup> Bryan joined the editorial board of the journal in 1979, became book review editor in 1982, and was editor from 1997 until 2015, and co-editor with me again briefly in 2016. He continues to serve on the Editors' Advisory Committee as editor emeritus.<sup>13</sup>

I enumerate this early history partially as a disclosure of the close collaboration that Bryan and I have enjoyed over many years, but also to illustrate both the origins of his work in the field of labour and working-class history as well as his key institutional role in its ongoing development, both in North America and abroad.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, it is perhaps worth reflecting here on the similarities and differences in our work prior to our jointly authored *Dreaming of What Might Be*.<sup>15</sup> Generally considered by advocates and detractors alike, in the same breath, closer readings of our first monographs, each derived from our doctoral dissertations, display important historiographic distinctions, albeit nuanced. Periodization is one place to start. In Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict*, Hamilton workers are studied from 1860 to 1914, from pre-Confederation days through World War I; in *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism*, I look at Toronto workers from 1867 to 1892, from Confederation, a curious choice at best, to the depression of the 1890s. Both books on Hamilton and Toronto workers in the second half of the nineteenth century begin with explorations of the political economy of early Canadian industrial capitalism. While broadly accepted now, the then-prevalent dominant historiography focused almost solely on staples development and hence largely bypassed the decades of most interest to us. Even left critics of Canadian political economy were preoccupied with what they saw as Canada's distorted economic development under the influences of British and later American imperialism. Hence, our focus on industrialization offered then-novel views of Canadian economic history, and in the process allowed us in turn to study the emergent working class in the new industrial cities of central Canada. If that was what was similar in approach, what was different lay in method. Hamilton workers emerged in a broad overview of industrialization, better placed in a Marxist framework of capitalist development, and an important analysis of "producer ideology," the political economy theory of thinkers such as Hamilton's Isaac Buchanan. Toronto workers emerged from the shadows of a detailed statistical analysis of the

array of data available in the manuscript industrial census, unfortunately only available for 1871.<sup>16</sup> Hamilton workers were also placed in a lovingly detailed analysis of associational life, while the Toronto work focused far more narrowly on the importance of the Orange Order in workers' lives. Chapters on the emergence of the labour movements in the two cities and on workers' activities in the workplace and in strike activity share much, although Hamilton's skilled workers are perhaps less detailed and more abstract than Toronto's shoemakers, coopers, printers, and moulders, who receive more intensive empirical treatments. Similarly, for better or worse, *Toronto Workers* veered off in a detailed analysis of workers' early political efforts and scrutinized both the efforts of the mainstream political parties to channel newly enfranchised male workers' votes and the emergence of Liberal-Labour (Lib-Lab), Labourist, and emerging socialist political ideas and organizations. *A Culture in Conflict* spent far less time on this aspect of Hamilton workers' lives before the early twentieth century. This particular aspect of my work on Toronto has received little consideration and given the general accusation of inattention to politics in Canadian social history, this has always puzzled me. The longer duration studied in Bryan's book also carried him into a discussion of the second industrial revolution and the major workplace transformation wrought by the emergence of various forms of scientific management in the early twentieth century. Of course, the books share similar lacunae in the absence of significant analyses of the unskilled, gender, religion, and family, to name but a few gaps. Such absences are true of many of the early working-class community studies in Canada and the United States.

*Labour/Le Travail* continued publication as an annual after its inaugural issue, and Bryan made his second major contribution to *LLT* on charivaris in nineteenth-century North America. Like his piece on artisanal culture, the rough music piece demonstrated at a very early stage of his career three of his major attributes as a historian.<sup>17</sup> First is the immense erudition of his exceptionally broad reading in not only history but also theory, especially Marxist theory, both classical and contemporary. Second is his ongoing commitment to asking big questions. Commencing in the 1980s, he grew impatient with the plethora of narrow community-based studies of working-class development that too often failed to ask larger questions about class and state formation.<sup>18</sup> And third is the continuous tie between his historical scholarship and his socialist political commitments.

On this third point we both had (and have) our differences as well. After his year in New York City, Bryan was increasingly attracted to Trotskyist politics, initially the residual elements of the Facing Reality group, primarily active in Detroit in the orbit of Marty Glaberman and later in other Left Opposition formations. Meanwhile, continuing my New Left suspicion of Leninism, I remained outside formal groupings other than reading groups and labour support activities.<sup>19</sup>

His pursuit of these larger questions continuously led him to the powerful writings of E. P. Thompson, about whom he has written often and well.<sup>20</sup> And in both Thompson's historical and political writings he found much to work with in some of his own reflections on state formation, state repression, and the law, themes increasingly prominent in some of his most recent works.<sup>21</sup> But it was also present in some of his early writings as well. One example is his 1981 review essay, "Historical Musings on the Canadian State and Its Agents."<sup>22</sup> There Palmer mused on a combination of Ian Adams's novel, *S: Portrait of a Spy: RCMP Intelligence—The Inside Story*, two recent journalistic accounts of Royal Canadian Mounted Police "Dirty Tricks" and other recently revealed offences, and Thompson's collection of essays, *Writing by Candlelight*.<sup>23</sup> The latter contains Thompson's "musings" on the state of civil liberties in the UK, including his remarkable "State of the Nation," which first appeared in *New Society* in late 1979. Thompson wrote that "for two decades the state, whether under Conservative or Labour administrations, has been taking liberties, and these liberties were once ours." Palmer echoed that in Canada:

If this secret state is allowed to grow unchecked, like some fungus in a dark corner of an uninhabited room, it will eventually overtake us all. Our land will be diseased, our capacity to resist weakened severely if not totally undermined: a blight of scarlet-tuniced, horseback locusts will be upon our houses. The secret state will no longer require the cover of darkness and will function openly and brazenly. It will discard anonymity and proclaim its power.<sup>24</sup>

Fast forward almost fifty years and the scarlet tunics are no longer at the centre of Canadian state intelligence. In the aftermath of 9/11, the powers of Britain's MI5, MI6, and GCHQ and our own Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and Communications Security Establishment (CSE) have only grown stronger and sadly less politically contested. The gains of

the 1970s in exposing and partially limiting state intelligence agencies in the aftermath of the domestic security scandals in Canada, the US, and the UK, which gave rise to the writings of Thompson and Palmer, have been trumped by state Secureaucrats in all the Five Eye nations, who were bestowed with renewed legitimacy and previously unimagined powers in the aftermath of 9/11.<sup>25</sup>

In 2013, while preparing a paper on Edward Thompson's influence on North American historians and their writing of history since 1963, for one of the many celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* (hereafter *The Making*), I became intrigued by a quite different subject, namely the use that Thompson made of archival records generated by informants and spies. This interest arose from my own research interest in state repression of labour and the left but was given additional impetus by Thompson's major historiographic influence on Palmer and their parallel fascination with spies and state repression. The remainder of this chapter turns to these themes.<sup>26</sup>

My historical interest in state repression stemmed from my work in the early 1980s on the labour revolt of 1917 to 1920 that led me to the massive archival documentation of the Royal North-West Mounted Police and its successor in domestic state security, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.<sup>27</sup> Such work again suggests the poor reading of many of the right-wing critics of Canadian social history who among their other charges continuously critiqued its alleged failure to study politics and the state.

Reflecting on spying and political policing in the case of the UK illuminates the interaction of Thompson's socialist humanist politics post 1956, his defence of a "Marxist Tradition" of empirical historical work, and his insights into the clashes, both historical and contemporary, between the rights of the "free-born Englishman" and the forces of state repression in what he termed the Natopolitan powers.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, one can say the same of the Palmer corpus of work.

This line of thought also led me to reflect on what some might dismiss as a simple coincidence, but historians might consider worthy of consideration. For 2013 was not only the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Making*, but also of John le Carré's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. In a new preface for a celebratory diamond edition, David Cornwell (le Carré's real name) wrote:

I watched the ramparts of the Cold War going up on the still warm ashes of the hot one. And I had absolutely no sense of transition from the one war to the other, because in the secret world there barely was one. To the hardliners of east and west the Second World War was a distraction. Now it was over, they could get on with the real war that had started with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and had been running under different flags and disguises ever since.<sup>29</sup>

Le Carré's invocation of the centrality of the Bolshevik Revolution and his tracing of the origins of the Cold War to 1917, not to 1945, while not novel, nevertheless reinforce a politico-historical reconsideration of the intersection of Thompson's use of spies' evidence from the 1790s to the 1820s and his activist views of the Cold War vagaries of the British Security State of the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, le Carré's profound ambiguity about the Cold War captured initially in *The Spy* was significantly expanded in his subsequent George Smiley novels and in later writings. Similarly, Bryan Palmer in his relatively little-known writings on Upper Canada in the "age of revolution" and later rebellion invoked many of the same themes and utilized similar sources. Having briefly introduced these themes in his review essay on the RCMP, he revisited them in his "Producing Classes, Paternalist Authority, 1800–1850" in his overview of Canadian working-class history, and at greater length in later essays on radicalism and political rhetoric in Upper Canada and on the law and class struggle.<sup>30</sup>

Spies and informants are major characters in *The Making*. "Citizen" Groves plays a key role in the state's repressive response to the Jacobin stirrings and threat of the 1790s. "B" or Bent, John Castle, George Edwards, and above all "Oliver the Spy" (W.J. Richards) star in the state's repressive response to Despard, Luddism, the Spa Fields Riot, the Ardwick Conspiracy, the Pentridge Rising, Peterloo, and the Cato Street Conspiracy.

The connective tissue of Thompson's implicit narrative here, for please recollect that he himself described *The Making* as "a group of studies, on related themes, rather than a continuous narrative," is derived from spies' observations of, and reports on, "the underground tradition."<sup>31</sup> A tradition that, as he constantly emphasizes, is furtive and opaque, words that are frequently used in *The Making*. For example, consider the key chapters of part 1: "The Liberty Tree." In both chapter 4, "The Free-Born Englishman," and chapter 5, "Planting the Liberty Tree," much of the evidence of Jacobin activities is derived from Groves and other spies such as James Powell.

Indeed, one of the key defining characteristics of the “free-born Englishman” is the resistance to such spies and to a spy system that is associated with “continental despotism.”

But it is in part 3 of *The Making*, “The Working-Class Presence,” where we find both the most dependence on these sources and the fullest explication of the historical methodology he promotes to justify their utilization. After a quick trip through “Radical Westminster,” we arrive at the heart of *The Making*, as we are introduced to the complexities of the world of “The Army of Redressers.” To enter that world, Thompson digresses first into the key methodological discussion about sources for his “opaque society.” While initially agreeing to the standard critique of the use of spy reports as historical sources as often exaggerated, sensationalistic, and sometimes even concocted, he nevertheless proceeds to a more nuanced view. He also establishes that despite the popular view that spies were “unBritish,” they were a traditional component of both British statecraft and police practice, although their use from 1790 to 1820 reached “a scale unknown in any other period.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, he argues: “A convincing history of English Jacobinism and popular Radicalism could be written solely in terms of the impact of espionage upon the movement.”<sup>33</sup> As later discussed more generally in sections of *The Poverty of Theory*,<sup>34</sup> he elaborates here on methodological strategies for the use of spy reports: recognize the occupational bias to sensationalize and hence discount with care; attend to the concatenation of reports from multiple spies as used by the spymasters to insure the reliability of their minions; recognize the ideological biases of the interpreters of the reports; acknowledge that informants were better able to penetrate the political rather than the industrial and the regional rather than the local; and scrutinize every report with the full array of the rules of historical evidence.<sup>35</sup>

After his methodological digression, Thompson returns us to the world of General Ludd via a discussion of the quasi-legal and illegal trade union traditions that developed in resistance to the Combination Acts and that were incorporated into the “moral culture—solidarity, dedication, and intimidation.”<sup>36</sup> These emerging traditions of oaths and other secret rituals became mainstays of the Luddite movements of the West Riding croppers, the Nottinghamshire stockingers, and the Lancashire weavers. And it is in these struggles that Thompson finds the core of the story of *The Making*: “A way of life was at stake for the community.”<sup>37</sup> The workers



were “opposed at one side by the values of order, at the other side by the value of economic freedom.”<sup>38</sup> “The journeymen and artisans felt themselves to be robbed of constitutional rights. . . . Ned Ludd was the ‘Redresser’ or ‘Grand Executioner,’ defending . . . rights too deeply established ‘by Custom and Law’ for them to be set aside by a few masters or even by Parliament.”<sup>39</sup> Factory owners, by contrast, were viewed “as engaging in immoral and illegal practices.”<sup>40</sup> The years from 1811 to 1817 were “a watershed, whose streams [ran] in one direction back to Tudor times, in another forward to the factory legislation of the next hundred years. . . . In both directions lay an alternative political economy and morality to that of *laissez faire*.”<sup>41</sup>

And into those watershed years Thompson’s “Sherwood Lads” and “The Luddite Movement,” which went well beyond general forms of Luddism (*pace* E. J. Hobsbawm) by dint of its high degree of organization and the political context. It represented to varying degrees in its Lancashire, Nottinghamshire, and Yorkshire embodiments elements of a “quasi-insurrectionary movement.”<sup>42</sup> And here again, the story can only be told because of the home office reports of a series of spies and informers, but not before another historiographic interlude to explain why the Hammonds had it wrong. Their dismissal of the authorities’ views of insurrection as only the exaggeration of spies and the actions of agents provocateurs must be dealt with for his revisionism to prevail. A lengthy and sophisticated analysis of cases in Barnsley depends heavily on Thompson’s reading of spy Thomas Broughton’s role and the differences between Sidmouth’s home office and the local magistrates, courts, and most importantly, juries. The decision not to lay treason charges for fear of acquittals leads Thompson to reflect: “to act the part of the informer was a breach of the moral economy, entailing a sentence of outlawry from the community.”<sup>43</sup> In turning to Lancashire events, the Hammonds (and Francis Place), other Fabians, and the “orthodox academic tradition” are all found wanting in the face of his revisionist reading of the evidence:

Hence “history” has dealt fairly with the Tolpuddle Martyrs, and fulsomely with Francis Place; but the hundreds of men and women executed or transported for oath-taking, Jacobin conspiracy, Luddism, the Pentridge and Grange Moor Risings, food and enclosure and turnpike riots, the Ely Riots, and the Labourers’ Revolt of 1830, and a score of minor affrays, have been forgotten by all but a few specialists,

or, if they are remembered, they are thought to be simpletons or men tainted with criminal folly.<sup>44</sup>

Key to Thompson's account is a new view of Bent, who is depicted by the Hammonds as a sensationalist and provocateur. For Thompson, he is "a plain informer . . . stupid but observant" and to be trusted "when he describes events in which he participated himself," yet not to be trusted for "his reports of ulterior aim or of organization in the rest of the country."<sup>45</sup> Not only does Thompson depend on Bent for his extensive account of Lancashire Luddism, but also on other spies such as Yarwood, Whittaker, and "R. W."<sup>46</sup>

In chapter 15, "Demagogues and Martyrs," we return to London where among the other weaknesses of city radicals we are reminded of how radical culture there was easily penetrated by home office spies. And we are introduced to Oliver, who made use of his London radical credentials to infiltrate the less porous Midlands and North. Other spies, such as Castle and Edwards, did much to both penetrate and perhaps to provoke the insurrectionary side of the movement in both the Spa Fields and Cato Street incidents.<sup>47</sup> Thompson begins his account of the former with the sentence: "The true story may perhaps be this."<sup>48</sup> Three conflicting versions of events—by the Crown, heavily based on spy/provocateur John Castle, used in the trial of Dr. James Watson; by Orator Hunt in his "Memoirs"; and by Watson's defence—make a simple narrative fraught. Whatever the intentions of the organizers, the actual attempt at the Tower in December 1816 was an abject failure and the alleged conspirators either fled to America or faced trial.

In March 1817, William Oliver, after his release from debtor's prison, joined the London Radicals and won the confidence of Joseph Mitchell, who he joined on an important trip to the Midlands. In what Thompson describes as a "splendid coup of espionage," Oliver gained full access to the plans for an uprising in late March. All was dutifully reported to Sidmouth, who sent Oliver north again where he found the plans had been delayed until June. He focused his attention then on the West Riding and Nottingham, where he was definitely in contact with Jeremiah Brandreth in advance of the latter's armed march from Pentridge toward Nottingham. A separate attack occurred at Folley Hall near Huddersfield. In the aftermath of the failed rising, there was huge public outrage as the extent

of Oliver's role became clear. This public revulsion against government spying spilled over into acquittals in ongoing treason trials such as the one against Dr. James Watson in London, against the Folley Hall accused, and in similar cases in Glasgow. Clamour against "the continental spy system" was widespread and sufficient to keep Oliver completely out of the trials surrounding the Pentridge Rising. Thompson puzzles over the unwillingness of Brandreth's defence lawyer to call Oliver as a witness and hence to make spying a central issue. In the end, he speculates that the decision was an effort to save the lives of many of the co-defendants, some thirty of whom had pleaded guilty in expectation of transportation instead of the gallows.

Evidence that Thompson is rather kinder to the Hammonds than they probably deserve is provided by their following character assassination: "At Nottingham he [Oliver] found an enthusiast ready to fall in and forward any proposal however wild, in the person of Jeremiah Brandreth, a half-starved, illiterate, and unemployed frame-work knitter, of swarthy and what is commonly called "foreign" appearance. Probably he had a strain of gipsy blood."<sup>49</sup> In an attached footnote they add that he was even receiving parish relief! In a similar fashion they reduce "The Blanketeers' March" from Manchester to London to "comic relief." I suspect that the nine marchers who were jailed for a year only to be released without charge failed to share in the Hammonds' humour.<sup>50</sup>

Peterloo (16 August 1819) inspires some of Thompson's most inflamed rhetoric against "Old Corruption" in his attribution of intent to Sidmouth and his description of the "massacre," "the panic of class hatred," and "class war." He writes, "Peterloo outraged every belief and prejudice of the 'free-born Englishman'—the right of free speech, the desire for 'fair play,' the taboo against attacking the defenceless."<sup>51</sup> And, by now predictably, spies march through the account, including the feckless "Y," informing on a radical pike maker in Manchester while also selling the product, and John Williamson, the London spy who aided Sidmouth's entrapment of Arthur Thistlewood. There is also "Alpha" in Manchester, who played a role in the Radical leadership under his real name W. C. Walker and who appears to have reported on himself to local authorities to maintain his cover.<sup>52</sup> Walker's reports provided the evidence for the arrest of the Manchester Radical leadership in December 1819.<sup>53</sup> All such events in the aftermath of Peterloo led to the December 1819 imposition of the Six Acts that again

imposed extraordinary levels of state repression. The final insurrectionary act in the aftermath of Peterloo was the abortive Cato Street Conspiracy that led to the execution of Arthur Thistlewood and four others, as well as the transportation of five more. The Cato Street conspirators acted throughout in concert with a home office spy, George Edwards. Indeed, Edwards had proposed the fake Cabinet dinner as the appropriate target of the action, and both Sidmouth and Castlereagh knew the details of the plot well in advance.

This, I hope not too tedious account of spies in *The Making*, demonstrates the centrality of Thompson's use of spy accounts as a critical part of the central argument about the underground tradition and the transmission of radical ideas and forms of resistance from the revolutionaries of the seventeenth century to the emerging working-class and socialist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>54</sup>

While over fifty years have passed since the publication of *The Making*, the human rights concerns of its author and of the "free-born Englishman" have not disappeared. Indeed, the Great Bustard's concerns so well articulated in his 1970s political essays, many of them utilizing his historical knowledge and skills, are sadly missed in our current crises of an Orwellian State security system well beyond the imagination of the creator of *1984*. The Five Eyes (the signals intelligence alliance forged in the early Cold War), and more specifically the National Security Agency (US), General Communications Headquarters (UK), and their Canadian sibling, CSE, cry out for analyses employing Thompson's historical and rhetorical skills. What fun he would have had satirizing the Secureaucrats of the Bush and Obama eras, not to speak of those of recent British governments under the likes of Tony Blair, Theresa May, and now Boris Johnson.<sup>55</sup>

Of course, our second diamond anniversary author (le Carré) has done just that recently in his novel *A Delicate Truth*. Here, the ambiguities of the Cold War era as depicted in the Smiley novels give way to a brutal condemnation of the immorality of the Secureaucrats and mercenaries of the post-9/11 world. Sir Christopher ("Kit") Probyn, a retired diplomat, Toby Bell, the prime minister's secretary, and Kit's daughter Emily stand in the novel for the residual traditions of the "free-born Englishman." They find themselves wholly arrayed against the total powers of the cynical politicians and their state's repressive regime, augmented now by mercenary private contractors set upon the world by the American cousins

in their so-called “War on Terror.” It is not a pretty picture and it provides a depressing counterpoint to Thompson’s powerful and pessimistic vision articulated in his “State of the Nation,” published in *New Society* in 1979.

Of considerable interest, le Carré chose to resurrect George Smiley, albeit in person only briefly, in his 2017 *A Legacy of Spies*. Perhaps the fiftieth anniversary helped to give rise to this return to Smiley or perhaps it was David Cornwell’s personal reflections on biography and autobiography that fueled his reconsideration of his original fictional triumph.<sup>56</sup> Whatever its conception, the novel revisits the events surrounding the early 1960s *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* via a convoluted and calculating contemporary “Circus” plot against the retired Peter Guillam, George’s devoted ally. Here again, le Carré describes the contemporary British intelligence community as cynical and unrooted. Guillam, yet again seeking explanation, turns as previously to Smiley. The best the latter can offer provides little solace:

I believe you came to accuse me of something, Peter. Am I right? . . . Was it for the things we did . . . Or why we did them at all? . . . For world peace, whatever *that* is? Yes, yes, of course. There will be no war, but in the struggle for peace not a stone will be left standing . . . Or was it all in the great name of *capitalism*? God forbid. Christendom? God forbid again. . . . So was it all for *England*, then? . . . But *whose* England? *Which* England? England all alone, a citizen of nowhere? I’m a European, Peter. If I had a mission . . . it was to Europe. If I was heartless, I was heartless for Europe. If I had an unattainable ideal, it was of leading Europe out of her darkness towards a new age of reason. I have it still.<sup>57</sup>

Le Carré, via Smiley, is undoubtedly alluding here to Brexit, but more importantly, he is also deeply undermining the assumptions of the Cold War and post-9/11 security state, as he has done increasingly in his novels. In his most recent fiction, *Agent Running in the Field*, le Carré pairs an initially naive Nat, a washed-up MI6 officer recently returned from Europe to head up “The Haven,” with an angry young Ed of MI5 who continuously rails against both pro-Brexit, Tory England and Trump’s America. Ed is faithful to Europe and like George Smiley himself a major devotee of postwar Germany. Nat, tired of the cynical excesses of his and the “sister” service, refuses to “double” Ed and instead accomplishes “as sweet

an exfiltration as you could wish for.” Here, le Carré satirizes all sides in “the game” and simultaneously removes his central characters from any further engagement in espionage and, apparently, from England to Europe.<sup>58</sup>

Thompson, “The Great Bustard,” however, shall be given the penultimate word in this chapter:

Britain might be in the final year or two of its own *Weimar* . . . with not the Nazis but a crowd of officious extras—police and security chiefs, “modernizing” civil servants, and cynical politicians, NATO and military personnel—waiting in the wings. No conspiratorial coup would be necessary. Massive unemployment, heavy industrial conflict with massive police response, racial provocations—and perhaps counter-provocations by increasingly desperate groups on the extreme Left and in threatened immigrant communities—heavy security measures and McCarthyite terrorization of dissent: all of this would lead . . . from the liberal managed society (where we are now) to a very foul, policed and managed, authoritarian state.<sup>59</sup>

Clearly Thompson’s dystopia did not arrive in the 1980s as he feared, but much of his apocalyptic vision seems alarmingly prescient, and hence all too present, in 2020.

Bryan Palmer, the committed socialist historian, commences his “permanent sabbatical” with similar concerns about late capitalism. His recent work on poverty and homelessness and newer work on mass incarceration and prison labour provide new evidence of his remarkable range as a social historian and his passionate commitment to the struggle for justice and equality.<sup>60</sup> Let us give Bryan the final comment. Discussing his collected essays reflecting almost fifty years of historical writing, he notes that they “struggle, inevitably somewhat incompletely, to link Marxism and historical practice, a conception of the past with an appreciation of the necessity of changing our present and realizing a better future.”<sup>61</sup> Let us hope there will be many more years of such writing.

#### NOTES

1. Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969); Alfred F. Young, ed., *Dissent: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968). Gutman had also published a number of

articles derived from his Wisconsin doctoral thesis in a scattering of state journals, all of which I avidly read. For more on Gutman, see Gregory S. Kealey, "Herbert G. Gutman, 1928–1985: The Writing of Working-Class History," *Monthly Review* 38, no. 1 (May 1986): 22–30; and "Herbert G. Gutman and David Montgomery: The Politics and Direction of Labor and Working-Class History in the United States," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 37 (1990): 58–68. Also influential was the New Left journal *Radical America*, edited by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), radical history students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. On the Wisconsin historiographic tradition, see Paul Buhle, ed., *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

2. Bryan D. Palmer, "Introduction," to his *Interpretive Essays on Class Formation and Class Struggle*, vol. 1, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 2–3. There is also a much more affordable American paperback edition published in 2017 by Chicago's Haymarket Books. Other important historians associated with the early years of the new labour history include David Montgomery, David Brody, and Alice Kessler-Harris.
3. As quoted in Jared Davidson, "History from Below: A Reading List with Marcus Rediker," *Overland*, 11 February 2019.
4. Bryan D. Palmer, "Becoming a Left Oppositionist," *Canadian Dimension* 39, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 56–63. PLP originated as a Maoist split from the Communist Party of the US in the early 1960s and was later a major faction in SDS.
5. On Palmer's early life, see his "Becoming a Left Oppositionist." For mine, see Kealey "Community, Politics and History: My Life as a Historian," *Canadian Historical Review* 97, no. 3 (September 2016), 404–25.
6. The allusion to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is from Palmer's "Becoming a Left Oppositionist."
7. Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Role of New York's Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Lemisch's major influence on New Left historians was based on his earlier articles derived from his Yale thesis, which was only published under this title some thirty years later.
8. Doctoral students at Rochester in those years included Leon Fink, Russell Jacoby, William Leach, Bruce Levine, David Noble, and Eric Perkins, to name only a few.
9. These dissertations subsequently were revised and published as Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867–1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980; rev. ed., 1991) and Palmer's *A*

*Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979).

10. Our first meeting has led to almost fifty years of friendship and collaboration. The meeting was a success and the collection appeared as Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976). Bryan's essay arose from his work on a major London street railway strike in 1899, which he had researched as part of a summer student employment project on the history of London labour. The same federal program (Opportunities for Youth) also funded the research, writing, and publishing of Russell G. Hann, Gregory S. Kealey, Linda Kealey, and Peter Warrian, comps., *Primary Sources in Canadian Working-Class History, 1860–1930* (Kitchener, ON: Dumont Press Graphix and Jimuel Briggs Society, 1973).
11. The journal became semi-annual in 1981, and the name was changed to *Labour/Le Travail* in 1984 to expunge the inadvertently sexist title in French.
12. Bryan D. Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976): 5–31. The "eclectic mix" of theory fits well with his comment that until the early 1980s he was "reluctant to decisively declare myself a Marxist. I felt I had a lot to learn and needed to earn the right to proclaim myself a Marxist historian." See Palmer, "Introduction," *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 1, 3.
13. For a capsule history of the journal, see Joan Sangster, "Creating a Forum for Working-Class Histories: *Labour/Le Travail*," *Scholarly and Research Communications* 9, no. 1 (2018): 1–10. For international perspectives, see Verity Burgmann, "*Labour/Le Travail* and Canadian Working-Class History: A View from Afar," *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002): 73–88; and David Roediger, "Top Seven Reasons to Celebrate and Ask More from *Labour/Le Travail*," *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002): 89–99.
14. For a fine overview of his contributions, both domestic and international, see the two volumes of his *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Volume 2 is subtitled *Interventions and Appreciations* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
15. Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). A Canadian paperback appeared with Toronto's New Hogtown Press in 1987 and a Cambridge paperback in 2005.
16. The manuscript industrial census for 1881 and 1891 had been destroyed before I began my archival work.



17. Bryan D. Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 5–63.
18. For his own version of his development as a historian, a close reading of the two-volume "Introduction" and the eight "Part Introductions" to his *Marxism and Historical Practice* will provide many insights. More insights into his views on his personal voyage can be found in his "Becoming a Left Oppositionist."
19. See Palmer's "Becoming a Left Oppositionist" and his essays on Braverman, Mandel, and Cannon in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 2, which is dedicated "to all 'the beautiful and ineffectual utopians and hissing factionalists' who make life on the revolutionary left exciting, challenging, and rewarding."
20. For an early example, see his *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981), which was intended to provide a political context to Thompson's historical work, especially for an American audience largely unfamiliar with British left-wing political developments. Later came his powerful two-part obituary, "Homage to Edward Thompson," first published in *Labour/Le Travail* 32 (Fall 1993): 10–71 and *Labour/Le Travail* 33 (Spring 1994): 13–68. A revised version of those essays was published as *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994).
21. Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, "'Cracking the Stone': The Long History of Capitalist Crisis and Toronto's Dispossessed," *Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 9–62. See also their monograph, *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016). For a more recent exploration, see Palmer, "The New New Poor Law: A Chapter in the Current Class War Waged from Above," *Labour/Le Travail* 84 (Fall 2019): 53–105.
22. Bryan D. Palmer, "Historical Musings on the Canadian State and Its Agents," *Our Generation* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1981): 28–41.
23. E. P. Thompson, "The State of the Nation," in *Writing by Candlelight* (London: Merlin Press, 1980). The journalistic accounts were John Sawatsky, *Men in the Shadows: The RCMP Security Service* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1980) and Jeff Sallot, *Nobody Said No: The Real Story About How the Mounties Always Get their Man* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1979). It should be noted that Adams's 1977 novel sailed close enough to the facts that he and his publisher (Gage) faced three lengthy years of litigation. The libel action was launched in December 1977 on behalf of Leslie James Bennett, a former Head of the Russia desk of the RCMP's Security Service, who had been forced to retire ignominiously in the mole hunt of

- the early 1970s. The second edition (Toronto: Virgo, 1981) dropped the subtitle, bore the curious disclaimer that “S’ is not and was not intended to be Leslie James Bennett,” and included a seventeen-page introduction and two appendices discussing the legal actions and Bennett’s hitherto secret intelligence career. For a lengthier discussion of the Bennett Affair, see Reg Whitaker, Gregory S. Kealey, and Andrew Parnaby, *Secret Service: Political Policing in Canada from the Fenians to Fortress America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 234–40.
24. Palmer, “Historical Musings,” 41.
  25. The Five Eyes are the signals intelligence sharing nations derived from World War II and significantly enhanced during the Cold War and even more so after 9/11: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. For an overview of the history of Canadian security and intelligence, see Whitaker, Kealey, and Parnaby, *Secret Service* and Gregory S. Kealey, *Spying on Canadians: The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Security Service and the Origins of the Long Cold War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).
  26. Bryan D. Palmer, “Paradox and the Thompson ‘School of Awkwardness,’” in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 2, 294–313.
  27. Gregory S. Kealey, “1919: The Canadian Labour Revolt,” *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 11–45; Kealey, *Spying on Canadians*. Gaining access to such archival data has been a time-consuming adventure necessitating frequent use of the Access to Information Act and equally frequent complaints to the Information Commissioner. Such difficulties continue and are worsening. The original promise of transparency has been destroyed by refusals of significant reform of the ATIP legislation by all Canadian governments since the original passage of the legislation in 1985. On the labour revolt, see Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) and the outpouring of material on the Winnipeg General Strike on the occasion of its centennial.
  28. MI5 unsurprisingly took considerable interest in Thompson even after he left the CPGB. For details, see his personal file in National Archives (Kew), KV2/4290–KV2/4295, The Security Service: Personal (PF Series) Files, Communists and Suspected Communists, Including Russian and Communist Sympathizers, Edward Palmer Thompson. This file was released in 2016, as was Eric Hobsbawm’s. For extensive biographical use of the latter, see Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).
  29. le Carré, “Introduction,” *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (Toronto: Penguin, 2013).

30. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983), 7–59, republished in a significantly revised and updated second edition by McClelland and Stewart in 1992 with the revised subtitle *Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991* and extending the temporal coverage to 1991 (Palmer discusses the revisions in his preface, 11–33); Bryan D. Palmer, “Popular Radicalism and the Theatrics of Rebellion: The Hybrid Discourse of Dissent in Upper Canada in the 1830s” and “What’s Law Got to Do with It? Historical Considerations on Class Struggle, Boundaries of Constraint, and Capitalist Authority,” in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 1, 69–106 and 436–61. These reflections on elements of the history of Upper Canada were derived from an as yet unfinished larger project to write a history of the early years of the settler society.
31. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 12.
32. *Ibid.*, 484ff.
33. *Ibid.*, 493.
34. E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 193–406.
35. Thompson, *The Making*, 488ff.
36. *Ibid.*, 511.
37. *Ibid.*, 548.
38. *Ibid.*, 543.
39. *Ibid.*, 547.
40. *Ibid.*, 548.
41. *Ibid.*, 552.
42. *Ibid.*, 553.
43. *Ibid.*, 583.
44. *Ibid.*, 592. Barbara and J. L. Hammond were prominent Fabian intellectuals and historians. *The Making* can be read not only as an extended diatribe against economic history orthodoxy, but also as an important critique of the social democratic (read Fabian) view of labour’s past. For important works in the Thompsonian tradition that evoke similar themes, see Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) and his *Red Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).
45. Thompson, *The Making*, 594.
46. *Ibid.*, 599.

47. Ibid., 616.
48. Ibid., 633.
49. J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, *The Skilled Labourer: 1760–1832* (London: Longmans, Green, 1919), 358.
50. Ibid., 349.
51. Thompson, *The Making*, 689.
52. Ibid., 698, n. 2.
53. For interesting commentary on Peterloo, both the Mike Leigh film and the event, see Nicholas Rogers, “Filming *Peterloo* in the Age of Brexit,” *Labour/Le Travail* 84 (Fall 2019): 333–41.
54. For another treatment by Thompson on spies in history, see his posthumously published “Hunting the Jacobin Fox,” *Past and Present* 142 (February 1994): 94–140.
55. The important and courageous revelations of Edward Snowden would have been applauded by Thompson. On Snowden, see Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the US Surveillance State* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2014); Luke Harding, *The Snowden Files: The Inside Story of the World’s Most Wanted Man* (London: Guardian Books, 2014); and Edward Snowden, *Permanent Record* (New York: Henry Holt, 2019).
56. Adam Sisman’s *John le Carré: The Biography* (Toronto: Knopf, 2015) appears to have played some role in generating le Carré’s *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from My Life* (Toronto: Viking, 2016).
57. John le Carré, *A Legacy of Spies* (Toronto: Viking, 2017), 262; emphasis original.
58. John le Carré, *Agent Running in the Field* (Toronto: Viking, 2019), 281. Donald Trump is lovingly described as “Putin’s shithouse cleaner” who “does everything for little Vladi that little Vladi can’t do for himself” (141, 168–69). “The Haven,” the secondary MI6 office in Camden Town in the novel, evokes the “slow horses” of “Slough House” in the fiction of Mick Herron, perhaps le Carré’s premier successor. Herron’s “Slough House” series includes six novels and two novellas to date.
59. Thompson, “Introduction,” *Writing by Candlelight*, x.
60. Palmer and Héroux, *Toronto’s Poor*; Palmer, “The New New Poor Law.”
61. Palmer, “Introduction,” *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 1, 6.

PART III



# Politics



## Palmer's Politics

### Discovering the Past and the Future of Class Struggle



*Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin*

To be a historian of the Left is a responsibility and a burden. Few write with breadth of vision, critical engagement, passion for evidence and commitment to reason, embracing as well revolutionary social change—foundations all of a calling as difficult as any to realise. It is one thing to research deeply, theorise imaginatively, orchestrate materials from the past to construct its blazing colours in all of their glory and despair and write with creativity and flair. Quite another to tend the garden of politics, where the blooms of one month fade and the foliage of another can be overtaken by weeds, some of which are quite compelling in their attractiveness. . . . To research and write, guided by the insights of Marxism, is, however difficult, easier than to struggle against capitalism and realise another world.<sup>1</sup>

Thus does Bryan Palmer begin his essay on the politics of no less a star in the left's intellectual firmament than Eric Hobsbawm. It was precisely "the rich range of his historical practice," Palmer argued, that brought the limitations of Hobsbawm's "political engagement into sharp relief." In particular, Hobsbawm's insistence "that the Labour Party needed to reconstitute itself as a popular-frontist body attractive to the broad anti-Thatcher coalition that might turn back the tide of reaction would, in actuality, culminate in a rightward trajectory that was truly destructive of socialist possibility and

alternative.”<sup>2</sup> Hobsbawm’s political and intellectual formation as a young man amidst the Communist parties’ turn to Popular Frontism, Palmer argued, was at the root of the “mark of deformation” that became so fully “visible in the cauldron of the 1980s, when so much of so-called communism of the 20th century crashed and burned.”<sup>3</sup> But whereas this might confirm for lesser left historians why it was safest to stick to the past and stay away from contemporary politics, Palmer refused to do this. Indeed, it reinforced the central concern in his historical writing to explain why working-class struggles against capitalism directed at realizing another world turned out to be so difficult, while consistently validating and powerfully demonstrating the ongoing need to keep at it.

Palmer’s own political and intellectual formation, so very different than Hobsbawm’s, was rooted in the recognition by the generation of the 1960s that the role of the old Communist parties as agencies of class formation and socialist transformation was already long spent, even as newly militant working classes had re-emerged amidst new economic and political crises. Young workers in particular, across a very broad range of occupations and community settings, refused to buy into the narrow legalisms of collective bargaining procedures that required lowering their material expectations and bowing to managerial authority in the workplace. Inspired by this, Palmer was at the very forefront of a coterie of equally young and highly energized labour historians in the 1970s who—“grappling with class as an agent of social transformation,” as Palmer has put it, with their (and especially his own) “boundless sense of the possibilities of dissidence”<sup>4</sup>—dug deeply to uncover the historical legacy of worker militancy in Canadian working-class culture. They dedicated themselves to excavating the daily life, the occupational and community associations, and the periodic struggles of working people right across the country over the previous century and more. If E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (or even Hobsbawm’s *Labouring Men*) was their intellectual inspiration, the turbulent time was their material catalyst.

Even though “the response of established Canadian historians to a New Left, class-based historiography was harsher than in other national settings” (led, in fact, by “the particularly vehement reaction of certain liberal-social democratic historians, who were stridently vocal in their opposition to Marxism”),<sup>5</sup> the impact of the remarkably dedicated and productive new generation of young Marxist labour historians was profound. And this



had impacts well beyond Canadian history's disciplinary boundaries, not least on the new Canadian political economy that also emerged out of the ferment of the late 1960s. Originally almost exclusively oriented to disinterring the distinctive nature of the capitalist class to explain Canada's economic dependency, the work of the new labour historians, especially Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict* in 1979,<sup>6</sup> provided the foundation for the new political economy to develop a much fuller and more social-relational class analysis by the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>7</sup>

But it was through the course of the decade of the 1980s that Palmer's distinctive voice was really registered in terms of a breadth of vision and critical engagement that stemmed from continuing to embrace the goal of revolutionary social change.<sup>8</sup> It was his *Working-Class Experience*, first published in 1983, that above all proclaimed how distinctively radical and ambitious Palmer's historiographic and political trajectory would be, even in the face of the defeats of working-class militancy and the retreats of both old and New Left intellectuals through the fateful decade of the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> It was "widely seen as the first synthesis of the new working-class history."<sup>10</sup> But if it was most certainly that (with an exceptional discursive bibliography that drew the reader's attention to an astonishing array of MA theses), it was at the same time so much more than that. Nothing like it had ever been produced in the study of Canadian working-class history. The sheer ambition of its breadth of coverage over two centuries and diverse regional experiences transcended the sources it drew on to achieve, through its sharp attention to political economy as well as its distinctively rich class analysis, the "sophisticated understanding" of Canadian workers' collective experience that Palmer set out as the central objective of his study.<sup>11</sup>

Palmer was, of course, most interested in uncovering "organizational, political and cultural ferment." But he recognized that discovering why such activity was "more intense at some moments than at others is one of the most difficult tasks of labour historians."<sup>12</sup> This was a sharp departure from those who approached working-class history teleologically, whether in terms of the cumulative development of collective revolutionary potential, or in terms of merely tracing the origins of contemporary unions and parties. Indeed, what was perhaps most important about Palmer's book was that it was as concerned with understanding the episodic unmaking of the Canadian working class. Thus, as much as he attended to the rise of the "movement culture" that came to prominence in the 1880s, and the

“working-class challenge” it presented to the structures of “competitive capitalism and political localism,” so too did he attend to its demise as “monopoly began to develop and as political power in a nation born only 20 years earlier grew more centralized and more sophisticated”:

Change was proceeding at such a quickening pace and the older social relations were being superseded so dramatically that working-class bodies like the Knights of Labor and the Provincial Workmen’s Association were thrown into a state of confused agitation . . . In the 1890s the search for solutions to labour’s dilemmas would be renewed in the rise of socialism and the drift toward a more dominant pragmatic unionism. But by then, the damage had been done, and the movement culture of the 1880s was in a shambles.<sup>13</sup>

But with the pan-Canadian general strike revolt of 1919, “an eclectic radicalism infused with new socialist principles re-emerged in the exuberance of wartime militancy, international working-class advance, and a climate in which proletarian victory seemed possible.” Even so, Palmer was careful to show why this did not erase underlying fragmentations, “including why little lasting unity between indigenous and immigrant workers was achieved.” And he went on to analyze developments in North American capitalism in the 1920s that would “erode the very substance of traditional working-class culture as a commercialized mass culture took root”<sup>14</sup>:

In spite of its capacity to reach and exploit huge markets, mass culture was an individualized activity that moved workers away from social interaction and into the confines of the nuclear family . . . The automobile craze accelerated by easy credit, declining costs of products and fuel, and suburban expansion, helped to transform the nature of working-class experience. It separated work and leisure decisively and structured working-class life in new ways.<sup>15</sup>

By the time the Great Depression struck, the Canadian working class “was stripped, in large measure, of its institutions and political traditions of radicalism.”<sup>16</sup> There was once again nothing teleological in Palmer’s account that followed of the emergence of “one of the first truly mass movements of the unemployed . . . [which] drew upon the spontaneous energies of class experience, as well as the disciplined leadership of communists, socialists, and nonaligned militants.”<sup>17</sup>

Far from seeing the achievement of industrial unionism and legal collective bargaining rights in the postwar period in terms of the “forward march of labour,” Palmer documented the limits and contradictions this entailed. Comfortable notions of gradualist reformism dissipated by the mid-1960s amidst a generational revolt that centrally involved wildcat strikes by young workers challenging the very legal sanctity of the collective agreements their union officials now policed in close cooperation with management in the workplace. Palmer thus came to the conclusion that if his book had “a message,” it was that the contemporary labour movement needed to reach into its past,

to cultivate an appreciation of those rare moments when workers sustained a movement that thrived because it was able to forge an assertion of opposition that united political and cultural struggles with the demands of the workplace. For there have been times in the history of Canadian workers when labour has united to reassert itself and to reappropriate what capital and the state have been concerned to suppress or destroy: the sense of potential that workers hold in their productive power and the alternative society that could be created around that capacity and authority.<sup>18</sup>

The “Forward March of Labour Halted” perspective that Hobsbawm was articulating in the face of collapse of the postwar capital-labour settlement by the end of the 1970s in fact evinced the denouement of the teleological approach.<sup>19</sup> And it underpinned Hobsbawm’s—and so many others’—political timidity in the founding years of neoliberal capitalist reaction. For his part, Palmer’s own experience of Operation Solidarity’s mass mobilization in British Columbia in 1983—the very year *Working-Class Experience* was published—reinforced his inclinations in the opposite direction. As he put it: “To have lived through those 130 days is to have been a witness to the reality of class struggle, and of how, in certain circumstances, it can restructure the politics of everyday life.”<sup>20</sup> The sorry way that mobilization ended (so indelibly captured in the image of the two wallets “commencing negotiations” in Tom Wayman’s great poem “The Face of Jack Munro”<sup>21</sup>) deeply informed Palmer’s characteristically searing indictment of the “bureaucratic” union leadership in his 1987 book on the Solidarity movement. The emphasis he gave to this sat uneasily with the weight he accorded in his historical writings to autonomous working-class

agency as opposed to the weight traditionally given to parties and unions by most labour historians. “In that sense, this book is an autocritique,” Palmer admitted in the afterword to the book. “Solidarity taught me some hard political lessons . . . Nothing teaches like concrete reality.” Palmer ended the book quoting Lenin on the inadequacies of “temporary non-partisan organization, which at best may supplement a stable and durable militant organization of a party, but can never replace it.”<sup>22</sup>

This begged the awkward but increasingly unavoidable question of whether Leninist forms of party organization were adequate, especially amidst all the changes in capitalist cultures and structures by the end of the twentieth century—not to mention the final implosion of Soviet Communism. But it did not gainsay Palmer’s stronger conclusion with regard to the political and intellectual trajectory of the left at this juncture:

To those who champion the capacity of the “new social movements” to displace the working class as the central agent of social change, Solidarity’s story will be read as yet another example of the failure of class politics and the need for coalition struggles that leave behind any notion of working-class leadership . . . Solidarity was surely a telling proof that on their own, without the material power of the working class, the various “sectors”—themselves often valuable allies of the labour movement—are ultimately impotent when confronted with the force and resources of the capitalist order.<sup>23</sup>

Despite his commitment to reviving a Leninist mode of political organization—or perhaps because of this—Palmer was well aware that the defeats suffered by working-class militancy in the 1980s made revived mobilization very difficult. What made it even more difficult now was what his essay in the 1990 volume of the *Socialist Register*, titled “The Retreat of the Intellectuals,” addressed by way of “the eclipse of materialism” in the writing of social history in the 1980s. The essay opened with the admission: “This is not a good time to be a historical materialist. It is not even a good time to be a historian.” But the essay ended:

To be a historian, to be a historical materialist, is necessarily to register certain refusals in the face of those many and influential forces that have gathered in the darkness of the 1980s, clamouring for new lights of interpretive insight and political practice that illuminate, in the end, nothing so much as their own accommodations to the pressures of

the moment. To stake out this elementary ground of opposition is, of course, to court dismissals and nasty excommunications. But it is time for historians, for historical materialists, to begin fighting back.<sup>24</sup>

This would indeed characterize Palmer's intellectual and political stances over the following three decades, beginning with the second and much revised edition of *Working-Class Experience*, with a subtitle highlighting the "rethinking" required since labour history's first heady days in the 1970s. As Palmer would put it in a later reflection, "a kind of 'popular front' of all seemingly Marxist scholars" had consolidated in that decade in the face of "the uphill battle to secure for Marxist ideas some measure of acceptance in the academy" in Canada. But this having been achieved by the mid-1980s, the differences among the New Left labour historians that were previously "suppressed and silenced" re-emerged in new forms amidst the overall decline of confidence in the prospects of further developing historical materialism as a fundamental tool of analysis.<sup>25</sup> The conflicts between the New Left labour historians and the old guard now extended to controversies among themselves and this included varying degrees of challenges to Palmer's work.

Much of this was to be expected in a newly developing field of study—differences in emphasis and interpretations of specific events, calls for refinement or clarification, identification of holes to fill and contradictions not fully explored. Some argued that Palmer was too focused on the late nineteenth century, over-emphasizing the importance of the Knights of Labor and romanticizing its achievements; others contended that Palmer's preoccupation with working-class "culture" was too vague to carry the load he had assigned it. Palmer conceded in his new preface that those criticisms, along with social developments since the first edition, justified some changes.<sup>26</sup> As well, he accepted some blame for the polarization caused by the "rhetorical excesses" he was "prone to and [would] likely continue to be burdened by."<sup>27</sup>

Although it was grossly unfair to claim that the first edition of *Working-Class Experience* ignored working-class women, Palmer did place much greater emphasis on their role in the new edition. Similarly, Palmer acknowledged that the rise of identity politics reflected gaps in left thinking that could no longer be ignored. And although he admitted that "culture" as applied to the making of a working class did have an inherent vagueness,

he was adamant about retaining it in the absence of another vocabulary to replace his conviction that class could not be grasped in only economic terms. But in the main, Palmer stuck to his guns on the centrality of class as he broadly conceived it. In contrast with the “presentism” that Palmer saw as characteristic of those of his critics who were impatient with his lengthy excavation of the nineteenth century—because reaching that far into the past is of minimal benefit by way of contributing to what is to be done a century later—Palmer insisted on the virtues of an intensive longer look back as having more than direct instrumental value.

Indeed, Palmer’s historical excavations have shaped our understanding of the complexities of working-class politics, challenged narratives of inevitable progressive reform of the ills of capitalism, and fostered an invaluable understanding that even those reforms that are won always contain within them the deep contradictions of social class in capitalism. Palmer’s emphasis on class as a process was indeed especially valuable for fostering understanding of how working-class achievements in terms of institutional and material success contained deep contradictions stemming from how they were bound up with class accommodations within capitalism, and the ways this impacted on the further development of working-class culture. Understanding the *longue durée* in the making and unmaking or remaking of working people into a class, sensitive to the complexities and possibilities of class formation and social change, not only carries lessons for the present but, more importantly, shapes how we approach the working class and its open possibilities in the future.

Yet, as Palmer continued to reflect on the retreat from Marxist class analysis in general and in social history in particular, he would eventually offer a very significant *mea culpa*. In his 1981 book on E. P. Thompson, which preceded his own ambitious reframing of Canadian labour history, Palmer had insisted that “the persistent calls for rigor are often the first innocent signs of rigor mortis.”<sup>28</sup> Looking back twenty-five years later, however, he admitted that the practitioners of social history had been “insufficiently rigorous in premising and elaborating their findings on the theory of historical materialism.”<sup>29</sup> Those who had spawned that “youthful decade of decisive productivity in the 1970s and early 1980s developing Marxism in Canada” had through the course of the 1990s increasingly “placed the necessity of elaborating a sophisticated conceptualisation of historical materialism on the lower shelf of priorities.”<sup>30</sup> And it might be

added that this was, in fact, as true of the new Canadian political economy as it was of the new labour history.

To be fair, Palmer actually had addressed the central theoretical issue more than most. In particular, Althusserian structuralism, he had long argued, contributed little toward exploring “dimensions of the human experience, not as some predetermined outcome but as agency operative within certain clearly understood limits.”<sup>31</sup> His chosen theoretical frame, as he had already expressed it in that early book on Thompson in 1981, was a sober and nuanced historical materialism that allowed for “an understanding of past and present as part of a continuous and unfinished effort to resist, challenge, and change the limits within which men and women find themselves.”<sup>32</sup> It is only when history is seen in terms of the shifting of limitations that “agency becomes the process of possibility: the human resources and institutions, cultures and traditions, ideology and practice, that can be drawn upon to resist, challenge, adapt to, or withdraw from the structures and determinations that establish the limits within which agency can operate.”<sup>33</sup> This was clearly not a rejection of theory per se, but only of the kind of theory that allowed little room for human intervention, and which was especially informed by experiences and calculations involved in challenging the (mutable) structures that fostered the development of working-class agency.

This is especially relevant for appreciating how Palmer has continued to navigate the “responsibility” and “burden” of a historian of the left. Though his work has continued to be passionately political, never straying from his unequivocal commitment to radical social transformation, Palmer has refused to compromise research and analysis so as to conform to that cause, as only the best historical work can contribute to revolutionary change. This precept has in fact clearly guided the whole of Palmer’s prodigious output over the past three decades as much as it did in the 1970s and 1980s. His meticulous recovery of the Minneapolis Teamsters strikes of 1934, as much as he was clearly concerned with lessons about agency for the current conjuncture, was exceptionally rich in terms of its attention to what was distinctive about US social formation at the time.<sup>34</sup> And in his book on the 1960s in Canada, the changing culture of young workers is set in the context of a deep analysis of the broader economic, political, and social changes.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, his more recent book with Gaétan Héroux examines the long history of working-class poverty in Toronto as part and parcel

of the permanently uneven restructuring of work and the urban labour market under capitalism.<sup>36</sup> And in this light, Palmer has encouraged us to see how the dispossession of the worker that lies at the heart of capitalism has come in our time to frame the insecurity of auto workers in southern Ontario today.<sup>37</sup>

Palmer's historical materialism has opened many windows to seeing how capitalist realities have pushed workers toward resistance of some kind, whether emanating from "a consciousness nurtured in the mundane context of workplace control,"<sup>38</sup> or from the solidarities working-class families form in the course of turning the piece of urban space they occupy into "a locale of resettlement and revival that [has] struggled against the odds."<sup>39</sup> Of course, sustaining this resistance has also been constrained by the very nature of working-class life. The pressures to attain the means of subsistence to reproduce themselves and their families leave workers focused on meeting short-term needs at the expense of longer-term capacity building and struggles. The dependence on capital is an everyday lesson about the limited autonomy of workers, whose fragmentation along lines of sector, occupation, and labour process limits class solidarity. Union representation of workers in a specific firm, occupation, or industry often takes the form of a transactional relationship with members in which dues are regarded by both as a premium on an insurance policy. This is sustained by worker passivity and even deference to union leaders as well as to the union staff's expertise in collective bargaining and grievance procedures. The problem of union bureaucratization, so much the object of Palmer's sharp pen, thus extends beyond the interests of the leaders to the inclinations of the members themselves.

This is where socialist political leadership comes in. A socialist political organization and cadre can bring strategic insights and retrieve lost memories from earlier struggles. It facilitates connections across the sectionalism of unions and community, and it raises the consciousness of being part of a broader collectivity. It injects a vision and nurtures class confidence in the potential of collective class power—the power of being part of an explicitly transformative project. The dialectic that links Palmer's simultaneous emphasis on worker agency and the need for a revolutionary party lies in the fact that without an organized socialist presence, workers are left with *only* moments of resistance. The inspiration that Palmer invites us to draw from his sweeping biographical account of American Trotskyist



leader James Cannon has everything to do with “his origins as a militant dedicated to advancing the possibility of working-class revolution. Central to this purpose was building a proletarian party that could implement a politics of class struggle.”<sup>40</sup>

This sheds light on how far even in Palmer’s case, “the rich range of his historical practice” has brought the limitations of his own “political engagement into sharp relief.”<sup>41</sup> Like other intellectuals of his generation inspired by the workers’ revolt of the 1960s, Palmer was attracted by the criticisms levied by Trotskyist political groups of the bureaucratization of Communist parties and trade unions and the Popular Frontism and class collaboration that suppressed rather than encouraged worker militancy. But the infamous factionalism of these groups, mired in their inability to get beyond the specific strategic disputations and even the specific discourse that had emerged within the Communist parties in the first decades after the Russian revolution, always limited their influence on workers engaged in concrete struggles. As Palmer himself says of the contingent of Minneapolis ex-Communists who went on as Trotskyists to play such a crucial role in leading the strike movement in that city in 1934, they had “no fundamental grasp of what was at stake in the animosity to Trotsky and his critique of the Communist International.”<sup>42</sup> This may have been a blessing. The obsessive debates that came with Trotskyists attempting to acquire such “a fundamental grasp” unfortunately defined and structured their political divisions right through the postwar era, and again after the 1960s. This ensured that Trotskyist groups would not get beyond their small memberships, and consistently frustrated their ambitions to become mass political parties.

Palmer’s prodigious research into these debates has been guided by his own understanding of what he often calls the “fundamental Trotskyist principles,” so as to show how much these were transgressed by most of the leaders of the Trotskyist groups as well as the foremost Trotskyist intellectuals. Palmer’s highlighting of this was accompanied by the lamentation that, had this not been the case, “the history of Trotskyism and possibly the history of radicalism in the 1960s and beyond might well have looked very different.”<sup>43</sup> What remained insufficiently addressed, as suggested earlier, was the inadequacy of the Leninist party model and Bolshevik discourse as understood and practiced by Trotskyist groups through to the end of the twentieth century.

This raises a more fundamental challenge beyond the obstacles Palmer identifies with “union bureaucracy.” Rank-and-file rebellions against elected union leaderships have been rare in the neoliberal era, even during concession bargaining, and when they have erupted, they too have often been easily contained. Their passivity in relationship to the leadership, even in the most democratic of unions, raises difficult questions about workplace struggles, working-class culture, and the political and organizational barriers socialists confront in trying to change this. Palmer’s animus against the union bureaucracy for stifling the revolutionary potential of the Solidarity movement in British Columbia and the Days of Action in Ontario actually sits uneasily with his recognition of the need for organized socialist cadres to develop the working-class agencies capable of overturning the capitalist class and its state. It is all too easy to recognize the inability of unions and traditional political parties like the NDP to change their ways. But the socialist left, too, has so pointedly failed to fill the vacuum—the small groups claiming a Leninist heritage are barely a presence. The flurry of coalitions and networks that have formed since the 1980s were all short-lived and are now even difficult to construct, and the non-aligned left outside of social democracy has not come close to a mass political organization of any kind.

The long string of working-class defeats that now, astonishingly, stretch over four decades has had a direct impact on the disorganization of the left itself. Palmer’s repeated expression of the need for a Leninist organizational practice in Canada fails to offer the necessary guidance for routes out of the impasse. Yet, none of this detracts from Palmer’s singular contribution and his relevance to the renewal of socialist politics. At the core of this has been the commitment to developing historical materialism and the high-quality research and sophisticated writing that has underpinned his recovery of working-class history in all its richness and flaws. In this respect, Palmer’s concern as a historian to recover and analyze the cultures of resistance that working people developed in the course of practicing class struggle from below is not only a remarkable achievement of scholarship but also retains great contemporary relevance.

Indeed, the close attention Palmer has paid to the kinds of struggles working people engaged in that were transgressive of the existing social order has also led him to appreciate the postmodernist identification with the transgressions of socially marginal “others” who are feared, shunned,

and repressed by the forces of order and conventionality. But, at the same time, he has been acutely aware of postmodernism's simultaneous inability to get beyond the mere defence of the right of marginalized subjectivity to be "recognized" in all of its particularities and even its parochial self-identity. Palmer has wanted, in other words, to save the politics of transgression from the postmodernists, whose bogeyman of the "grand narrative" also blocked them from understanding "the determining and foundational feature of human experience in the modern world," that is, "the rise and transformation of global capitalism."<sup>44</sup> This has left us, Palmer insists, with "the disembodied pieces of a puzzle" without the "borders and linked segments which would make the whole intelligible."

Yet this puzzle, in its rich totality, is the metanarrative that can, in part, counter capitalism's current grand story of accomplishment, the obscured mirror image of which is of course enslavement, the forcible extraction of surplus value, and the endless proliferation of special oppressions associated with gender, race and sexual identification. To make the coerced marginalities of history a viable force of transformative alternative, the need is to bring them together. Differences need to be championed, not through a reification of difference, but in the building of programs and perspectives that fly in every way against the impulses and structures of our current varied but connected subordinations.<sup>45</sup>

No one has said this better. Bravo.

## Acknowledgements

We are especially grateful to Greg Albo for his suggestions, comments, and editorial input.

## NOTES

1. Bryan D. Palmer, "Hobsbawm's Politics: The Forward March of the Popular Front Halted," in *Interventions and Appreciations*, vol. 2, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 261–62.
2. *Ibid.*, 262–63.
3. *Ibid.*, 263.

4. Bryan D. Palmer, "Writing About Canadian Workers: A Historiographic Overview," in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 2, 94.
5. Bryan D. Palmer, "Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History: A Dialectical View," in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 2, 59, n. 44.
6. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979).
7. See the special issue of *Studies in Political Economy* ("Rethinking Canadian Political Economy") 6 (Autumn 1981), and especially the discussion of Palmer and Kealey in Leo Panitch, "Dependency and Class in Canadian Political Economy," 17–18. See also the appreciation of Palmer's work in Leo Panitch, "Elites, Classes and Power in Canada," in *Canadian Politics in the 1980s*, ed. Michael S. Whittington and Glen Williams (Toronto: Methuen, 1981), 177–78.
8. This was already signalled by Palmer's *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, History* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981), which marked his entry into the key theoretical debates on the left internationally, although it was unlikely uppermost in the minds of those who selected his and Gregory S. Kealey's monumental study of the Knights of Labor in Ontario (published by Cambridge in 1982) for the A. B. Corey Prize, jointly awarded by the Canadian Historical Association and the American Historical Association. (*A Culture in Conflict* had already secured Honourable Mention from the Canadian Historical Association's Sir John A. Macdonald Prize in Canadian History.)
9. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983).
10. Craig Heron, "Towards Synthesis in Canadian Working-Class History: Reflections on Bryan Palmer's Rethinking," *Left History* 1, no. 1 (1993): 109–21.
11. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1983), 2.
12. Bryan Palmer, preface, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 31.
13. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1983), 131–32.
14. *Ibid.*, 180–84.
15. *Ibid.*, 192–93.
16. *Ibid.*, 189.
17. *Ibid.*, 212.
18. *Ibid.*, 297.

19. Eric Hobsbawm, "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" *Marxism Today* (September 1978): 279–86.
20. Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987), 9.
21. Tom Wayman, *The Face of Jack Munro* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1986).
22. Palmer, *Solidarity*, 105.
23. *Ibid.*, 103.
24. Bryan D. Palmer, "The Eclipse of Materialism: Marxism and the Writing of Social History in the 1980s," *Socialist Register 1990: The Retreat of the Intellectuals* 26 (1990): 110, 138.
25. Bryan D. Palmer, "Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History: A Dialectical View," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17, no. 2 (2006): 49.
26. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 11–28.
27. *Ibid.*, 14.
28. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson*, 71.
29. Palmer, "Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History," in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 2, 63; emphasis original.
30. *Ibid.*, 62–63.
31. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson*, 15.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).
35. Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
36. Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).
37. See Bryan D. Palmer, "Reconsiderations of Class: Precariousness as Proletarianization," *Socialist Register 2014: Registering Class* 50 (2014): 40–62.
38. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 244.
39. Bryan D. Palmer, "Sugar Man's Sweet Kiss: The Artist Formerly, and Now Again, Known as Rodriguez," in *Interventions and Appreciations*, vol. 2, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 156.
40. Bryan D. Palmer, "James Patrick Cannon: Revolutionary Continuity and Class-Struggle Politics in the United States, 1890–1974," in *Interventions and Appreciations*, vol. 2, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 273. See also Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins*

*of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

41. Palmer, “Hobsbawm’s Politics,” 262–63.
42. Palmer, “James Patrick Cannon,” 286.
43. Bryan D. Palmer, “The Personal, the Political, and Permanent Revolution: Ernest Mandel and the Conflicted Legacies of Trotskyism,” in *Interventions and Appreciations*, vol. 2, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 237.
44. Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 456; emphasis original.
45. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness*, 4.

## The Hippopotamus and the Giraffe

### Bolshevism, Stalinism, and American and British Communism in the 1920s



*John McIlroy and Alan Campbell*

Bryan Palmer's interest in Communism in North America stretches back to the 1970s. Through his links with European labour historians, enthusiasm for the work of Edward Thompson, and friendship with the great English historian, he kept abreast of the historiography of the left in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Embarking on research into American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon in the mid-1990s, Palmer read widely in the historiography of Communism in the United States and Europe, which had developed from the 1950s and gathered momentum after Western scholars gained access to Soviet archives in the 1990s. Disputation resulted over the degree to which new documentation confirmed or challenged contested interpretations of the role of national Communisms and their relationship to the Third International (Comintern) and the Soviet state. Palmer registered a noteworthy contribution to both these wide-ranging debates and the substantive historiography. Penetrating essays explored contentious issues in American Communism, while the first volume of the *Cannon* triptych qualitatively extended our knowledge and understanding of its first ten years. Palmer also contributed, insightfully and trenchantly, to related discussions in Britain, and recently offered comment on Canadian Communism, where difference and debate has been decidedly less robust than elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most important aspect of Palmer's engagement was a powerful reassertion of the significance of Stalinism in moulding Communist

history during the 1920s. Most students of national Communisms conflated Bolshevism and Stalinism or employed Stalinism as an epithet denoting a historical period or dictatorial misdeeds—or passed over it as a distinctive political phenomenon. In like fashion, Stalinization was used as a depoliticized synonym for subordination and Soviet domination. Taking issue with orthodoxy, Palmer argued that the absence of Stalinism as an explanatory concept debilitated the historiography and impoverished comprehension of what happened to the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and Communism in the United States and Canada. He emphasized its distance from Bolshevism and its role in the degeneration of the Russian revolution, a defeat “conditioned and nurtured in specific material conditions predating Stalinism proper, but structuring its later development.”<sup>3</sup> Palmer’s treatment of the roots and trajectory of Stalinism, particularly in his study of Cannon and the origins of the American revolutionary left, was nevertheless relatively terse, and the body of this chapter expands on it.<sup>4</sup> Our essay discusses how Stalinism emerged, conquered the Soviet Union and the Comintern, and influenced the politics of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and its American counterpart, the Workers’ Party (WP).<sup>5</sup>

## Contending Historiographies

Sixty years after the publication of his twin monographs chronicling the first decade of US Communism, Theodore Draper looms large in its historiography. *The Roots of American Communism* (1957) and *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (1960) concentrated on the WP leadership and the interplay between Russian and American politics mediated through the Comintern. Draper’s conclusion—straightforward but meticulously documented—was that this interaction entailed American subordination to Moscow. The hegemony of the Comintern, and hence the Russian state, was sown in the initial encounters of 1919, effective by 1921, and formalized in 1929. Every change of line emanated from Moscow and was accepted and applied in New York. Internalizing the policy of the Comintern and an anti-capitalist state ensured American Communists were disabled in grappling with the politics of a modern capitalist democracy.<sup>6</sup> The fundamentals of Draper’s approach were elaborated beyond the 1920s by Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes. They described Comintern



management—albeit expressed lightly in the 1920s—of a political satellite. Like Draper, they did not explore the relationship of Bolshevism to Stalinism but assumed substantial identity between the two and exhibited a preference for liberal democracy over “official Communism.” Their work in the Soviet archives filled out the detail of the domination the Russians exercised over the American party, the extent of Soviet finance, and later involvement in espionage conducted in the interests of the rulers of Russia. The result was a depiction of the WP and its successor, the Communist Party of America, as subservient, its subordination to Moscow pervasive but voluntary.<sup>7</sup>

In studying bureaucratic centralist parties, it is reasonable to start with leaders and policy and tentatively assume most members ultimately toed the line. The approach of Draper, Klehr, and Haynes, subsequently designated “traditionalist,” rarely went further. Yet it is difficult to understand the role of leaders unless we look at the led, at second-level cadres and the grassroots, and their interaction. This insight would animate much of what would be designated “revisionist” scholarship, often consciously posed against Draper and his followers. From the 1980s, scholars influenced by “the new labour history,” the politics of the New Left, and a desire to recuperate a useable socialist past, researched the 1930s and 1940s and recollected preoccupations of second-level leaders and rank-and-file activists. Episodic local studies explored the role of Communists in building trade unionism, contesting exploitation, combatting racist and sexist oppression, and radicalizing the cultural field.<sup>8</sup> “Revisionist” writers were sympathetic, even at times asserting that hostility disqualified understanding. Many admired Popular Front and wartime Communism—although it constituted a relatively small proportion of party history—and reconstructed these periods as Communists had presented them, as embodying an indigenously generated radicalism. Stalinism and Comintern control were frequently displaced and marginalized—rather than evidentially dismantled. “History from below” and narratives sanitizing Soviet-inspired politics cast Communists as standard-bearers of an authentic American anti-capitalism. The new history, one revisionist scholar claimed, “depicted the Party as at certain times and places, flexible, imaginative, principled, rooted in neighbourhoods and workplaces and enjoying genuine popular support.”<sup>9</sup> In the face of findings from the Moscow archives buttressing the

traditional case, some reacted constructively; others attempted to explain away inconvenient discoveries.<sup>10</sup>

Early British literature was influenced by the US historiography: the pioneering scholar, Henry Pelling, was almost more Draperesque than Draper. CPGB adhesion to the Comintern, its acceptance of international discipline, and its break with earlier socialist politics determined its development. Long-term subordination to the Soviet state was accomplished via “Bolshevization” (1921–24) and “Stalinization” (1924–29).<sup>11</sup> A more detailed study of the 1920s by Leslie Macfarlane similarly located CPGB history in a political-institutional and Russian paradigm. Policy flowed from Moscow and, by 1929, the requirements of “socialism in one country”; Comintern hegemony was “in the main accepted by the British party without question.”<sup>12</sup> For Walter Kendall, CPGB failure stemmed from the party’s desertion of a fecund pre-1917 socialism: the establishment of a Communist Party in the United Kingdom was a mistake.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, the best writing from a revolutionary perspective endorsed the establishment of a Moscow-affiliated party, explaining its lack of impact in the 1920s as a consequence of unrealistic ambition in an attritional environment.<sup>14</sup>

Following their American forerunners, later historians were frequently sympathetic to British Communists, marginalized Stalinism, and embellished Popular Front politics in pursuit of British autonomy. They were sometimes influenced by “history from below” and testimony from survivors anxious to ensure their and their party’s legacy. As in the US, there was approbation of “local initiatives” and “autonomized” rank-and-file campaigns. On the basis of selective activity in unions, community, and cultural arenas, and without weighing in the calculus the politics of Stalinism, the CPGB of the Popular Front years was adjudged superior to its political competitors.<sup>15</sup> Studies of activity in trade unions in the 1930s, advertised as extending US revisionism, were disdainful of the revolutionary politics the party was created to pursue and passed over Stalinism with perfunctory examination. Such work portrayed CPGB leaders as initiators rather than executors of moves toward reformism, and as exhorting activists to embrace economism and disregard centralism. Eurocommunism was furnished with a historical pedigree and reformism depicted as the desirable destination of British Bolshevism.<sup>16</sup>

Even scholars who criticized “history from below” and took a political-institutional approach, like Andrew Thorpe, infused their writing

with similar sensibilities. Thorpe emphasized the “active agency” of CPGB leaders, presenting figures such as Harry Pollitt and J. R. Campbell as independent-minded pragmatists, uncomfortable with, and frequently resistant to, Comintern policy. Thorpe went so far as to claim that Pollitt was “clearly able, for most of the time that he was secretary of the party, to run his own show.”<sup>17</sup> The weight of interpretive commentary amplified his conclusion that “the influence of Moscow has been on the whole exaggerated . . . the party was to a large extent the master of its own fate. [The Comintern] did not hinder it too much, most of the time, in providing its own solutions to the problems it faced.”<sup>18</sup> But the documentary evidence adduced for such novel propositions failed to justify them. Thorpe decen-tered CPGB leaders’ existential commitment to the Comintern, diminished their theoretical and practical dependence on it, and elided the distinction between making policy and administering it. Social histories of British Communism likewise yielded new information, but tended to downplay politics and bureaucratic centralism, their conclusions often flawed by methodological inadequacies. Presenting an array of findings, an avowedly prosopographical survey concluded: “No attempt was made to identify a representative sample . . . the information in many cases is fragmentary, sometimes relating to a single aspect of an individual’s life . . . Simple statements that we have identified groups of cases sharing particular characteristics have no quantitative significance.”<sup>19</sup>

Our own work has argued differently: politics must remain pervasive and pivotal, structuring multi-dimensional analysis of a political party that was part of a global political movement. Social histories should acknowledge the importance of relating prosopographical and personal material to the political *raison d’être* of the movement, rather than segregate the two; articulate “history from below” with “history from above”; measure memories against the documentary record; and delineate the character of fissures between leadership and led on a spectrum running from organized opposition to individual apathy. Our studies demonstrated that the evidence from the archives confirmed the controlling role of the Comintern, the lack of significant political deviation from the Moscow line in the CPGB before 1956, and the absence of meaningful political autonomy at the grassroots. Soviet funding, espionage, and infiltration of other parties, we insisted, constituted relevant aspects of Communism as a movement and merited recuperation and analytic engagement. Nonetheless, the

traditionalists' neglect of social history requires redress, as does conflation of "official Communism" with revolutionary socialism and "the straight line" continuity thesis that pervades many studies and fails to distinguish Bolshevism from Stalinism. Stalinism developed from Bolshevism, we argued, but it evolved into a distinct political species. The two were as different as swans and geese. And Stalinism was as different from socialism as the hippopotamus from the giraffe.<sup>20</sup>

Our quarrel with revisionist approaches centred on the silences and evidential inadequacies with which they evaded such distinctions and their impact and subverted established understandings. Analysis of transactions between the Comintern and the CPGB disclosed no instance where political strategy or important tactics were initiated by the CPGB, and no instance where the CPGB successfully opposed Comintern initiatives of any strategic or tactical significance. Opposition or sustained resistance is constructed by elevating differences aired in discussions preliminary to setting the line and inflating secondary, tertiary, and, it has to be said, trivial issues. Developments attributed to the agency of CPGB leaders—economism, the failures of centralism—are better explained by objective constraint, the fallibilities of democratic centralism, and caution and weakness when faced with hostility.<sup>21</sup> Popular Front politics were Stalinist politics in which anti-fascism and revolution were secondary to the security of Stalin's dictatorship. Far from representing a carnival of autonomy, Anglicization, and ecumenism, they were licensed and monitored from Moscow. The decisive influence of Soviet imperatives survived the discarding of anti-fascism when it no longer met Stalinism's requirements; the pro-Hitler line of 1939–40; the exclusion of the British party from the Cominform; and the invasion of Hungary.<sup>22</sup> The conclusion is undeniable: CPGB leaders followed Comintern initiatives rather than resisting them, while impressionistic stabs at social history rarely negotiated the rapids of political contextualization and methodological rigour.<sup>23</sup> The WP and CPGB were not unique and other literatures were marked by similar developments and debates.<sup>24</sup>

Palmer's contribution to this conflicted historiography re-balanced the narrative of American Communism and restored, albeit in a different way, Draper's emphasis on the significance of the 1920s. He provided an overdue corrective to histories that implied the story really began in 1935, and in extreme cases offered Stalinists, suitably sanitized, as role models for

contemporary left-wing practice.<sup>25</sup> Recuperating a forgotten left, Palmer rehabilitated lost leaders: Cannon received a justice last extended to him in Draper's foundational texts almost fifty years earlier. Innovative employment of an eye-opening swathe of sources and deft analytical fusion of protagonists and context, agency, and circumstance rendered *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* an achievement as biography and history. It stands as a rebuke to those who dismiss history written from the revolutionary viewpoint of its subjects. Centrally, and in contrast with both traditionalists and revisionist historians, Palmer's book and the related essays presented Stalinism as a far from inevitable phenomenon, central to the history of national Communisms, "a lever" used to "pry open a conceptualization of revolutionary degeneration."<sup>26</sup> In contrast with revisionist historians, Palmer portrayed developments in Russia as moulding events in the United States. Before the ascendancy of Stalinism, he argued, the alignment of Bolshevism and native socialism promised a vibrant American Communism. The early Comintern acted with flexibility and respect for affiliates to purvey an essentially healthy politics. From 1926, and decisively from 1928, "the age of innocence" of American Communism ended with the encroachment and conquest of Stalinism.

What was unusual was the power with which a case, about which some historians will have reservations, was constructed, the quality of the evidence assembled to support it, and its location in a critique of the literature. Recognizing the centrality of Soviet domination and acknowledging Draper's outstanding scholarship and partial recognition of the early give-and-take between Bolsheviks and US Communists, Palmer distanced himself from a determinism he perceived as afflicting Draper's account after 1923. Draper, he argued, downplayed both the continuation of dialogue and contention in the relationship and the transformative impact of Stalinism—a criticism Palmer applied more vigorously to Klehr and Haynes. Deprecating the latter's neglect of the party's interventions in industry and society, Palmer took the New Left historians to task from a position of socialist commitment. He analyzed their disregard of the 1920s and absorption with the Popular Front, as well as depoliticized local narratives and the sidestepping of Stalinism, perceptively critiquing Denning's *Cultural Front* and Schrecker's reconstruction of McCarthyism.<sup>27</sup> He brought history and politics—scholarship and reconstruction of the past

to serve construction of the future—into alignment. Historiographical progress and debate, he argued, are indispensable, “especially if the *history* of Communism is ever to play a role in the revived political mobilization of the revolutionary left.”<sup>28</sup>

As noted earlier, the format of Palmer’s work, historiographical essays, and biography constrained extended examination of the evolution and nature of Bolshevization and Stalinization, their differences and similarities, and their impact—questions that deserve more considered attention than they have recently received in books and articles examining Communism in America.<sup>29</sup> Similar judgment might be passed on literature assessing these questions in relation to the CPGB.<sup>30</sup> If such issues are to be meaningfully addressed, however, historiographical debate must be permitted to develop. Palmer noted: “All of us on the anti-Stalinist left can recount tales of book manuscripts reviewed, grant applications assessed and teaching posts interviewed for where *our* political engagements became the object of caricature and unfairness.”<sup>31</sup> Other protagonists in the contested historiography of Communism claimed: “the gatekeepers of the historical profession have effectively silenced this debate in the *Journal of American History* and the *American Historical Review*.”<sup>32</sup> The role of Palmer, Dan Leab, and Haynes in facilitating properly conducted discussion in journals such as *Labour/Le Travail* and *American Communist History* has not always been replicated, certainly not in Britain. In one case, a paper Palmer submitted to a journal debate remained unpublished without reasonable explanation.<sup>33</sup> In another case, difficulties with *Twentieth Century History*, an Oxford University Press journal, culminated in its editors informing us that they had rejected our submission on the basis of referees’ reports, which, in violation of the fundamentals of transparency and peer review, they refused to let us see.<sup>34</sup> Historiography develops, *inter alia*, through disputation between historians. That process suffers if debate is illegitimately stifled, something Palmer has long opposed.

### **Bolshevism – Bolshevization – Stalinism – Stalinization – and the Comintern**

Communist leaders such as Jay Lovestone acknowledged at the end of the 1920s that “unquestioned and unquestionable loyalty to the Communist International” was mandatory for WP members.<sup>35</sup> Rajani Palme Dutt

remarked of the CPGB in 1923 that ordinary members would “agree to any Thesis that comes from the International without being able to judge” even if it contradicted another directive. Dutt conceded this was a “brutal” verdict but regarded it as the political reality of the time.<sup>36</sup> The paramount influence on the Comintern was the Soviet party and the situation in Russia. Conditioning developments was the contradictory nature of 1917: it was a workers’ revolution restricted to particular regions of a peasant empire whose autocracy, limited industrialization, and tiny working class rendered it ripe for a bourgeois revolution. This circumscribed socialist progress and advance was further limited by capitalist encirclement, civil war, depletion of proletariat and party, the social weight of the peasantry, and, crucially, from a Bolshevik perspective, the failure of revolution in Europe and the consolidation of world capitalism, however crisis ridden. The evolution of the Comintern has to be situated in the domestic and foreign policy of the Soviet Union, located in the responses of the party/state to these challenges as Bolshevik ideology—based on adapting Kautskyian social democracy to pre-1917 Russian realities—collided with post-revolutionary Russian realities and the absence of viable prototypes for constructing socialism in intransigent circumstances. From the interventionism, nationalization, and coercion of War Communism, through the New Economic Policy (NEP), moderation of intervention in agriculture and industry, and moves to a mixed economy, to Stalinism, Comintern policy was inextricably linked to developments within the Russian party.

Landmarks included the initial primacy of Lenin; the appointment of Stalin as general secretary; the prohibition of factions; the emergence of diplomacy and foreign policy interacting with Comintern policy, marked by agreement on cooperation with the Weimar republic at Rapallo (1922); Lenin’s disabling illness; the ascendancy of the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin; the subsequent partnership of Stalin and Bukharin; and finally, the climactic “revolution from above” which, we shall argue, marked the passage from Bolshevism to Stalinism. These events were accompanied by changes in the composition and cadre of the party, social mobility, and the growth of party/state bureaucracy and professional and managerial elites.<sup>37</sup>

Classifying events into discrete periods, allocating political ideas and practice to different categories, and weighing continuities against disjunctures can be a problematic process. That applies to the following

periodization and the argument developed in this section for distinguishing Bolshevism from Stalinism. The Comintern's first period, 1919–22, reflected a decline of belief in the short-term possibility of revolution in the West, War Communism, and the active, if limited, engagement of Lenin. Russian hegemony, flowing from the fact that the Bolsheviks alone had made a revolution, maintained state power, and thus constituted a model for emulation, was underpinned by the other sections' political and economic dependence on the unique Russian affiliate and their difficulties in advancing revolution at home. National parties, often with tiny resources, suffered from a power imbalance in interacting with a party/state whose dealings with other states could be compromised by encouragement of revolution. This first phase witnessed acceptance of the universality of the Bolshevik experience and the as yet incompletely realized necessity for national parties to adopt contemporary Bolshevik politics, organizational norms, and disdain for left reformism, Left Communism, and syndicalism. As "the general staff of world revolution," the Comintern was modelled on post-1917 Bolshevik organization. The "21 Conditions" for affiliation demanded that constituent parties be built "in the most centralized way possible . . . governed by iron discipline." They gave a decisive role between congresses to the executive (ECCI), on which Russian representatives outnumbered all others. Acquiescence was preceded by debate drawing on the experience of national parties; outcomes invariably met Soviet objectives.<sup>38</sup>

If the constitutional tendency was centralist and power was crystallizing in the executive and in a developing bureaucracy, the ethos in an inexperienced Comintern was democratic. Decisions were made at the ECCI level. But they were open to critical debate at the frequently disputatious first four congresses.<sup>39</sup> Factions, defined by Lenin in 1921 as "the formation of groups with separate platforms striving to a certain degree to segregate and create their own group discipline," were tolerated.<sup>40</sup> Bolshevization, in the sense of more specific insistence on remoulding the national parties in the current Russian image, climbed the agenda. However, congress delegates—and Lenin—countenanced against too pervasive an emphasis on the Russification of the world movement.<sup>41</sup> Lenin had other concerns and diminished physical resources; Russian developments and lesser minds moulded Comintern initiatives. September 1922 saw Zinoviev instructing the French party to execute an "immediate and complete dissolution of all factions."<sup>42</sup>



The Comintern's second phase ran from 1923 to 1927, with important changes within that period. Its beginning saw "Bolshevization" take central stage. The idea was frequently expressed in rhetoric and broad formulae susceptible to interpretation: national parties must become centralized, eliminate factionalism, get close to the masses, and eschew both sectarianism and opportunism. More concretely, it demanded a rupture with the federalism, local autonomy, and propaganda approaches that had characterized the predecessors of the CPGB and WP and a decisive break with reformist politics. Based on Comintern theses, "Bolshevization" may be broadly defined as the assimilation of affiliates to the prevailing politics, norms, structures, and culture of the Soviet party-state in order to permeate society with Russian politics through organized intervention in all spheres. Comintern sections were required to adopt Russian conceptions of revolution and democratic centralism, with the decisions of higher bodies binding lower organs, subordination of minorities to the majority, prohibition of factions, and election of the leadership by the membership, and with professional revolutionaries directing the party. All members were to be active in workplace and street units, with "fractions" reporting to higher bodies that controlled party work in parliaments, unions, reformist parties, and social and political institutions, with a press written by and for workers. All affiliates were bound by Comintern decisions.<sup>43</sup>

It is necessary to emphasize that the 1924–25 "Bolshevization" did not entail generalization of a timeless Bolshevism propounded by Lenin in 1902 or 1917 that led remorselessly to Stalinism. Bolshevism was far from a monolithic ideology that determined Soviet policy through the 1920s. As David Priestland has shown, it contained a range of ideas that suggested and legitimated a spectrum of strategies. His account unpacks the complex, conflicted, and dynamic ideas, politics, and programs that informed the shifting practice of Bolshevism.<sup>44</sup> Long ago, Marcel Liebman documented how Lenin's conception of revolutionary organization changed between 1902 and 1923. The internal ideological struggle and democracy of 1905 gave way to a more monolithic party, an approach relaxed in 1914 and reversed in 1917 when hierarchy and discipline yielded to open controversy and the clash of factions.<sup>45</sup> This, in the view of Alexander Rabinowitch, explains the "phenomenal Bolshevik success" of 1917, with the party "internally relatively democratic, tolerant and decentralized . . . essentially open [in its] mass character—in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model."<sup>46</sup>

It is instructive to compare the party in 1917 with the governing party and Comintern in 1924.

Before 1921, Lenin's stance on party democracy was flexible and pragmatic. Internal groups and debates should be curtailed if they disrupted organization, compromised unity, and hindered struggle—formulae transparently open to conflicting interpretations. Nonetheless, factional activity remained legitimate after the Bolsheviks took power, and the Democratic Centralism group and the Workers' Opposition remained active and articulate until March 1921. Only at the Tenth Party Congress were factions outlawed, although there are grounds for believing this was considered a temporary expedient.<sup>47</sup> It was a crucial rebuff to democracy, arguably efficiency, and, in retrospect, the continuity of Bolshevism. The political monopoly the Bolsheviks enjoyed was now complemented by restriction of freedom within the party. "The freewheeling debates and groupings of prewar Bolshevism," Lars T. Lih observes, "shifted fairly rapidly to a new emphasis on monolithic unity and strict disciplined centralism."<sup>48</sup> The accent on *democratic* centralism between 1905 and 1907 and through 1917 was replaced by *democratic centralism* as power accumulated above in the context of exercising state power within a hostile world in which internal "factionalism" was perceived as dangerous. By the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in June 1924, "Bolshevization" meant acceptance of the ruling orthodoxy in Russia, the domination of the triumvirate, and, as the Comintern theses and Stalin and Zinoviev's actions made explicit, the struggle against Trotsky and the Left Opposition. *Democratic centralism*, a model of organization functional for running an undemocratic state, but a model distanced from the party that led the October Revolution, was to be exported to the United States and Britain, where revolutionaries were instructed to replicate the practice of a party in power rather than its experience of winning it.<sup>49</sup> Even if one accepted the arguments for universalization, this monolithic, undemocratic "Bolshevization" was dysfunctional.

In relation to inner-party democracy, a distinction may be made between temporary factions as political platforms—established to clarify problems and facilitate decision making and united action—and permanent factions in which politics may become secondary and differences more rigid, impoverishing internal exchange and political clarity. "Bolshevization's" blanket prohibition of both types and suppression of members' right to

publicly dissent restricted the development of ideas—while undermining free exchange with protagonists of other parties and the openness and honesty necessary to secure a united front with reformists. For some, restricted democracy circumscribed motivation and commitment. Moreover, the specific objective of the 1924–25 “Bolshevization,” Soviet-style bureaucratic centralism, cannot be divorced from the triumvirate’s attempts to mobilize the national parties for their crusade against the opposition. Factionalism was banished in the interests of factionalism. It is hard to see “Bolshevization,” in this context and with this purpose, as a “double-edged sword,” as Palmer and Zumoff suggest. *Cui bono?* Like Stalin’s “Leninism,” “Bolshevization” “laid the basis for further degeneration” and the Stalinization of the world movement.<sup>50</sup>

Comintern policy developed against the background of a besieged, increasingly undemocratic Soviet state, society and party; the NEP, recognition of capitalist resilience, and the united front pitch to reformists. By 1927 the attitude to social democracy had hardened. The Comintern became more centralized and Russified. Revised statutes introduced biennial instead of annual congresses; stressed the binding nature of ECCI directives; and granted the executive power to amend or dispense with decisions of congresses of national parties and expel their members. Discussion and timely addressing of policy were sidelined as delays in convening congresses—four years between the Fifth and Sixth World Congresses and seven years between the Sixth and Seventh World Congress in 1935—became commonplace. Zinoviev utilized the right to reconstruct the executive committees of national parties, a prerogative exercised in relation to the French, Finnish, German, and Polish sections. Stalin presided over Comintern removal of Polish leaders who protested the treatment of Trotsky. Zinoviev threatened the deposed revolutionaries: “If you attempt to stand against us we will break your bones.”<sup>51</sup> The defeat of the 1923 German revolution, the demise of Lenin, the appearance in 1924 of the first drafts of “socialism in one country” and “social fascism,” and the struggle between the triumvirate and the Left Opposition with the former triumphant all contributed to the ongoing centralization of the Communist International and its subordination to Zinoviev and Stalin.<sup>52</sup>

Support for the NEP remained axiomatic. Stalinism remained embryonic. Born out of Bolshevism, it would with time subvert it. In terms of ideology, Stalinism represented a shift away from the strategic primacy

of revolution outside Russia. This was not excluded, particularly outside Europe. But the accent was on action in Russia, defending “the gains of October,” not extending them internationally. Constructing socialism at home became central, and the security of the degenerating Russian state became the main consideration infusing Soviet diplomacy *and* Comintern policy, despite the rhetorics of revolution.<sup>53</sup> The canon of authoritative thinkers was reduced, and Trotsky, Bukharin, and Rosa Luxemburg excommunicated. Future change in the ideas and politics of Comintern affiliates was now Stalin’s prerogative, his stature as interpreter of Marx and Engels elevated to an infallibility Lenin never enjoyed in his lifetime. Stalinism, packaged as “Leninism,” would stifle creative thinking. On the policy level, the rupture with Lenin’s approach to social democracy and trade unionism, pivoting on a one-sided assertion of reformism’s bourgeois nature at the expense of its working-class base and a similarly mechanical declaration of the union bureaucracy’s integration into the capitalist state, was inserted into a catastrophic theory of capitalist crisis and proletarian radicalization. On this basis, Stalinism demanded termination of the united front—only unity from below with reformist workers to oppose social democratic leaders was now permissible—and formation of alternative revolutionary unions. On the organizational level, Stalinism built on the Bolsheviks’ 1921 innovations. It beat the drum for “iron discipline,” rooting out factionalism and purging national leaderships to install cadres of “the Stalin generation” and replace or re-educate those identified with the old policies.<sup>54</sup>

Although 1924 has been considered “as marking the end of Bolshevism,” Stalinism and Stalinization were not, at that point, ready to replace it.<sup>55</sup> It might be better characterized as “the beginning of the end,” for until 1928 the process remained conflictual and gradual. In Russia, the Left Opposition and then the United Opposition fought Stalin, but they did so backed up against particular walls of resistance. Zinoviev declared at the 1923 Congress of the Russian party that, “Every criticism of the party line” was “now objectively a Menshevik criticism.”<sup>56</sup> Disputation and argument continued within the Comintern, albeit within the arc of a power imbalance countenancing intimidation and coercion. Surveying the events of 1923–24, culminating in the Fifth Comintern Congress and the demands from German disciples of the “Bolshevizers” for a world party that placed discipline above democracy and adhered rigidly to the Russian road, Isaac

Deutscher asked, "What accounted for the change that had come over the International?" Noting that only months earlier the leaders of the now chastened German, French, and Polish Central Committees had "had enough courage and dignity to rebuke the triumvirate," Deutscher pointed out that they had guided their parties from their inception, enjoying high moral authority among those committed to the anti-capitalist cause. In the face of the orchestration of "a complete upheaval in the entire communist movement," all was now "a spectacle of submission and self-abasement." Nowhere, Deutscher observed, did "the rank-and-file stand up" for the Central Committees of their parties, "shuffled, displaced, or broken up at will" as they were. The ease with which Zinoviev accomplished this drastic change "indicated a deep-seated weakness in the International," declared Deutscher. "Only a diseased body could be thus subdued at a stroke."<sup>57</sup> Guarding against inevitability and mechanical retrospection, "the disease," we would argue, can be traced to the Comintern's DNA, constituted in part by the disparities distinguishing the Russian party, which controlled a state, and other national sections of the International struggling to challenge their rulers with scant success.

Despite Zinoviev's visibility, recent research suggests that by 1924 Stalin was the strongest force in the Russian party, and there is some evidence that he was already controlling Comintern decisions. The leading functionary, Otto Kuusinen, who regarded Zinoviev as a far from impressive figurehead who devoted too little time to Comintern work, reported all serious matters directly to Stalin.<sup>58</sup> The latter's latest biographer posits that even as Zinoviev and Bukharin ran sessions of the Comintern, it was Stalin who was paramount. He quotes a letter of Zinoviev invoking Lenin's critique of Stalin in his *Testament*: "Stalin arrives, glances around and decides. And Bukharin and I are 'dead bodies'—we are not asked anything . . . in practice there is no 'triumvirate,' there is Stalin's dictatorship. Ilich [Lenin] was a thousand times correct."<sup>59</sup>

It seems arguable that we can talk of the "Stalinization" of the Comintern at least from 1926 when Zinoviev was replaced by Bukharin, Stalin's confederate, as ECCI chair. Subsequently, Stalin and Bukharin were empowered by the ECCI to "decide all urgent questions themselves," a license they exercised immediately in reconstituting the leaderships of the German and French sections.<sup>60</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, and acknowledging that outcomes were not inevitable, it seems evident that the process by which

Stalin captured the Comintern was underway earlier, by late 1923. However, considering developments in the three intersecting loci of party/state, Comintern, and affiliates, it is more exact to talk of “incipient Stalinization” between 1923 and 1928. Hermann Weber’s characterization of 1921–22 as “the pre-history of Stalinization” passes muster. But it is premature and too sweeping to label the mid-1920s as years of Stalinization *per se*.<sup>61</sup> It was rather a period during which its preconditions—the Stalin faction’s control of the three arenas—were put in place. However, the core policies of Stalinism, coercive industrialization, and the Third Period were not yet on the agenda. Nonetheless, it is important to note that from 1923 notions of Russian self-reliance and the possibility of survival in isolation were burgeoning. Stalin’s political role in Russia and internationally was increasingly dominant and the direction of travel was away from Bolshevism. Broué has a point when he argues that to use the term “Bolshevization” to denote what was happening by 1924 is “an abuse of language,” for this designation conflates Bolshevism with “incipient Stalinization.”<sup>62</sup> That matters in the Comintern, and in Russia, remained contested complicates attempts to see the road to Stalinization completed by 1924; Zinoviev continued to be a force if a declining one, and Trotsky a player, although an increasingly ineffective one. “Incipient Stalinization” seems more suitable to denote these years of conflict and transition, during which Stalin continued to defend the NEP and Bukharin against their left critics.

From 1928, with the defeat of the Right Opposition and turn from the NEP, Stalinization was taking wing. The “revolution from above,” with its base in the apparatus, party activists and the new bureaucrats, and the demotion of Bukharin after the Sixth World Congress—he was replaced by Molotov in July 1929—signified the decisive break with Bolshevism. Bolshevism provided the cocoon in which Stalinism incubated. The party/state, the party’s monopoly of political life, the restriction of party democracy, the primacy of the leader, institutionalized violence, the emergence of bureaucracy, balancing the security of the new state and diplomacy to achieve that against the need for foreign revolutions—all this and more, particularly what Luxemburg had earlier criticized as the tendency to turn necessities into virtues, were present while Lenin lived.

The germs were incubating in State Bolshevism. However, the crystallization of Stalinism was influenced by a number of factors of which Bolshevism was only one. It remains difficult to dispute the verdict that

“it is hard to exaggerate the essential differences underlying the basic incompatibility of Leninism and Stalinism.”<sup>63</sup> Or, we might add, socialism. Lenin never advocated anything like Stalin’s version of socialism in one country, social fascism, or, for that matter, Popular Fronts.<sup>64</sup> Lenin fought to combat, not accommodate, burgeoning bureaucracy. Lenin prevailed through the exercise of argument and authority, not autocracy. The structures of Bolshevik power certainly favoured a single, authoritative leader and top-down control, facilitating Stalinism. Yet, as Stephen Smith observes, “if Bukharin or Trotsky had become general secretary, the horrors of Stalinism would not have come to pass, although economic backwardness and international isolation would still have critically constrained their room for manoeuvre.”<sup>65</sup>

Before his death, Lenin recognized that Bolshevism did not provide a blueprint for moving toward the construction of a socialist economy and society in a backward, beleaguered country. Rather, he maintained “the elementary truth of Marxism that the joint efforts of the workers of several advanced countries are needed for the victory of socialism.”<sup>66</sup> Uncharted territory required realism, patience, education, regenerating the working class, rebuilding the party, and, crucially, a concordat with the middle peasants.<sup>67</sup> This was the Leninist conception of socialism in one country. Moves could be made in a socialist direction in Russia while working simultaneously toward revolution in the west. For all the difficulties of building socialism in the Soviet republic, Lenin never countenanced anything resembling Stalin’s “great leap forward”; he never advocated violent enforcement by the state of a new form of economy and society along the lines implemented from 1929 to 1933 or later.<sup>68</sup> As Stephen Cohen suggests, these were years of “great change” and political, programmatic departure: “No Bolshevik leader or faction had ever advocated anything akin to imposed collectivization, the ‘liquidation’ of the kulaks, breakneck heavy industrialization and a ‘plan’ which was of course no plan at all . . . These years of ‘revolution from above’ were historically and programmatically the birth period of Stalinism.”<sup>69</sup>

In short, it is both compelling and useful to avoid determinism and distinguish Bolshevism and Stalinism: “although the institutions of rule did not change, personal dictatorship, the unrestrained use of force, the cult of power, paranoia about encirclement and internal wreckers, and the spiralling of terror across an entire society, all served to underline the difference

between Stalinism and Leninism.”<sup>70</sup> Developing through distinctive phases from the 1920s to the 1950s, Stalinism and its application, Stalinization, was characterized in broad terms by the subordination of world revolution to “socialism in one country”; state planning, a nationalized economy, and state control of foreign trade; forced industrialization and the destruction of the peasantry; intensified state terror and controlled mobilization from below to eradicate recalcitrance and subversion; autocratic control of state and party; emphasis on hierarchy and discipline; social mobility that enabled the development of new political, administrative, and intellectual elites; state control of working-class institutions, supervision of culture, and regression to a repressive social and cultural conservatism; cultivation of a siege mentality and “the war danger”; revival of Russian nationalism and xenophobia; and conviction that the class struggle and bourgeois resistance intensified in tandem with progress toward socialism, so the “workers’ state” could not “wither away” but must be strengthened. Stalinism drew the line with Bolshevism in its sidelining and eventual destruction of the old Bolshevik cadre.<sup>71</sup> It was capable of taking ultra-left adventurist turns between 1929 and 1933 and reformist realignments between 1935 and 1939. Rooted in control of the party/state apparatus, Stalinism overcame resistance, encountered constraint, and built, cultivated, and mobilized popular support from below.<sup>72</sup>

The overriding mission of Comintern affiliates became defence of the Soviet Union in the context of the development during and after the Sixth Congress in September 1928 of the “Class Against Class” politics of the Third Period.<sup>73</sup> After 1929, Stalinism in Russia had little to do with socialism as previously understood, and the Comintern abandoned Bolshevik internationalism to become decisively an instrument of the foreign policy of the Soviet state. The veteran German Communist Clara Zetkin concluded: “the Comintern has turned from a living political body into a dead mechanism which on the one hand is capable only of swallowing orders in Russian and on the other regurgitating them in different languages.”<sup>74</sup>

## American Communism and the Comintern

How far did these developments influence relations between Moscow and the WP? Were significant changes in the Comintern reflected in its



American affiliate? Was the role of the International beneficial or detrimental to revolutionary progress in the United States? Was the WP Stalinized?

Some introductory comment is necessary. First, the WP remained small. If it punched above its weight and was financially resourced from Moscow, it remained politically marginal. Second, in assessing its precise size, accurate membership figures are difficult to arrive at, as noted by Draper and Palmer. Some estimates of the underground parties' enrolment posit a certainly exaggerated figure of 40,000 in 1920. The WP, established in 1921, had a membership of about 16,000 by 1926, declining to roughly 10,000 members at the end of the decade. The precipitous decline was partly explained by "Bolshevization" and an exodus of foreign-language federation members as well as the end of "the dual stamp system," which allowed married couples to purchase a single dues stamp while declaring themselves as two members. Compounding this complexity, the WP was plagued by high turnover throughout the 1920s.<sup>75</sup> Third, the party only emerged in a meaningful sense as a political actor in 1923. Draper concluded: "1920–22 may be called the dark age of American Communism . . . it seemed to leap from a promising beginning to premature senility."<sup>76</sup> Fourth, as Palmer emphasizes, the WP was faction ridden throughout the 1920s, with contending groups at loggerheads until a fully fledged Stalinism imposed party "unity" in 1929.<sup>77</sup> Fifth, unlike many sections of the Comintern, the party contended with an ethnically and culturally divided membership, and the issue of racism was ever present. The preponderance of non-English speakers and the power of the language federations no doubt enriched American Communism, but presented unique challenges. Sixth, as we have observed, the WP exhibited a fundamental faith in the leadership of the Comintern.<sup>78</sup>

WP policy, like that of the CPGB, was monitored by the Anglo-American Colonial Bureau, which became in 1924 the Anglo-American Secretariat (AAS). It was subject to the ECCI, supplemented by periodic national commissions involving party leaders, ECCI potentates, and Comintern functionaries. The conditions Moscow attached to party funding and the training of cadres at the Comintern's International Lenin School constituted further control mechanisms.<sup>79</sup> A permanent representative to the Comintern was regularly appointed by the WP, indicative of the authority the American party invested in the Moscow-based International. The ECCI received minutes of party bodies, party leaders frequently travelled

to Moscow, and Comintern staff and affiliates visited the US, sometimes entrenching themselves within the WP apparatus and playing a decisive role, as Palmer emphasizes with respect to peripatetic Hungarian Joseph Pogany/John Pepper.<sup>80</sup>

We have noted that Bolshevism was decomposing by 1924–25 and that “incipient Stalinization” may be more appropriate for designating developments. The Fifth Congress of the Comintern formalized “Bolshevization” in 1924, and its policies were readily adopted by the WP. Yet there were limits. The language federations were dissolved, factions were not. An initial attempt to reorganize the party in workplace units was unsuccessful. Nonetheless, Russian hegemony was reinforced and proved permanent; the WP was gradually remodelled in the spirit and, to a great degree, practice of centralism, hierarchy, and discipline; the system of workplace units and fraction work was adopted, although a pattern emerged of relapse—renewal—relapse in the face of a recalcitrant industrial and political environment. If the WP failed to replicate the Russian prototype with exactitude, it was distinctive and quite unlike other American parties.

The journey from Bolshevism through incipient Stalinization to the triumph of the new politics in 1929 can be traced in Comintern–WP relations. The events of 1925 are sometimes considered a turning point, a transition from more equal transactions to subordination.<sup>81</sup> Through 1924, the faction headed by William Z. Foster maintained a precarious majority, although oppositions remained intact. A commission in Moscow in spring 1925 failed to resolve matters, with Zinoviev favouring Foster and Bukharin inclining toward Charles Ruthenberg and Lovestone. The issue was postponed until the WP convention in August, supervised by the Comintern emissary, Sergei Gusev. It became clear as the convention opened that a majority of delegates supported Foster. Gusev then produced a cable from the Comintern awarding control of the party to the Ruthenberg faction, on the grounds that it stood closer to Moscow and demonstrated greater loyalty. Gusev presided over the installation of the new leadership and savaged its critics.<sup>82</sup> By 1925, the ascendant Stalin faction in the Russian party was prepared to ride roughshod over the democracy of the American party. Equally noteworthy was the reaction of American Communists. An unhealthy loyalty to Soviet authority trumped everything. For the demoted Foster faction, as much as for its triumphant opponents, fealty to Moscow took precedence. As Palmer notes, it was a severe test, but it

was one Cannon passed. Foster's fury subsided into abject acquiescence: "I am for the Comintern from start to finish . . . if the Comintern finds itself criss-cross with my opinions there is only one thing to do and that is to change my opinions to fit the policy of the Comintern."<sup>83</sup>

The WP's subaltern position by mid-decade seems unarguable, but were things significantly different before 1925? Between 1919 and 1922, the Comintern of Lenin weaned the Americans away from leftism, insurrectionism, purist fundamentalism, and clandestine organization, pointing them toward the necessity of a united party, the united front, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the need for a Labor Party. It achieved these results largely through argument and persuasion backed by the political authority earned in 1917. There was genuine dialogue: Ruthenberg, admittedly a practiced diplomat, was expressing the sentiments of the majority of American leaders when, at the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, he credited progress to "the persistent effort and tactful guidance of the International."<sup>84</sup> There was, nonetheless, disequilibrium in the power of the two actors and the Comintern had to occasionally resort to administrative measures, such as the dispatching of Fraina to Mexico and the detention of Nicholas Hourwich in Moscow. Authority was not typically backed, as in later times, by *diktat* and coercion. However, we must register the discordant views expressed as early as 1922 by John Ballam, who observed of Zinoviev and Comintern functionaries: "They care nothing for majorities. They will support a minority who will carry out their policies against a majority that is opposed to them."<sup>85</sup>

Cannon, a convinced Cominternist before 1928, remembered a healthy situation in 1922 but a sea change from 1924:

I never was worth a damn on a mission to Moscow after my first trip in 1922. Then everything was open and above board. A clear cut political issue was presented by both sides in open debate and it was settled straightforwardly on a political basis without discrimination or favoritism to the factions involved . . . But after 1924 everything was different . . . by the time the Commission meetings got under way they were mere formalities. Everything had been settled behind the scenes; the word had been passed and all the secondary leaders and functionaries in the Comintern were falling into line.<sup>86</sup>

Yet the Comintern's involvement from 1923 in WP attempts to short-circuit progress toward a Labor Party constituted neither an exercise in education nor ultimately an essay in egalitarian exchange. Responsibility for the WP delegates overplaying their hand and packing the convention that founded the feeble Federated Farmer–Labor Party (FFLP)—provoking a breach with the Communists' trade union allies—lay with the Americans, not the Russians. However, as Palmer shows, the Comintern emissary, the incipient Stalinist, Pepper, was a key architect of the FFLP fiasco.<sup>87</sup> The Comintern did nothing to arrest WP opportunism. The follow-up was “the senseless and infamous adventure of creating a ‘farmer-labor party’ around [Robert] La Follette in order to overthrow quickly American capitalism.”<sup>88</sup> Underlying convoluted attempts to insert the FFLP, and hence the WP, into the Republican senator's 1924 presidential campaign and split proletarian from bourgeois elements was the un-Bolshevik idea of a “two-class” party. Before pulling the plug on a blunder that ended with La Follette denouncing the WP, the Comintern exhibited limited knowledge of the United States and class politics, while its own factionalism precluded dispassionate evaluation of mistakes.<sup>89</sup> Nonetheless, its decisions were endorsed by the Americans. The party's obedience was further illuminated in the anti-Trotsky campaign of 1924. The WP moved for condemnation of Trotsky at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern. Support for the Russian party's *démarche* was endorsed by the WP executive, with only Ludwig Lore voting against.<sup>90</sup>

If it is possible to discern a healthier relationship between Moscow and the WP before 1923, most of that period may be considered as the prehistory of the party, a time when the Comintern was itself in the making. Like its British counterpart, the WP was only up and running in a meaningful sense by 1923. The days of egalitarian dialogue were fleeting, and one protagonist was always more powerful and influential than the other.

Finally, can we detect any difference in the character of the relationship between 1923 and 1928 and during and after Stalinization in 1929? The Stalinization of American Communism was incarnated in the meeting of the Presidium of the ECCI in May 1929, which legitimized Stalin's dismissal of the Lovestone group's leadership of the party. The refusal of Lovestone and his key confederates to bow the knee should not be glossed over. Nonetheless, the psychology of most of the leaders and their obedience to Russian rites of recantation and self-criticism were articulated by

Ruthenberg's old lieutenant, Max Bedacht. Bedacht recognized the right of the Americans to argue matters out with the Comintern, but after differences were "settled by a definite decision," he insisted on accepting "the correctness of the decision as a means of recognizing the international and ideological superiority of the Comintern over ourselves."<sup>91</sup>

The nature of interaction between Stalin's Comintern and the WP was thus not qualitatively distinct from the relationship between Zinoviev's Comintern and the WP; there was not a great deal of difference between the initial defiance and speedy subservience of Foster in 1925 and Bedacht in 1929. If from 1919 to 1922 the Russians acted substantially through advocacy and soft power, their superior authority was typically accepted in this period of prologue. Parity was never real and events from 1924 should have dissipated illusions—had these been based on ratiocination rather than faith. The *lingua franca* was still argument, but if that failed the Russians utilized intimidation. Stalinization represented a watershed in running Russia. In the Comintern, it represented to a greater extent the consolidation of tendencies already apparent, albeit contested, rather than a rupture.

An intriguing point is why it took the Comintern so long to terminate American factionalism, given its interdicts on organized, semi-permanent dissension—although it should be remembered that no faction challenged the Comintern; with the possible exception of Ludwig Lore's group, all competed for its favour and exuded fidelity. As Cannon remarked in 1927, demonstrating scant awareness of earlier Bolshevism, "It is anomalous for a Bolshevik party to have factional groupings."<sup>92</sup> One explanation may be that Moscow's attempts to stimulate a united, legal party before 1923 and the WP's particular difficulties—witness the language problem—alerted the Comintern to the embedded nature of difference and the fragility of compromise. One reason for prevarication may lie in the recognition that avoidance of splits demanded patience. A related answer may be that the Comintern was overburdened with problems, while inter-factional competition for favour may have been perceived as facilitating manipulation and eliciting compliance in Comintern decisions, a view congruent with Palmer's understanding of how Stalin eventually juggled the leadership contingents within the WP, from 1925–27, to consolidate power inside the Soviet Union.<sup>93</sup>

However, the party membership and the majority of leaders experienced few problems embracing Stalinization and the liquidation of factionalism.

The new turn commenced with the establishment of red unions in the mines, the needle trades, and textiles, excoriation of “the fascist AFL,” and Stalin’s demand for a black republic in the southern states. Change encountered resistance and, ultimately, dissent as Cannon led a small Left Opposition expelled from the WP. Lovestone’s protestations of loyalty were outweighed by his past support for Bukharin and his perceived untrustworthiness. After refusing to accept demotion and exile, Lovestone, Gitlow, and Wolfe were expelled, although the Foster group was not permitted to replace them, marginalizing the most significant WP proletarian leader with a demonstrated capacity to galvanize mass struggles. Earl Browder was elevated by the Comintern to fill the leadership vacuum, and by 1932 had emerged as the supreme head of a party without factions, dedicated to the politics and organizational practices of Stalinism.<sup>94</sup>

Judged by contemporary conditions and its Marxist mission, the Comintern performed a constructive role in constituting American Communism and equipping it with ideological and material resources and organizational acumen. Doubts must remain, however, as to the relevance of some of its ideas for revolutionizing American society and the value of much of its guidance from 1923. After 1929, it was evident that the Comintern’s politics deviated from both American realities and Leninism, and that continuing to harness the fortunes of revolutionaries to the Stalinized Russian party represented a fundamental error. Cannon’s eleventh-hour conversion to Trotskyism in Moscow in 1928 confirmed that opposition to Stalinism could develop and revolutionary socialism had not been extinguished.<sup>95</sup> Yet the incompleteness of the Trotskyists’ break with the Soviet Union, and the negative reaction of most WP leaders and members to the rebellions of Cannon and Lovestone, emphasized the limits of resistance to Comintern policy and the degree to which American Communists remained firmly attached to the politics of the Soviet elite.

### **From Subordination to Stalinization: The CPGB and the Comintern**

The British party required less dramatic Comintern intervention. In terms of both membership and factional intrigue, it could not rival its US counterpart. At its foundation in 1920, the British party claimed around 5,000 members, with this falling to roughly 2,500 in 1923, and increasing

to 10,000 in 1926, before plummeting to about 3,000 in 1929.<sup>96</sup> Nor was it initially esteemed in Moscow. In 1923, Zinoviev dubbed it the “Achilles Heel” of the International, while party chair Arthur MacManus considered members’ understanding of “the implications of the revolutionary movement” rudimentary.<sup>97</sup> Jack Murphy recalled that few CPGBers “had more than a nodding acquaintance with the writings of Marx,”<sup>98</sup> and through the 1920s, education was rarely organic to branch life; where it existed, it was Russian inflected and catechetical.

In the summer of 1923, a commission in Moscow resolved, with some success, factional problems prevalent from the CPGB’s inception. Bolshevization, although the term was not in general use, was central. It had been initiated in 1922—well before the drive in America—as a response to the party’s disarray and promptings from the Comintern. The Report of the Party Commission on Organization was based on the Theses on Organization adopted by the Third World Congress in July 1921 and endorsed by the Fifth CPGB Congress in the fall of 1922. Implementation was plagued by a lack of understanding and suspicion among members, and the conservatism of “the old gang” around MacManus and their resentment of the emerging Dutt circle.<sup>99</sup> Given the CPGB’s inability to overcome its weaknesses, the Commission reconstructed the leadership, provided new directions for work in the unions and the Labour Party, and stressed the need to transcend conservatism but restrain impatience in implementing Bolshevization.<sup>100</sup>

This contributed to the advance in the labour movement between 1924 and 1926. But difficulties with “Bolshevization” persisted. The establishment of an interventionist press proved successful, but the factory branches established in 1924 proved ephemeral. There was, moreover, concern that the new, elaborate structure with its workplace/geographical fissures was fragmenting the party, isolating members, and sacrificing debate and education on the altar of an inadequately informed activism.<sup>101</sup> This proved an enduring problem. Like Zinoviev, Stalin favoured a submissive, permanently mobilized membership obedient to the cadre. Those who demanded more discussion and reviews of the party line stood for “the freedom to weaken party discipline, the freedom to turn the party into a discussion club.”<sup>102</sup> Arguments about centralism, with the membership organized primarily for sectional combat in a top-down manner by professional commanders—an approach that overrode more democratic conceptions

of a party characterized by debate and education, with the ranks trained for informed action—persist until this day. However, by 1925 Zinoviev declared the CPGB one of the best parties in the Comintern as it executed Comintern directives “most conscientiously and successfully.”<sup>103</sup> The following year, fresh from exorcizing heresy in other parties, he was praising the CPGB for the absence of “fractionalism.”<sup>104</sup> British leaders and their members invariably followed the Russian leaders and guarded against the danger that differences could transmute into factionalism.<sup>105</sup>

Resistance to Moscow’s policy initiatives remained slight throughout the 1920s. No section of the CPGB maintained an independent, evidence-based position on issues fundamental to the future of world Communism. The leadership uncritically accepted the changing line of the Soviet party and its suppression of internal dissent. Publication of an article by Kollontai outlining the politics of the Workers’ Opposition in Sylvia Pankhurst’s *Workers’ Dreadnought* in 1921 helped spark Pankhurst’s expulsion. A year later, MacManus registered no protest at the ECCI as the Russian leaders denounced their party critics.<sup>106</sup> At the Fifth World Congress, the British delegates reacted to protests in the French, German, and Polish parties by confirming their unconditional backing for international discipline and the anathema against Trotsky and the Left Opposition. When Stalin and Zinoviev returned to the attack in late 1924 and early 1925, the CPGB’s resolution of support was drafted on the basis of a statement prepared by Comintern emissaries in Britain. They remarked on the British leaders’ ignorance of events in Russia and lack of understanding of the issues involved.<sup>107</sup> Going further, the party published a massive Russian compilation, *The Errors of Trotskyism*, while its leading bodies professed “solidarity and implicit faith” in the Russian party leadership and the ECCI, dedicating themselves to “carrying through the accepted policy of the International.”<sup>108</sup> Stalin’s German acolyte, Ernst Thälmann, reflected: “the British Communist Party was the one major party which had no differences with the Executive of the Communist International.”<sup>109</sup>

Comintern representatives visited Britain frequently to counsel and supervise a faithful congregation that only rarely questioned, still less resisted, the map of travel, focusing on the details of the journey. The permanent representatives were Mikhail Borodin, who pushed Bolshevization before his deportation in 1922, and Max Goldfarb, who, like Borodin, had spent time in America and resided sporadically in Britain between 1921



and 1928. Both were subsequently executed by Stalin. Party leaders MacManus, Tom Bell, Jack Murphy, and Bob Stewart represented the CPGB at the Comintern, but so did second-level personnel such as Ernest Brown, Alex Hermon, and Patrick Lavin. The brief tenure in unfamiliar territory, limited knowledge, and attractions to prestige and power restricted their roles, and, overall, they acted to transmit Comintern positions to the CPGB.<sup>110</sup> Internalization of Moscow hegemony ensured successive changes of line were accepted after clarification and discussion and no transformation in the nature of the relationship occurred as Bolshevism gave way to the “incipient Stalinization” of the Comintern. Between 1923 and 1927, there was substantial continuity in the interplay between an initiatory, directive Comintern and a responsive, typically positive, but occasionally uncomprehending and critical, CPGB. A pattern of formulation of the line after discussion with the Comintern, attempts at application by the party, Comintern correction, new emphases, additional initiatives, application, and amendment continued through the decade.

The CPGB’s industrial work reflected the process. The party accepted Russian insistence on working in the existing unions and establishing a British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), despite the improbability of convincing labour organizations to break with the International Federation of Trade Unions. Zinoviev’s initial emphasis on revolutionizing the unions was ephemeral but disorientating.<sup>111</sup> However, in 1923–24, the Comintern performed an exemplary role in prodding the CPGB toward forming the National Minority Movement (NMM) as an oppositional grouping in the unions, overcoming resistance from elements who considered the initiative premature and others who believed it would create an alternative to the party. Zinoviev, Bukharin, and Borodin insisted it would end the CPGB’s isolation: the NMM should focus on the unions and winning their left wing to the united front.<sup>112</sup> Complicating matters was Zinoviev’s search for shortcuts, toying with the opportunist idea that left reformist union leaders might play a part in revolutionizing Britain, and luring these functionaries into the RILU via diplomacy and the Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee.

Nonetheless, as tensions mounted in the run-up to the general strike, the Comintern attempted to restrain tendencies to soft-pedal criticism: “To over-estimate the left-wing, to ignore its timidity and inconsistency, would be a grave error.”<sup>113</sup> This was echoed by the CPGB: “It would be a suicidal

policy for the CP and the Minority Movement to place too much reliance on the official left-wing... [they should] criticize its weakness ruthlessly."<sup>114</sup> Through 1925–26, however, the party strayed from Comintern directives, bowing to the pressure of a difficult objective situation and understating clear evidence of the unreliability of the trade union left-wing. On the eve of the strike, the Comintern emphasized the inability of both left- and right-wing bureaucrats to advance a struggle that it conceived as posing the question of state power—at the very time when the CPGB was boosting the left leaders' credentials.<sup>115</sup> In the aftermath of the confrontation, the CPGB offered criticisms of the left but reserved its main fusillades for the right, citing the need to maintain support for the locked-out miners and left-wing leaders' advocacy of unity with RILU. Slowly, with foot-dragging, dissension from party leaders, recrimination, pressure from Moscow, and some manoeuvring—notably Stalin's initiative to instruct the party to publish the manifesto of the Soviet unions, which was critical of the CPGB—London was brought into line. By 1927, the party fully accepted the Comintern credo: the fundamental conflict in the unions ran between a militant rank and file and "a consolidated bureaucracy."<sup>116</sup>

A similar pattern was evident in attempts to apply Lenin's orientation to the Labour Party. In 1923, Dutt informed the British Commission that the only real political difference within the CPGB leadership centred on the degree of criticism to be mounted against Labour while working to engage it in a united front and secure affiliation. Despite Comintern directives, leaders such as Albert Inkpin believed criticism should be toned down to achieve the latter objective.<sup>117</sup> With the advent of the 1924 Labour government, however, Dutt himself came under fire for claiming the MacDonald administration opened the road to a struggle for power, while sympathetically observing its limitations and advising Communists to be patient.<sup>118</sup> Disputation provoked a further British commission in Moscow, which stressed MacDonald's was not a government of class struggle: it would betray the working class and the CPGB must maintain a resolutely critical position, expose Labour's leaders, and assail the bourgeoisie.<sup>119</sup>

This motivated a turn to the left. But intractable issues of working simultaneously inside and outside reformist Labour to further revolutionary politics, while resisting the pressures of reformism and condemning the party whose members it was courting, persisted. Comintern instructions concerning the CPGB manifesto for the 1924 general election centred once

more on exposing the reformists' vacillations, Labour leaders' imbrication with the state, their support for imperialism, and the need to resist attempts to expel Communists from the Labour Party.<sup>120</sup> Lack of success prompted another Moscow Commission at the turn of the year. Much of its prescription was formulaic: Communists should collaborate with the Labour left to accentuate divisions within Labour, while at the same time criticizing their collaborators and clarifying their politics. There was, however, a new emphasis on the need to organize a Marxist movement embracing Communists and left reformists moving toward Communism in and around the Labour Party. Despite divisions on the party executive, Comintern advice produced the Communist-edited *Sunday Worker* and eventually the National Left Wing Movement (NLWM).<sup>121</sup> A great part of the traffic between Moscow and London at this time consisted of Comintern instructions and CPGB requests for clarification and direction.<sup>122</sup> An impression of equal debate in Comintern commissions is belied by Zinoviev, Bukharin, Radek, even Borodin and Pepper—who interested himself in British as well as American affairs—speaking with greater assurance and authority than their counterparts in the United Kingdom, despite lack of knowledge of British conditions.<sup>123</sup> Dialogue may be viewed as Socratic: Comintern authority is based on the pedagogue's superior experience and respect accorded those who have earned the right to be heeded.

Moves toward Stalinization were modulated. Events in and around the British Commission in Moscow in late 1927 demonstrated the beginning of change in the Labour Party orientation that would see Lenin's characterization of Labour and prescription of the tactics necessary to undermine its hegemony discarded. The CPGB, the Commission directed, should stand as many candidates as possible against Labour in the next general election and ratchet up criticism of its leaders and policies. Those who questioned the turn were worked on. Willie Gallacher, who accepted "the whole line of the Comintern [resolution] except that one particular sentence" (advocating Communists standing against Labour), succumbed to the powerfully expressed arguments of Bukharin, Kuusinen and Petrovsky.<sup>124</sup> Pollitt, who quickly became an advocate of the new line, was interviewed by Stalin and Bukharin and endured "a hammering from one fellow which lasted 8 hours."<sup>125</sup> As the doctrine of social fascism, the branding of Labour as the third capitalist party, and the dismantling of the united front perspective unfolded at the Ninth ECCI Plenum in February 1928, the Sixth World

Congress, and Open Letters to the CPGB leadership, British reservations elicited more forceful Comintern directives. Crucially, the dissidents came into line. As the CPGB leadership was reformed, nobody openly challenged the Comintern.<sup>126</sup>

Given the importance Labour held for CPGB strategy, the new line was queried by skeptics citing Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism*. Pressure from Moscow tapped into and orchestrated leftism among the rank and file and cowed "right-wing" recalcitrants. Despite brief resistance, the united front and the NLWM—already on the rocks—were abandoned. Moves to split the labour movement by forming Red Unions produced dissatisfaction and doubts, but no frontal opposition.<sup>127</sup> Stalin's elaboration of "social fascism" in summer 1929 sealed matters. Comintern leader, Dmitry Manuilsky, chastised the British leadership's long-term disinterest in international issues. Comparing the CPGB unfavourably with other affiliates, he observed: "in the British party there is a sort of special system which may be characterised thus: the party is a society of great friends."<sup>128</sup> In contrast to the strong factionalism in the American and other parties, the CPGB had been marked largely by shifting individual, political, and personal differences.

If the reconstitution of the leadership was milder than in some other parties, it was more thoroughgoing than in 1923. Bell, Ernie Brown, Helen Crawford, Campbell, Arthur Horner, Wal Hannington, Inkipin, Tommy Jackson, Andrew Rothstein, Bob Stewart, and Jock Wilson were culled or demoted. None questioned Stalin's course in Russia. Pollitt was installed as general secretary with Stalin's benediction: "You have taken a difficult job, but I believe you will tackle it all right."<sup>129</sup> Russian rituals of self-criticism, confession, and recantation developed, accompanied by demagoguery and public persecution of dissidents. Stalin's writings took pride of place in the party press and his pre-eminence as the guardian of "Leninism" was proclaimed.<sup>130</sup> Pelling concluded: "A new Stalinist leadership had come to power."<sup>131</sup> The conditions for its entrenchment had been established and the limits of resistance tested. Nobody emulated Lovestone in his defiance of Stalin, and when a Trotskyist opposition developed in 1932 it was tiny even in comparison with its American counterpart.<sup>132</sup>

From the CPGB's creation, the Comintern had been the dominant player. Its hold hardened in 1926–27, but 1928–29 represented a watershed. In its early years, the relationship of the British party and the

Comintern achieved success in educating revolutionaries out of syndicalism, anti-parliamentarianism, leftism, and federalism. Practical attainment proved more elusive. It was easier to develop formulae than to apply them. Accepting capitalist stabilization, the Comintern was too eager to revert to visions of radicalization at the first sign of an upturn in struggle. Its analysis of the main obstacle, the hegemony of labourism and the marginality of revolutionary ideas, was superficial. With few exceptions, the CPGB never rooted education and creative thinking in its ranks; its best minds functioned within the confines of Comintern doctrine. The context constrained success. But the final blow to its prospects, acquiescence in the pioneering Stalinism of 1929, flowed from its already ingrained subservience. Like the WP, the CPGB never made any significant breakthrough in this decade. By 1930, it was an ultra-left sect, isolated, and, with three thousand members, weaker than at its birth.

## Conclusion

A survey of Comintern activists by Brigitte Studer touched on whether “Stalinization” constituted a valid conceptualization of the International’s trajectory. Studer inquired if what happened is best understood as “an intensification and further development of Bolshevization, or a distinctive ‘Stalinization,’ a qualitative change occurring in the late 1920s. In favour of the first it may be said that there are unambiguous continuities in patterns of thinking between the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the attitude towards social democracy.”<sup>133</sup> Declaring, but not explaining, her own preference for recognizing “a step change in the dismantling of internal democracy rather than the simple continuation of an existing steady process,” Studer claimed that the view there was no distinctive Stalinization “prevails for the most part in British scholarship, perhaps because the CPGB did not in the late 1920s and 1930s experience as brutal a change of leadership as many other parties.”<sup>134</sup> As elaborated in this essay, Stalinization was not simply subordination—it infused subordination with a new, distinctive political content—and it involved more than suppression of internal democracy, important as that was. Few historians would deny continuities in “patterns of thinking” between the 1920s and 1930s; the astute would acknowledge discontinuities were more significant. If we consider Lenin’s, and the Comintern’s, thinking about social democracy in the first half of

the 1920s and then consider the Comintern's adoption of Stalin's conflicting analysis of social democracy as social fascism, what strikes us is change, rupture, and discontinuity. If we look at everything Stalinism entailed, the "brutality" or otherwise of the purge of the CPGB leadership hardly seems an adequate peg on which to hang rejection of "Stalinization."

Significant differences in context and history make it unhelpful to simply transpose Weber's analysis of the KPD's subordination to the CPGB or WP, however convenient this may appear. The applicability of some of Weber's terminology—"absolutist integration," "complete obliteration of all traces of democracy"—may be queried in relation to the CPGB and WP as redolent of automaton-like obedience. Weber's periodization is questionable in relation to America and Britain: in these cases, the web of subordination was woven from 1919 and was in place by 1923, while Stalinization in the proper, political sense of the term triumphed in 1929. What is undeniable is that by 1930 all three parties were "Stalin's instruments" and that "party policy was implemented exclusively in the spirit of the Stalinist CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]."<sup>135</sup> Weber's discussion of how this transpired remains an indispensable, if incomplete, reference point in examining the Stalinization of the CPGB and WP.

Both internalized Stalinist politics with minimal resistance—insignificant in the CPGB, fleeting in the WP. Reducing Stalinization to subordination *simpliciter*, refusing delineation of the political content and break with Bolshevism of *this* subordination, and asserting its impact was slight—because CPGB branches had different kinds of members, priorities, and approaches—neglects the uniform political framework in which these branches operated. It depoliticizes Stalinization and overlooks the evidence for adherence to it, whatever members' interests and commitment. Whether a branch focused on union activity or anti-imperialism within the common Stalinist framework is secondary. If we put aside templates of members as robots and readings of "total" that transcend politics, then to reject Stalinization on the grounds that "new members, new policies, new problems and new priorities ensured that 'total' control remained a chimera," as do Taylor and Worley, is simply to reject a chimera of their own making.<sup>136</sup>

Stalinism remains indispensable to understanding the path revolution, the Comintern, and its affiliates took. Its triumph represented, as Palmer noted, degeneration, an adverse resolution of the tensions between

international revolution and “socialism in one country” that emerged in State Bolshevism.<sup>137</sup> Without revolution beyond the Soviet Union, constructing socialism in a backward, besieged country remained a utopian project. A different regime, undemocratic but far from Stalinist, was in the realms of possibility—until Stalinism put paid to its prospects and protagonists. Establishing *points de scission* involves intervening in the unceasing flow of events and ideas, and is always, to some degree, problematic. But defeat in Germany and the death of Lenin marked the onset of a struggle between a declining Bolshevism and an ascendant Stalinism that did not dare to speak its name. That battle culminated in the revolution from above and, by 1933, the consolidation of an ever-evolving Stalinism.

Our critical development of Palmer’s brief account affirms his insistence on the centrality of Stalinism as politics while disclosing differences of emphasis—for example, over the periodization and over the meaning of “Bolshevization.” The Russian party/state dominated the Comintern from the beginning. Soviet foreign policy, which did not always prioritize, although it did not always exclude, revolution, became increasingly important from 1922. For both the CPGB and WP, the essentials of the hegemon–subaltern relationship were developed from 1919, in place by 1923, institutionalized by 1924, and reinforced, with a radical change in its political content, between 1926 and 1929. Through the decade, Moscow achieved its goals through its standing as a superior ideological, political, and material force. When necessary—and often it was not—domination was exercised through argument, cajoling, bullying, sporadic coercion, and restriction of democracy. The Comintern’s posture, in what remained essentially an exercise in voluntary acquiescence and soft power, hardened through the decade; direction of affiliates became more insistent. Using the term “negotiation,” as Andrew Thorpe does, to characterize the relationship, is so general and blind to power as to be unhelpful.<sup>138</sup> If the form of dependence was refined and reinforced, its political content changed more dramatically. The politically changing subordination of the CPGB and WP stemmed from the nature of the relationship, which ensured from 1919 that all significant political initiatives came from Russia and were accepted in America and Britain.

Bolshevization remains an appropriate, but diminishingly appropriate, term to describe the development of the Comintern in Lenin’s last years, because Bolshevism was already under threat. The “Bolshevization”

of 1924–25 reflected a move away from Bolshevism and sealed the turn from democratic to bureaucratic centralism. Stalin was already rehearsing “socialism in one country”; he was well advanced in the control of the party machine and thus the Comintern. With the benefit of hindsight, “incipient Stalinization” seems a better way to designate a transition period than Stalinization per se, which conveys connotations of completion. The uncritical acquiescence of the CPGB and WP was encapsulated in their endorsement of anathemas against successive Russian oppositions. Stalinization, the most persuasive designation of change from 1928, should not be considered in purely organizational terms; it embodied a unity of politics and organization. It underwent dramatic development, moving from the policy of “Class Against Class,” through Popular Front politics, to the pro-fascist line of 1939–40. Its power is clear from its continuing support in Russia and beyond. That there were limits to the Stalinization of small revolutionary groups operating in liberal democracies is hardly at issue. What is more remarkable is the degree of control the Russian state exercised over the politics and political behaviour of the membership of the CPGB and the WP.

Palmer argued, like his subject of study, James P. Cannon, that the Comintern made an early and important contribution. However, this was limited and fleeting. As Russia changed and the Comintern got its act together, the fundamental problems with the organization became apparent. An association in which constituent sections are dependent on a more powerful section answerable to a state that possessed and articulated its own interests, a relationship where democracy was restricted from the start and swiftly shrank, was likely to prove unfruitful for the subordinates. It should surely have become unacceptable to Marxists. After 1923, the Comintern was incapable of providing an honest account of the Russian experience, or understanding that revolutionary success should not trump equality and democracy and could not be exported wholesale to different environments.<sup>139</sup> Overall, as an Italian Communist reflected in the early 1920s: “Russian development does not provide us with an experience of how the proletariat can overthrow a liberal-parliamentary capitalist state that has existed for many years and possesses the ability to defend itself. We must, however, know how to attack a modern bourgeois democratic state. . . .”<sup>140</sup>



Stalinism and Stalinization supplied the CPGB and WP with inadequate answers to such problems. Along with Palmer, we believe too many historians gloss over critically important aspects of Communist historiography, conflating Bolshevism and Stalinism and confusing Stalinism and socialism. Naming reflects understanding. As Moshe Lewin, scholar and socialist, who devoted much of his life to comprehending the Soviet Union, concluded: "If, confronted with a hippopotamus, someone insisted it was a giraffe, would he or she be given a chair in zoology? Are the social sciences really that much less exact than zoology?"<sup>141</sup>

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985* (St. John's, NL: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1988); Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1993); Bryan D. Palmer, "Reasoning Rebellion: E. P. Thompson, British Marxist Historians, and the Making of Dissident Political Mobilization," *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002): 187–216.
2. Bryan D. Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 139–73; Bryan D. Palmer, "Communist History: Seeing It Whole. A Reply to Critics," *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 203–14; Bryan D. Palmer, "'Who ARE These Guys?!' Politics, Passions, Peculiarities, and Polemics in the Historiography of British Communism," *American Communist History* 4, no. 2 (December 2005): 187–97; Bryan D. Palmer, "American Communism in the 1920s: Striving for a Panoramic View," *American Communist History* 6, no. 2 (December 2007): 139–49; Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Bryan D. Palmer, "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?" *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 199–232.
3. Palmer, "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?" 220.
4. We have engaged elsewhere with other aspects of Palmer's position. See John McIlroy, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism: A Comment," *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 195–202; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "Some Problems of Communist History," *American Communist History* 4, no. 2 (December 2005): 199–214.

5. The United States party/parties operated under various names before becoming the Communist Party (USA) in 1929. In the underground years prior to 1921, American Communists were affiliated with the Communist Party (CP) and the Communist Labor Party (CLP). A united “legal” party, the Workers’ Party, was formed in 1921, although it later went by the name of the Workers’ (Communist) Party. To simplify matters we have used WP throughout.
6. Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957); Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia* (New York: Viking, 1960). Another pioneering study is sometimes overlooked: Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957; New York: Frederick Praeger, 1962).
7. See, for example, Harvey E. Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fredrikh Igorevitch Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Andersen, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
8. See, for example, Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997); Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998); Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).
9. Isserman, *Which Side Were You On*, ix–x.
10. For the former response, see Maurice Isserman, “Open Archives and Open Minds: ‘Traditionalists’ versus ‘Revisionists’ after Venona,” *American Communist History* 4, no. 2 (December 2005): 215–23; for denial, see Paul Buhle, “Secret Work,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Left*, ed. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 736–37. John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr’s *In Denial: Historians, Communism, and Espionage* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003) presents a traditionalist critique of revisionist historiography.
11. Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London: A and C Black, 1957), 15–53.

12. L. J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origins and Development Until 1929* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966), 276.
13. Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900–1921* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969).
14. James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the British Communist Party* (London: Pluto Press, 1975).
15. Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist History, 1935–1941* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989).
16. Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995); Nina Fishman, “Essentialists and Realists: Reflections on the Historiography of the CPGB,” *Communist History Network Newsletter* 11 (August 2001): 7–16.
17. Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–1943* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 279.
18. Andrew Thorpe, “The Communist International and the British Communist Party,” in *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919–1943*, ed. Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 9, 68, 81.
19. Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, *Communists in British Society, 1920–1991* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007), 279, 280, 282.
20. See, for example, John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “Histories of the British Communist Party: A User’s Guide,” *Labour History Review* 68, no. 1 (April 2003): 33–59; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “A Peripheral Vision: Communist Historiography in Britain,” *American Communist History* 4, no. 2 (December 2005): 125–57; John McIlroy, “The Establishment of Intellectual Orthodoxy and the Stalinization of British Communism, 1928–1933,” *Past and Present* 192 (2006): 187–226; John McIlroy, “British Communists and the 1932 Turn to the Trade Unions,” *Labor History* 56, no. 5 (December 2015): 541–65; Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, “‘The Trojan Horse’: Communist Entrism in the British Labour Party, 1933–43,” *Labor History* 59, no. 5 (October 2018): 513–54; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern: A Historical Controversy Revisited,” *Labor History* 60, no. 3 (2019): 165–92; Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), 379.
21. John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “Nina Ponomareva’s Hats’: The New Revisionism, the Communist International and the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–1930,” *Labour/Le Travail* 49 (Spring 2002): 147 and 187; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “For A Revolutionary Workers’ Government’: Moscow, British Communism and Revisionist Interpretations

- of the Third Period," *European History Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (October 2002): 535–69. See also John Newsinger, "Recent Controversies in the History of British Communism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4, no. 3 (2006): 551–72; John Callaghan, "National and International Dimensions of British Communist History," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24, no. 3 (2008): 456–72.
22. See, for example, John McIlroy, "Restoring Stalinism to Communist History," *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 41, no. 4 (2013): 594–622; Paul Flowers and John McIlroy, eds., 1956: *John Saville, Edward Thompson and the Reasoner* (London: Merlin Press, 2016).
  23. John McIlroy, Barry McLoughlin, Alan Campbell, and John Halstead, "Forging the Faithful: The British at the International Lenin School," *Labour History Review* 68, no. 1 (2003): 99–128; Gidon Cohen and Kevin Morgan, "Stalin's Sausage Machine: British Students at the International Lenin School, 1926–1937," *Twentieth Century British History* 13, no. 4 (2002): 227–55; Alan Campbell, John McIlroy, Barry McLoughlin, and John Halstead, "The International Lenin School: A Response to Cohen and Morgan," *Twentieth Century British History* 15, no. 1 (2004): 51–76, and the exchanges in subsequent issues.
  24. Space precludes discussion of the European historiography. See, especially, Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969), which addressed the Stalinization of the German party (KPD); Hermann Weber, "The Stalinization of the KPD: Old and New Views," in *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization, 1919–1953*, ed. Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 23–25. We refer to Weber later and have elaborated on the historiography in McIlroy and Campbell, "Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern." Weber's important studies have, like Draper's, elicited revisionist comments, which, in turn, have been responded to critically. See Richard Croucher, "Shifting Sands: Changing Interpretations of the History of German Communism," *Labour History Review* 68 (April 2003): 11–31.
  25. The 1920s sometimes lost their historical integrity and significance. The decade was recast as a period when, in an inventive leap, the potential for a Popular Front was squandered by Leninism. Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1987) characterizes early American Communism in terms of "self-destructive behaviour," the "incessant cant of 'Democratic Centralism' . . . unchallenged authoritarianism and the wild factionalism of the 1920s" (127, 134). Communists "arguably lost the opportunity to put together a 'Popular

Front.” Nonetheless, cynical about their leaders “local activists followed their own instincts” (128). This sketch may usefully be compared with Palmer’s reconstruction of the times in *James P. Cannon*.

26. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 13. For Palmer’s observations on historians who circumvent Stalinism, see “Rethinking the Historiography,” 170–71 and n. 71; *James P. Cannon*, 4–7 and n. 12; and “How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?”
27. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 8–15; Palmer, “Rethinking the Historiography,” 157–66.
28. Palmer, “Communist History,” 214.
29. Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) is a welcome addition to the literature. On many points of analysis, particularly in its recognition of the role of Stalinism, the book follows Palmer. But it is noteworthy for its employment of newly available Comintern material and other unexploited archival resources; its adept handling of the Farmer–Labor Party issue; and its extended discussion of “the Negro Question.” As the author acknowledges: “At bottom, the Comintern archives provide nuance and detail to the history of early American Communism, but they do not change the broad outline of Draper’s history” (Zumoff, *Communist International*, 12). There is, moreover, a tendency to overstate the health of the Comintern during Lenin’s lifetime and counterpose it to what came after. Its beneficial influence was mixed and brief, spanning 1919 to 1922. The benefits did not last, but the subordination seeded in the early years did. See John McIlroy, “American Communist History: A Comment,” *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 195–202.

Randi Storch’s “‘Their unCommunist Stand’: Foreign Language-Speaking Communists and the Question of Stalinization, 1928–1935,” in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern*, 263–82, explores Stalinization in one locality with reference to foreign-language groups—whose introversion and relative insulation from the party is well established in the historiography. Storch notes breaches of party rules, defiance of disciplinary decisions, and the persistence of independent subcultures. She concludes from this that party leaders were unable to “subordinate their members to total democratic centralism” so that there was not a “completely Stalinized movement” (264 and 278). While the small, negative deviations observed here are noteworthy, they hardly invalidate the reality of Soviet control of politics (which Storch accepts; see 265), or the characterization of the party in terms of its politics and structures as Stalinized.

30. Kerry Taylor and Matthew Worley's "Testing the Limits: Stalinization and the New Zealand and British Communist Parties," in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern*, 226–44, explores neither Bolshevism nor Stalinism and fails to engage with the extant literature. The introduction to the collection in which this essay appears is light on empirically grounded argument and ambiguous in its conclusions: Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley, "Stalinization and Communist Historiography," in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern*, 1–21. For a critique, see McIlroy and Campbell, "Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern," 171–72.
31. Palmer, "Who ARE These Guys," 197.
32. Haynes and Klehr, *In Denial*, 79.
33. For some background, see Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, "Is Communist History Important? A Reply to Harriet Jones," *Labour History Review* 68, no. 3 (December 2003): 385–90; Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, "The Last Word on British Communism," *Labour History Review* 70, no. 1 (April 2005): 97–101; and Keith Laybourn, "A Comment on the Historiography of Communism in Britain," *American Communist History* 4, no. 2 (December 2005): 156–66.
34. The article was eventually published in another journal. The case for non-publication and refusal of access to referees' reports may thus be evaluated. See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "'The Last Chance Saloon': The Independent Labour Party and Miners' Militancy in the Second World War Revisited," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 2 (October 2011): 871–96. We could cite further examples of attempted suppression of criticism of the existing historiography.
35. Quoted in Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 400.
36. English Commission of the ECCI, Transcripts, June–July 1923, 495/38/1, Comintern Archives, Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (hereafter RGASPI).
37. See E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1953); E. H. Carr, *The Interregnum, 1923–1924* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); E. H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country, 1924–1926*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1958–64); E. H. Carr and R. W. Davies, *Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926–1929*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1969, 1971, 1976). Soviet foreign policy and its relationship to Comintern policy and the development of "socialism in one country" requires more attention than we can afford it here. See Jonathan Haslam, "Comintern and Soviet Foreign Policy," in *The Twentieth Century*, vol. 3, *The Cambridge History of Russia*,

- ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 636–61.
38. As examples only, see Pierre Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste, 1919–1943* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 76–292; John Riddell, ed., *Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress, March 1919* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1987); John Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples Unite: Proceedings of the Second Congress*, vol. 2 (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991), 765–61; John Riddell, ed., *Towards the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).
  39. For a succinct account, see Marcel Liebman, *Leninism Under Lenin* (London: Merlin Press, 1980), 385–416.
  40. *Ibid.*, 401–2.
  41. At the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922, Lenin warned against foreign parties embracing Russian experience too readily, reverentially, and religiously. See V. I. Lenin, *August 1921–March 1923*, vol. 33, *Collected Works* (New York: Foreign Language Press, 1966), 418–31.
  42. Jules Humbert-Droz, *De Lénine à Staline: Dix ans au service de l'Internationale Communiste, 1921–1931* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1971), 95.
  43. See Jane Degras, ed., 1923–1928, vol. 2, *The Communist International, 1919–1943: Documents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 153–54, 195; Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew's *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) dates the slogan of Bolshevization and the process from the Fifth Comintern Congress, June–July 1924. However, Bolshevization was inherent in the Comintern's founding theses and attempts at implementation were pushed, as in Britain, from 1922. In dealing with “Bolshevization”—and Stalinization—concepts some accounts treat in largely organizational terms—it is important to remember that “organizational questions are inseparable from questions of program and tactics.” See Leon Trotsky, “The Draft Program of the Communist International: A Criticism of Fundamentals (1928),” in *The Third International After Lenin* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1966), 71.
  44. David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power and Terror in Inter-War Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); McIlroy and Campbell, “Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern,” 177.
  45. Liebman, *Leninism*, particularly 25–52, 57–61, 147–54. See also Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1990); Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to*

- Be Done? In Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Lars T. Lih, *Lenin* (London: Redaktion Books, 2011).
46. Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976; London: Pluto Press, 2017), 311.
  47. Liebman, *Leninism*, 298–304.
  48. Lars T. Lih, “Bolshevik Roots of International Communism,” in *World Revolution and Socialism in One Country, 1917–1941*, vol. 1, *The Cambridge History of Communism*, ed. Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 160; Degras, *Communist International*, 198.
  49. Degras, *Communist International*, 188–200.
  50. Quotes from Zumoff, *Communist International*, 152–53. Palmer discerns in the 1924–25 “Bolshevization” “positive aspects” and “attempts to address genuine problems.” See Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 5–6, 228. The insular language federations were assailed and party discipline tightened, but this was an essential part of the centralization and de-democratization of the International and its sections and a further step in the installation of bureaucratic centralism.
  51. Alexander Vatlin and Stephen A. Smith, “The Evolution of the Comintern, 1919–1943,” in *Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 190–91; Fridrikh Firsov, “Mechanisms of Power Realization in the Comintern,” in *Centenaire Jules Humbert-Droz: Colloque sur L’Internationale Communiste* (La Chaux-de-Fonds: Fondation Jules Humbert-Droz, 1992), 449–66; English Commission, 495/38/1, RGASPI; Broué, *Histoire de l’Internationale*, 378.
  52. Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 75–163.
  53. As Trotsky put it at the time: “The task of the parties in the Comintern assumes, therefore, an auxiliary character; their mission is to protect the USSR from intervention and not to fight for the conquest of power. It is, of course, not a question of the subjective intentions but of the objective logic of political thought.” See Trotsky, “Draft Program,” 79–80. The overriding influence was foreign policy with its goal of peace rather than revolution. See MacDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 94–98; Haslam, “Comintern,” 643–52.
  54. Alec Nove, ed., *The Stalin Phenomenon* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993); Michael Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the Second Revolution* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1987); Erik van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002); MacDermott and



- Agnew, *Comintern*, 90–107; McIlroy and Campbell, “For A Revolutionary Workers’ Government.”
55. Lewin, *Soviet Century*, 308.
56. Quoted in Deutscher, *Prophet Unarmed*, 95–96.
57. *Ibid.*, 147–48. The Fifth Congress formalized Russian domination, reiterating that all Comintern affiliates required “a centralized party permitting no fractions [*sic*], tendencies or groups; it must be fused in one mould.” See Degras, *Communist International*, 153–54.
58. Stephen Kotkin, *Paradoxes of Power, 1878–1928*, vol. 1, *Stalin* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 609–10; Aino Kuusinen, *Before and After Stalin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1974), 78.
59. Kotkin, *Stalin*, vol. 1, 506–7.
60. Peter Huber, “The Moscow Headquarters of the Comintern: Departments, Leading Organs, Soviet Influence and Decision Making,” in *Mechanisms of Power in the Soviet Union*, ed. Niels Erik Rosenfeldt, Bent Jensen, and Erik Kulavig (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 74; Serge Wolikow, “The Comintern as a World Network,” in Pons and Smith, *Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. 1, 237.
61. Weber, “Stalinization of the KPD,” 22–26.
62. Broué, *Histoire de l’Internationale*, 385. For work that characterizes the 1924–25 “Bolshevization” as a prelude to Stalinization, but depicts the two as sharing a great deal in common, see, for example, Emile Fabrol, “The Prelude to Stalinism,” in *Trotsky and the Origins of Trotskyism*, ed. Al Richardson (London: Francis Boutle, 2002), 20–34; Antoine Clavez, “The Bureaucratization and Destruction of the Party,” in *Trotsky and the Origins of Trotskyism*, 35–48.
63. Liebman, *Leninism*, 433.
64. The best contemporary dissection of Stalin’s attempts to cover his tracks and trace his own ideas—particularly socialism in one country—back to Lenin, is Trotsky’s “Draft Program.”
65. Stephen A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 388.
66. V. I. Lenin, “Notes of a Publicist,” in *Lenin 2017: Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2017), 32.
67. *Ibid.*, 32; V. I. Lenin, “On Cooperation” and “Better Fewer But Better,” in Žižek, *Lenin 2017*, 127–36, 149–61.
68. The less than sympathetic Robert Service concluded: “On his death-bed Lenin did not envisage a strategy of liquidating millions of innocent and hard-working peasants . . . Nor did he aim to exterminate his enemies, real and imaginary in the party . . . His vision of a future for mankind when all

- exploitation and opposition would disappear was sincere. That surely is the central point about his life." See Robert Service, *The Iron Ring*, vol. 3, *Lenin: A Political Life* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 322–23.
69. Stephen F. Cohen, "Bolshevism and Stalinism," in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 24.
  70. Smith, *Russian Revolution*, 389.
  71. For different views, see, for example, Reiman, *Birth of Stalinism*; Cohen, "Bolshevism and Stalinism"; Robert C. Tucker, "Stalinism as Revolution from Above," in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 77–110; Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974); Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization*.
  72. From a voluminous literature, expressing different viewpoints, see, for example, Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Stalinism* (London: Methuen, 1985); Nove, *Stalin Phenomenon*, 75–99; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jeffery J. Rossman, *Worker Resistance under Stalin: Class and Revolution on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
  73. Carr and Davies, *Foundations*, vol. 3; E. H. Carr, *Twilight of Comintern, 1930–1935* (London: Macmillan, 1982).
  74. Quoted in Stephen Kotkin, *Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941*, vol. 2, *Stalin* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 20.
  75. Klehr and Haynes, *American Communist Movement*, 25, 54; Draper, *American Communism*, 187–90; Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 166–67, 252–53. Draper remains an indispensable guide to American Communism in the 1920s, Palmer is a powerful update from another angle, and Zumoff, with *Communist International*, is a useful addition. Klehr and Haynes provide a succinct, critical introduction.
  76. Draper, *American Communism*, 21.
  77. Palmer makes clear how Cannon's life in the WP was in some sense determined by factionalism. See, especially, *James P. Cannon*, 202–51, 285–315.

78. Membership application forms placed allegiance to the Comintern before allegiance to the party: "The undersigned declares his adherence to the program and statutes of the Communist International and the Workers (Communist) Party . . ." Cited in Draper, *Roots*, 263.
79. McIlroy and Campbell's "Nina Ponomareva's Hats," 166–73, discusses control mechanisms.
80. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 188–201; and see also Draper, *American Communism*, 169–71.
81. Yet one scholar has observed that although it is difficult to ignore earlier instances of Soviet intervention and manipulation, "the tone in the transcripts and reports related to the deliberations of the Anglo-American Commission of 1925, for example, is surely not one of comradesly equality." See James R. Barrett, "The History of American Communism and Our Understanding of Stalinism," *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 182.
82. The episode is discussed in Draper, *American Communism*, 138–52; Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 236–39; Klehr and Haynes, *American Communist Movement*, 41–42.
83. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 247; James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 150–51.
84. Quoted in Draper, *American Communism*, 27.
85. Quoted in *ibid.*, 240. Zumoff suggests the detention of Hourwich was justified on the grounds that the Russians were right and Hourwich wrong on the question of whether the US party should remain underground or embrace legality. This is to justify the substitution of coercion for debate and democracy in resolving political differences between Moscow and the Americans. To claim "Lenin was not applying Russian fiat" (Zumoff, *Communist International*, 15) is to disregard the facts.
86. James P. Cannon, *The First Ten Years of American Communism: Report of a Participant* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1962), 179–80. The conformity of this past and future rebel highlights the WP cadre's subordination to Moscow. Cannon's recollected "doubts and discontents" only crystallized on his own account in 1926–27 when Zinoviev joined Trotsky and they were expelled. Alexander Bittelman recalled Cannon making disparaging remarks about Stalin in 1928, but he never formally criticized the political line of the Comintern before reading Trotsky's "Draft Program." See Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 205, 213; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "The Leadership of American Communism, 1924–1929: Sketches for a Prosopographical

- Portrait," *American Communist History* 19, nos. 1–2 (2020): 17 and notes 47 and 48.
87. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 177–88.
  88. Trotsky, "Draft Program," 135.
  89. For a good account, see Zumoff, *Communist International*, 112–29. See also American Commission of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, April–May 1924, 495/37/4, RGASPI, where the problems of building a Labor Party were given sobering perspective by CPGB leader Bob Stewart's reference to British experience.
  90. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 226–27.
  91. Quoted in Klehr and Haynes, *American Communist Movement*, 49.
  92. James P. Cannon, *James P. Cannon and the Early Years of American Communism: Selected Writings and Speeches, 1920–1928* (New York: Prometheus Research Library, 1992), 420.
  93. See Weber's comments on the German Party in "Stalinization," 35–37, and Palmer's discussion of WP factionalism in *James P. Cannon*, 286–87.
  94. Draper, *American Communism*, 282–314; Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 316–49; Zumoff, *Communist International*, 355–64.
  95. Palmer, *James P. Cannon*, 316–49, 360, 364.
  96. Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, Appendix 2.
  97. Quotations from English Commission, 495/38/1, RGASPI.
  98. J. T. Murphy, *New Horizons* (London: Bodley Head, 1941), 181.
  99. English Commission, 495/38/1, RGASPI. For the Report on Organization, see Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 73–89.
  100. English Commission, 495/38/1, RGASPI.
  101. For the discussion, see Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 84–87.
  102. Lars T. Lih, Oleg V. Naumov, and Oleg Khlevniuk, eds., *Stalin's Letters to Molotov, 1925–1936* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 1, 62.
  103. Quoted in Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 141.
  104. "Factionalism" was sometimes translated as "fractionalism." See Degras, *Communist International*, 264.
  105. For example, Robert Stewart to J. T. Murphy, 10 October 1926, 495/100/357, RGASPI.
  106. Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 167–68; Cathy Porter, *Alexandra Kollontai* (London: Virago Press, 1980), 388.
  107. John McIlroy, "New Light on Arthur Reade: Tracking Down Britain's First Trotskyist," *Revolutionary History* 8, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 40, 20–21.
  108. Quoted in McIlroy, "Arthur Reade," 40–41.
  109. Quoted in Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 141.

110. John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "The British and French Representatives to the Communist International, 1920–1939: A Comparative Survey," *International Review of Social History* 50, no. 2 (2005): 203–40.
111. Roderick Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924–1933: A Study of the National Minority Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 19–24.
112. English Commission, 495/38/1, RGASPI.
113. Degras, *Communist International*, 131.
114. Quoted in Hyman and Hinton, *Trade Unions and Revolution*, 31.
115. John McIlroy, "Revolutionaries," in *The Struggle for Dignity: Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout*, ed. John McIlroy, Alan Campbell, and Keith Gildart, 2nd ed. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), 274.
116. *Ibid.*, 274–76; Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 92–99.
117. English Commission (Dutt, Inkpin), 495/38/1, RGASPI.
118. Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 103–6; Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 75–77.
119. ECCI Presidium, 30 January 1924, CI 25, Communist Party Archive, Manchester (hereafter CPA); ECCI Presidium, "The British Labour Government and the Communist Party of Great Britain," 6 February 1924, 495/100/134, RGASPI.
120. Degras, *Communist International*, 171.
121. English Commission of the ECCI, Minutes and Transcripts, 13 November–10 December 1924, 495/38/5, RGASPI; ECCI Presidium, 3 December 1924, CI 24, CPA; Lawrence Parker, *Communists and Labour: The National Left-Wing Movement, 1925–1929* (London: Rotten Elements, 2018).
122. McIlroy and Campbell, "Nina Ponomareva's Hats."
123. English Commission, 495/38/1, RGASPI; English Commission, 495/38/5, RGASPI.
124. English Commission of the ECCI, Minutes and Transcripts, 13 May–1 December 1927, 495/38/11, RGASPI; CPGB Central Executive Committee, Minutes, 7–9 January 1928, 495/100/493, RGASPI.
125. Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 117–22.
126. Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 221–42. For an example of interventionist directives, see "Closed Letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain," 27 February 1929, reprinted in Macfarlane, *British Communist Party*, 308–19.
127. McIlroy and Campbell, "Nina Ponomareva's Hats," 181–82; McIlroy and Campbell, "For A Revolutionary Workers' Government," 545–55.
128. Quoted in Pelling, *British Communist Party*, 45–46.

129. Quoted in McIlroy, "Establishment of Intellectual Orthodoxy," 189.
130. McIlroy, "Establishment of Intellectual Orthodoxy," 197–233; John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "The Heresy of Arthur Horner," *Llafur: Journal of Welsh Labour History* 8, no. 2 (2001): 105–18.
131. Pelling, *British Communist Party*, 52. "For the first time in the history of the party, instead of the so-called 'democratic' open vote of Congress . . . a Bolshevik method was adopted . . . A list containing twelve of the old Central Committee and 23 new members was adopted by the Congress" (Page Arnot quoted in Pelling, *British Communist Party*, 52).
132. Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain* (London: Socialist Platform, 1986), 62–126.
133. Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 30. Studer makes no reference to the historiography of American Communism.
134. *Ibid.*, 159, n. 33. To support her characterization of British research, Studer cites McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, and LaPorte et al., "Introduction," ignoring relevant scholarship supporting the Stalinization thesis. See notes 20–22 above.
135. Weber, "Stalinization of the KPD," 22–26.
136. Taylor and Worley, "Testing the Limits," 241, 233. No examples are provided of branches pursuing alternative politics. While some members' commitment was undoubtedly limited and temporary, turnover of members and policy, inactivity, and apathy may just as plausibly be considered as enhancing rather than eroding leadership control. For an argument that the Stalinization of the American party was incomplete—which again begs the question of degrees of significance—see Storch, "Their unCommunist Stand."
137. See, for example, Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography," 143–45; Palmer, "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?" 214–23.
138. Thorpe, *British Communist Party*, 13.
139. That this relationship was unlikely to work is recognized in James R. Barrett, "What Went Wrong? The Communist Party, the US and the Comintern," *American Communist History* 17, no. 2 (2018): 176–84. Barrett, however, embraces the New Left paradigm, commending the Popular Front, while understating the extent to which it was a reformist "political tactic" ordered from and rescinded by Moscow.
140. Perry Anderson, "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," *New Left Review* 100 (November–December 1976): 52, quoting Amadeo Bordiga.
141. Lewin, *Soviet Century*, 379.

## The June Days of 2013 in Brazil and the Persistence of Top-Down Histories



*Sean Purdy*

This chapter contests the arguments of elements of the left in Brazil and beyond that have condemned the so-called June Days of 2013. In June 2013, the Free Fare Movement (Movimento Passe Livre, or MPL) in São Paulo—a left-wing autonomous political formation oriented by a horizontalist strategy and tactics—led a movement against a R\$0.20 (approximately C\$0.05) increase in bus, train, and subway fares in the city. The movement of young workers and students quickly spread throughout the major cities of the country, mobilizing at its peak millions of people in militant street demonstrations and occupations of public buildings. State and municipal governments across the country were forced to revoke the fare increases, and, in reaction, the federal government of President Dilma Rousseff of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) promised a series of sweeping reforms to improve urban mobility and public services. The promises were not fulfilled: the Workers' Party government instead opted for a neoliberal turn and a wave of conservatism and reactionary politics eventually emerged in the country, culminating in a parliamentary coup with the impeachment of Rousseff in 2016.

From the beginning, however, intellectuals, militants, and leaders of social democratic political parties—especially, but not exclusively, from the Workers' Party—criticized the June Days. They argued that the demonstrations were manipulated from above by the corporate media and the right and cynically used as an attack on the social democratic governments of Fernando Haddad, Workers' Party mayor of São Paulo, and the federal

Workers' Party government of Rousseff, initiating a series of events that would lead to her unjust impeachment in 2016 and the election of the neo-fascist Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. Indeed, in 2017 and 2018, Workers' Party leaders such as Fernando Haddad, the Workers' Party's losing presidential candidate in 2018, and former president Lula da Silva repeated the argument that the June Days had initiated the conservative groundswell in the country.

Based on a critical historical approach developed from the 1960s on by historians such as E. P. Thompson and Bryan D. Palmer, a broad reading of social movements and the Workers' Party in the historical and social science literature, and a rigorous empirical study of the June Days, I argue that these criticisms are erroneous for a number of reasons:

1. they derive from a decidedly top-down approach, that is, an empirical analysis, political formulation, and practice of the left detached from the base of the working class and social movements. These critics thus called the young protesters of 2013 "ungrateful" for not being satisfied with all the supposed advances of the governments of the Workers' Party from 2003 to 2013. Similarly, they believe that the June Days were merely driven, in a superficial way, through social media networks. These arguments show a deep ignorance of social movements historically, and especially in the more recent neoliberal period;
2. there is a distinct lack of understanding of the changes in the structure of the working class in Brazil over the last decades, which have seen a substantial increase in precarious workers and growing expectations created by modest advances during the Workers' Party governments;
3. such criticisms fail to engage with the fact that other struggles emerged before, during, and after June 2013, such as the record number of strikes in the country in 2012–14 and the important struggles of the Homeless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto, MTST);
4. the criticisms ignore the limits of the Workers' Party's economic development model, which reacted to the global economic crisis through neoliberal austerity policies;



5. they also neglect the consequences of ruinous alliances with central and right-wing parties that compromised policies against oppression and advanced conservative policies in the areas of public security and policing;
6. they mistakenly locate the nature and timing of the conservative wave, falsely linking right-wing groups that emerged after the June Days to the progressive demonstrations against the fare increases and poor quality of public services and urban mobility, and neglecting the importance of the Workers' Party's own policies in nourishing the conservative tide.

### Histories from “Below,” “Above,” and “from the Bottom Up”

The history of the concept of “history from below” is relatively well known, but it is worthwhile briefly discussing the trajectory of the concept itself in the historiographical literature and in the intellectual/political formation on which the present chapter is based. First coined by the founder of the *Annales*, Lucien Febvre, “history from below” became explicitly known in the English-speaking world after the publication of an article with this title by E. P. Thompson in 1966, but also implicitly from the impact of his *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>1</sup> Although the title of the 1966 article was likely added by an editor since Thompson did not actually use the term in the article, the notion that “history from below” would focus on the hitherto “history-less”<sup>2</sup> — “the lives and struggles of ordinary people . . . social relations at the grass roots, popular forms of protest, everyday activities such as work and leisure, as well as attitudes, beliefs, practices, and behavior”<sup>3</sup> — would be welcomed by critical historians, especially Marxists, from the 1960s onward who aimed to counter the “history of great men” (and, occasionally, “great women”) still prominent in the academy. Not by accident, such an insight ended up fostering not only research on workers, but also on women, slaves, immigrants, and other oppressed groups. And the influence of the concept was felt not just in Europe and North America, but in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, where it conceptually merged with similar traditions, such as microhistory, *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life), and people's histories.<sup>4</sup>

In the specific field of labour and working-class history, strongly influenced by Thompson, historians such as Bryan D. Palmer, Gregory S. Kealey,

and others in the Canadian context in the 1970s and 1980s focused on the class experiences of workers and their cultures of protest, cutting against the staid and largely institutional histories of working-class organizations and political parties (especially social democratic unions and parties).<sup>5</sup> Again, following Thompson, there was a clear interest in countering histories, even by Marxists, that mechanistically viewed the determination of political outcomes by economic structures, ignoring “temporality, the dialectical unity of the economic and political, and the complexity of capitalist totality.”<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes, such practitioners bent the stick too far, offering one-sided appreciations of the class struggle and ignoring material determinations and the influence and actions of the dominant classes.<sup>7</sup> Yet it is noteworthy that both Thompson and Palmer also authored detailed histories of the ruling classes or working-class histories with particular attention paid to ruling-class ideas, strategies, and tactics.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that one can pursue “history from below” or, using Staughton Lynd’s notion, “history from the bottom up”<sup>9</sup> without neglecting economic structures and the dominant classes’ ideas and practices in the class struggle.

What’s this got to do with the struggles of young workers and students in June 2013 in Brazil? First, “history from below” involves a clear political commitment to the struggles of ordinary people despite the often ambiguous and contradictory matrix of ideas and practices and unintended outcomes involved in popular struggles. This does not mean neglecting rigorous empirical research and conceptual clarity; in fact, these are even more important when an explicit political commitment is adopted. Second, there is a concerted focus on “class as a historical process and dynamic relationship” that must take into account “contingencies of class struggle, relational processes in the formation of political subjectivity, and the role of contending ideologies.”<sup>10</sup> I argue in the rest of this chapter that left critics of the June Days not only ignored these insights from class analysis, but, in toeing the party line of the Workers’ Party and seeking specious excuses for the party’s misfortunes, also neglected honest and rigorous empirical research.

### **June 2013: “The Most Expensive 20 Cents in Brazilian History”?**

While individual Workers’ Party militants and the party’s youth section in São Paulo participated in or supported the Free Fare Movement—led

demonstrations in June 2013, several Workers' Party and Communist Party of Brazil (Partido Comunista do Brasil, PCdoB) councillors in the municipal government of São Paulo, and later, key intellectual and political figures in the Workers' Party, condemned the first demonstrations on 6, 7, and 11 June as the violent acts of vandals, sharply questioning the legitimacy of the movement.<sup>11</sup> An influential journalist who supported the Workers' Party, Paulo Henrique Amorim, dismissed the acts as a "coup" led by conservative media conglomerate *Rede Globo*.<sup>12</sup> Prominent intellectual and founder of the Workers' Party Marilena Chauí, a retired professor of philosophy at the University of São Paulo, had (in general) a much more sober and reflexive analysis, but his still failed to distinguish between the progressive movement of workers and students that managed to get the increase of the tariff revoked and raised progressive demands and the conservative "anti-corruption" and anti-Workers' Party minority that emerged at the end of the cycle of demonstrations in June.<sup>13</sup> In April 2018, Professor Igor Fuser of the Federal University of ABC wrote the following post on his Facebook page, "June 2013: the most expensive 20 cents in Brazilian history," and in the comments defended the argument that the June Days resulted in the impeachment of President Dilma as well as the anti-working class politics of the Temer government from 2016–18.<sup>14</sup>

Criticisms of the June Days by the key Workers' Party cadre continued in the years following 2013. In January 2014, Gilberto Carvalho, the former chief of staff of President Lula, a minister of the Rousseff government, and a supposed interlocutor of the latter with social movements, called the demonstrators "almost" ungrateful:

When the demonstrations occurred in June, on our part there was a scare. We were perplexed. When I say "we," I refer to the government and all our traditional movements. (There was) a certain pain, a misunderstanding and almost a feeling of ingratitude. (It was like) saying: "we have done so much for these people and now they stand up against us."<sup>15</sup>

In August 2017, former President Lula expressed: "We precipitated in thinking that 2013 was a democratic thing. That the people went to the street because they were very worried about that collective public transportation thing."<sup>16</sup> In March 2018, he suggested that the June Days had been planned in the United States (without citing by whom or how exactly).<sup>17</sup> In June

2017, Fernando Haddad, a former minister of the Lula government and mayor of São Paulo during the June Days, said that the coup against former president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 would hardly have occurred had it not been for the June Days, blaming nebulous and (again unspecified) “large corporations” for manipulating social networks and involving “possible infiltrators” in the protests.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, the most calumnious declaration came in late December 2019 when Workers’ Party vice-president Alberto Cantalice compared the June Days of 2013 with the infamous “March for the Family with God for Liberty” in support of the coup in April 1964 that inaugurated a brutal twenty-year military regime in Brazil.<sup>19</sup>

In the academic literature on the June Days, critical scholar-activists in Brazil, such as Elena Judensnaider et al., Erminia Maricato, Ruy Braga, Marcelo Badaró Mattos, André Singer, Alfredo Saad-Filho, Felipe Demier, Raúl Zibechi, Ruda Ricci, Aldo Sauda, and the present author have celebrated the revolt from below as a genuinely progressive and democratic movement and emphasized the decidedly *class* nature of the June Days in the wider contexts of the economic crisis and the erosion of the “left neoliberal” project of the Workers’ Party.<sup>20</sup> While the historian Alexandre Fortes acknowledges the importance of the revolt from below, he nonetheless stresses the “multiple narratives”—including conservative and anti-Workers’ Party perspectives—that emerged from the struggles.<sup>21</sup>

Among other academic researchers, political philosopher Marcos Nobre sees the mobilizations more generally as a popular denunciation of the absence of tangible political representation in the country, as a veritable “shock to democracy”—the *lack* of democracy in a country whose traditional political parties have consolidated a closed political system that allows for little real decision making among citizens.<sup>22</sup> Giuseppe Cocco utilizes Tony Negri’s argument of the “multitude,” arguing that the lack of formal leadership and horizontal organizational forms in the Free Fare Movement were the key strengths that led to the success of the movement.<sup>23</sup> Manuel Castells sees recent social movements, including the June Days, as distinct from earlier movements of social contestation in that they present a “singular content” that relies on the “connectivity” of social media networks, promising a genuinely new form of utopian subjectivity and rebelliousness.<sup>24</sup> In another text, I have already engaged with these social scientific interpretations of the June Days.<sup>25</sup>

In the following six sections, I contest, in particular, the arguments that the June Days were anti-democratic, right-wing, and resulted in President Rouseff's coup in 2016, the draconian cutbacks of the Temer government, and the ascension of Jair Bolsonaro. I have been influenced and inspired in this effort by Bryan D. Palmer's historical and political interventions over his long career—his rigorous empirical research and his explorations of the multi-faceted experiences of working-class and popular mobilizations and the centrality of capitalist social formations.

## Reformism from Above and Socialism from Below

The chief basis of the arguments against the June Days by left commentators is the notion that social movements should not operate independently and autonomously from a progressive government like the Workers' Party. "Leave it in our hands and we will do everything (or what we can) for you" describes the attitude of the type of leftist politics constructed by the Workers' Party. Already in the 1990s, the grassroots branches within the Workers' Party—which played a key role in formulating party policies in its first decade—had become increasingly moribund.<sup>26</sup> The Workers' Party was gradually transformed into a party of professional politicians with interests linked more to electoral politics and the party bureaucracy than to grassroots struggles.<sup>27</sup> In the Workers' Party governments from 2003–16, most social movements and the trade union movement were characterized by their close relationship with the government, relinquishing strikes and protests in favour of negotiating behind closed doors with party and government officials. Tens of thousands of key ministerial and bureaucratic positions in the state were filled by Workers' Party militants, many of them ex-union leaders and social movement activists, as well as by members of allied political parties from the centre and the right. The Workers' Party maintained the financial orthodoxy of neoliberalism, yet achieved modest social reforms "from above," that is, through government programs formulated and implemented from above and detached from the base of the working class and social movements.<sup>28</sup>

It is necessary to highlight that the June Days constituted a legitimate progressive social movement composed of young workers, university students, and the left, who mobilized first against the increase in public transport fares. The class character of the participants on a national scale

in the demonstrations from 17 June to 20 June, the peak dates of the uprising, was quite clear: while 70–80 percent of the demonstrators had either graduated from post-secondary school or were currently attending, 50 percent of demonstrators were earning working-class incomes, 25 percent had lower-middle-class wages, and only slightly more than 20 percent had upper-middle-class salaries.<sup>29</sup> The majority of demonstrators belonged to what many critical researchers call the “new proletariat” or “precariat,” characterized by relatively high educational levels after more than a decade of expansion of higher education opportunities, but employment in low-wage, precarious jobs in telemarketing, services, and education, among other occupations.<sup>30</sup> The June Days were thus distinguished by a massive working-class revolt against precariousness not only in public transit, but in public services in general.

After the first demonstrations against abusive public transit fare hikes, protesters expanded their demands, but they were still progressive and class-based demands. Flags, posters, and interviews with protesters highlighted claims related to the right to free assembly and expression, the end of police violence and racism, and improvements in public services, as well as against the corporate media monopoly.<sup>31</sup> Even after the annulment of the fare increases in São Paulo on 19 June, a survey done by Ibope on 20 June 2013—the day demonstrators celebrated the victory—carried out in the capital cities of the seven most populous states and in the federal capital, Brasília, shows that of the participants, 37 percent were primarily against the increase in fares; 12.1 percent wanted improvements in public health; 5.5 percent were against a legislative proposal to give the judiciary more investigative power; 5.3 percent were for improvements in education; 4.5 percent were against the FIFA World Cup/Confederations Cup; 1.3 percent were against violent police action; and 1.3 percent were there for improvements in criminal justice and public security.<sup>32</sup> Of the demonstrators, 29.9 percent also expressed that they were protesting against the “political environment,” including 24.2 percent who were against corruption and misappropriation of public money, which may be indicative of some (but by no means all) interventions by right-wing activists. It is true that a small group of right-wing protesters had already participated in the demonstrations on 17 June in São Paulo, the fifth Free Fare Movement demonstration, but until 20 June, after the victory against the fare

increases, the vast majority of demonstrators were on the street in favour of a progressive agenda.<sup>33</sup>

Another misleading argument raised in criticism of the June Days is that they were merely superficially driven by social networks. The role of social networks was said to be exaggerated and linked to the notion analyzed above about the role of social movements: demonstrators were supposedly ignorant and only went out on the streets because of Facebook or Twitter. As Lula simplistically put it: "With nimble fingers on their cell phones, youth went to the streets all over the world to protest, connected by social networks."<sup>34</sup> Social scientist Luiz Werneck Vianna opined simplistically: "Beyond social media, the people are not organized."<sup>35</sup> Without a doubt, the use of the internet and social networks to discuss strategy and tactics and divulge protests was important and should be studied more.<sup>36</sup> However, it is extreme technological determinism to assert that millions mobilized simply because of participation in social networks. This was reflected in the sloppy journalism of *The Guardian* and *The Economist*,<sup>37</sup> and was reproduced by at least one social movement theorist,<sup>38</sup> for example, who reported that protesters carried posters with the slogan "We left Facebook," which was incorrectly translated in these publications as "We came from Facebook." It is a relatively small example, but it demonstrates the ignorance and/or distortion of material questions in social movement analysis.

The incredulity of Workers' Party leaders, signalled above by Gilberto Carvalho and Fernando Haddad, as to the legitimacy of the June Days demonstrates that the possibility of a mass movement criticizing the Workers' Party government simply was not contemplated nor taken seriously. Therefore, these critics called the young protesters of 2013 "ungrateful" for not being satisfied with all the supposed advances of the Workers' Party governments in the first decades of the 2000s. The Workers' Party leaders failed to understand that the June Days confronted the entire establishment, which included their party. The Workers' Party could simply not comprehend a mass movement that was not under its control and that questioned the basis of its parliamentary practice from above. Their logic was binary: "if it is not under our control, it's right wing."

## Changes in Class Structure and the Growing Expectations of the Working Population

I will briefly highlight here the emergence of workers' discontent during the first term of Workers' Party President Rousseff (2011–14), especially among those with low-paid, unstable jobs, within the limits of the development model directed by the Workers' Party. The present crisis cannot be understood without taking into account the discontent of the working class, especially from those in the most precarious sectors in Brazil, and their part in the June Days.

As the historian of the Workers' Party, Lincoln Secco, argues, the party successfully promoted modest social reforms, yet ceded hegemony to the "ideologues of the financial markets."<sup>39</sup> Alfredo Saad-Filho has exhaustively shown in a series of studies that the Workers' Party maintained "the neoliberal macroeconomic 'Policy Tripod' imposed by the preceding administration, including inflation targeting and central bank independence, free capital movements and floating exchange rates, and tight fiscal policies."<sup>40</sup> Interest rates were among the highest in the world, and almost half of government receipts was used to pay off the national debt.<sup>41</sup> According to statistics from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the profits of Brazil's four largest banks in 2013 were larger than the gross domestic products of eighty-three countries.<sup>42</sup>

The modest advances in employment, income, and social programs during the Lula governments in the context of a (temporarily) favourable world market for Brazilian exports significantly increased expectations among the Brazilian population. As Saad-Filho argued, "the poor want to consume more, larger masses of people want social inclusion and both want better public services."<sup>43</sup> While Lula's governments created more than two million jobs a year between 2003 and 2010, 94 percent of them only paid up to one and a half times the minimum wage.<sup>44</sup> Job creation had already begun to slow down by 2009; from 2009 to 2012, the average time in employment also fell from eighteen to sixteen months, suggesting deterioration in the employment market.<sup>45</sup> Job turnover was also very high: in 2012, 45 percent of newly hired workers quit their jobs within six months.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, as Ruy Braga has shown, the period between 2003 and 2010 was "marked by economic growth and formalization of employment, but the current rate of informality [was] still 44%."<sup>47</sup>



While the government widely trumpeted that it had brought tens of millions of Brazilians into the “middle class,” economist Marcio Pochmann, himself a leading Workers’ Party intellectual and politician, has shown that this is a myth: the weakening of basic industry that provides relatively high wages and benefits and the massive expansion of outsourcing actually reduced the middle class. He emphasizes that there has been no fundamental change in class structure in the twenty-first century.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the unique focus on the agribusiness industry, the creation of precarious jobs, and a reliance on neoliberal financial policies would leave Brazil particularly vulnerable to the global economic crisis that hit Brazil hard in 2011–12.

There were modest reforms and some improvements in public services in the areas of education, health, and housing, but they did not meet the expectations of most Brazilians. Expenditures on education and health were inadequate compared to developed and even developing countries among the BRICS.<sup>49</sup> The “My Home, My Life” housing program launched by the Lula government in 2009 had modest successes, but by no means solved the deficit in decent housing. Moreover, it was very beneficial to the construction firms, which retained control over many aspects of the program.<sup>50</sup> One side effect of this program, combined with the high interest rates, was the creation of a speculative bubble in urban real estate markets, with house prices and rents increasing much more than increases in income and the cost of construction.<sup>51</sup>

More important in relation to the June Days were the huge discrepancies in urban mobility—not only the formal availability of public transport in the city, but also its cost and quality. As Saad-Filho argues, “rapidly rising incomes at the bottom of the pyramid and rising auto sales have not been accompanied by improvements in infrastructure, leading to an overall deterioration in the quality of urban life.”<sup>52</sup> Long journeys on overcrowded, uncomfortable, and relatively expensive vans, buses, trains, and subways are daily facts of life for many Brazilians.<sup>53</sup> According to the Brazilian government’s statistical research institute, IPEA, from 2000 to 2012, the cost of transportation in Brazil as a whole increased by 67 percent above inflation.<sup>54</sup> Taking into account average wages, the public transport systems in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are among the most expensive in the world.<sup>55</sup> It is no surprise, then, that the argument for “the right to the city” during the June Days attracted broad support among those of the working class, especially young workers from the peripheries of large cities.<sup>56</sup>

## June and the 2012–14 Strike Wave

It is valuable to place the June Days within the broader cycle of protests and strikes that began in 2010 and only ended in 2014. It was no accident that after a decade of decidedly uneven growth, strike levels began to substantially increase in 2008, reaching a peak in 2013 with more strikes (2,050) than in any other year since at least 1978.<sup>57</sup> According to Ruy Braga, many of the 2010–12 strikers were “semi-skilled or unskilled laborers who entered and exited the labor market, young workers in their first jobs, and workers who had recently come out of the informal market.”<sup>58</sup> In fact, there was a marked increase in strikes by precarious workers in the public and private sectors with little tradition of workplace action.<sup>59</sup> Salary increases in 2014 even surpassed the levels of 2013, with increases on average of 1.4 percent above inflation.<sup>60</sup>

The main explanations for the low level of strikes throughout the early 2000s were the precariousness of labour relations in the context of neo-liberal productive relations and what Marcel Badaró Mattos calls the “progressive pacification” of many of the combative union leaderships in the country and their incorporation into the Workers’ Party government.<sup>61</sup> Since 2010, therefore, Brazil has witnessed not only rising expectations but economic slowdown, increasing numbers of strikes, and the gradual erosion of the economic and political development model of *Lulismo*. The June Days of 2013 thus did not arise from nowhere.

Indeed, the original protests against public transit fare increases were not new (the Free Fare Movement had mobilized around this question since 2005), and neither was the plethora of demands for improvements in social services. The Homeless Workers’ Movement had already begun to mobilize through occupations of empty buildings and large street demonstrations, employing many of the tactics historically used by the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*, MST) and redeployed by the Free Fare Movement in 2013. Furthermore, one of the key leaders of the Homeless Workers’ Movement explicitly acknowledged the inspiration of the June Days for the group’s escalating campaign of occupations and street demonstrations in late 2013 and 2014.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, in many strikes and mobilizations throughout the 2000s (2000–13), public sector workers had raised similar banners to those of the protesters in June 2013 on the necessity to preserve and expand social

programs. It would also be negligent to ignore the influences of mass protests on an international scale, such as the Arab Spring and the Gezi Park mobilizations in Turkey that occurred at roughly the same time as the June Days.

The June Days also boosted the profile of the *Comitês Populares da Copa* (People's Cup Committees) in cities hosting games for the 2014 World Cup, raising awareness about the reckless spending and corruption involved in preparing for such mega-events.<sup>63</sup> The Free Fare Movement–led activities in June were also particularly influential in the late 2013 strikes by education workers, especially in Rio de Janeiro, where teachers and their supporters (with certainly many of the same people on the streets as in June) mobilized a spectacular struggle of occupations and resistance in the face of police repression that on several occasions brought out tens of thousands.<sup>64</sup> And in March 2014, street cleaners in Rio de Janeiro paralyzed the city in support of better salaries and working conditions in the middle of the popular Carnival holiday against the wishes of their own union leaders. The largely black workers won the sympathy of the majority of the city's population and eventually achieved their principal demands through massive street rallies and the blocking of major urban arteries.<sup>65</sup>

### Austerity and Neoliberalism of the Dilma Government

On 24 June 2013, President Rousseff met with twenty-seven state governors and twenty-six mayors of capital cities, proposing five “social pacts” involving health, education, public transportation, political reform, and fiscal responsibility. As demonstrations declined in the second half of 2013, however, the government shelved all the pacts except the last, that of fiscal responsibility. Although Rousseff's government was already faltering in 2014, it managed to win the second round of the elections that year by a short margin, largely due to the support of the working class.<sup>66</sup> This support was conditional on the continuation of formal employment opportunities, even if these were of low quality and poorly paid.

However, shortly after starting its second term in 2015, the Rousseff government followed clearly neoliberal austerity policies, choosing the head of the country's largest bank to be finance minister, cutting R\$80 billion from the annual budget (drastically affecting social spending), and restricting pension and labour rights.<sup>67</sup> And since the election, an economic

contraction has occurred, driven by federal spending cuts and increased unemployment (which rose from 8.5 percent at the beginning of 2015 to 12 percent at the end of 2016), hitting both the urban precariat and the organized working class.<sup>68</sup>

The traditional middle class, in turn, some of whom were hitherto supportive of the Workers' Party and the main trade union federation, the Unified Workers' Central (Central Unica dos Trabalhadores, CUT), moved toward a markedly right-wing economic agenda and politics. One important reason for this was the formalization of employment conditions for those doing domestic work, widely employed by the middle class, which led to increased salaries at a time when the heated labour market had raised the cost of services in general. In fact, the Workers' Party governments had effected a certain de-concentration of income among workers and this eventually had impacts on the middle class. Services provided by precarious workers to the middle class saw prices increase, so concierges, pedicures, manicures, and hairdressers, for example, were more expensive, especially domestic employees.<sup>69</sup> If one takes into account the tight labour markets and strategies to increase the minimum wage at more than the rate of inflation, which had a direct impact on domestic work, the cost of living for the middle class certainly increased significantly.<sup>70</sup> In addition, the increased buying power of workers led to their higher engagement in mass consumption. Workers began to use spaces, such as shopping malls and airports, that had previously been considered exclusive for the traditional middle classes. Lastly, the improving access to low-quality private universities for the children of workers meant increased competition for middle-class children for jobs that paid more than one and a half times the minimum monthly wage.<sup>71</sup>

Finally, the deepening economic crisis in 2014–15 affected small and medium-sized businesses particularly sharply. Influenced by the reactionary and conservative corporate media in the country, the middle classes grew increasingly dissatisfied with the measures instituted by the Workers' Party government. When the Petrolão/Car Wash scandal broke, in which the state petroleum company Petrobras was linked to kickbacks and money laundering, the dissatisfaction of the traditional middle class and small and medium-sized businesses exploded into a huge wave of protest driven by a reactionary political agenda.<sup>72</sup>

The collapse of Rousseff's support base in the National Congress was only the most visible face of a crisis that was rooted in the very social structure of a country that had suffered a deep recession for two years. The Brazilian development model, which had promised the creation of jobs for precarious workers and the levelling-out of income inequalities, was no longer able to guarantee corporate profits, let alone win the consent of the subaltern classes. Faced with a worsening international crisis, the main representatives of Brazilian business, with the private banks in the lead, began to demand that the federal government toughen its austerity measures.<sup>73</sup> In short, for large companies it was necessary to deepen the recessionary adjustment, increase unemployment, and contain the strike cycle in order to impose a series of unpopular reforms, such as cuts to social security and labour rights. This agenda flowed into the Workers' Party government's actions. The fiscal adjustment that Rousseff thus implemented early in her second mandate betrayed the expectations of the fifty-five million voters who had been seduced by her campaign promises of improving employment numbers, social programs, and labour rights. Certainly, the vulnerability of the Rousseff government that resulted in impeachment in 2016 was due to these policies and decidedly not to demonstrations by young workers and students in 2013 around abusive public transit fare increases and demands for improvements in public services.

### Dubious Alliances

The argument that the June Days resulted in the wave of conservatism and eventually the parliamentary coup also neglects the consequences of the Workers' Party's ruinous alliances with central and right-wing parties throughout the government's four mandates (2003–16). These not only compromised its economic policies, but also handcuffed its social policies against oppression as well as its policing and drugs policy. In the name of "governability," the Workers' Party, at all levels of government, brokered alliances with right-wing politicians to secure support in the National Congress, state assemblies, and municipal governments. In addition to alienating the party's own base, Workers' Party governments undermined their own policies in a number of areas associated with the fight against oppression, leaving an open human rights opponent, for example, the

evangelical federal deputy Marco Feliciano, to preside over the Commission of Human Rights of the National Congress.<sup>74</sup>

The Workers' Party's public security policy and its effective support for a phony "war against drugs" witnessed Brazil's prison population rise to the third highest in the world as well as record-breaking numbers of homicides and violent crimes, many by Brazilian security forces that regularly kill poor and black people with impunity.<sup>75</sup> An "anti-terrorism" law pushed through by President Rousseff in 2014 and the police brutality against social movements was, at best, wilfully ignored by Workers' Party governments at the federal, municipal, and state levels.<sup>76</sup> Added to the failure to enact media reforms to reduce the power of the *de facto* corporate media monopoly of the *Globo* group (also sought after as an ally by the Workers' Party government), these policies ended up giving legitimacy to the conservative political tide, while erstwhile allies from the centre and the right quickly split with the Workers' Party, voting overwhelmingly for impeachment and/or composing and supporting the Temer government and, more recently, the neo-fascist government of Jair Bolsonaro.

### The Timing Issue

Rousseff won the elections in 2014 by a bare margin for many of the reasons outlined above. There is no doubt that right-wing social movements such as the Free Brazil Movement (Movimento Brasil Livre, MBL) and Come to the Street (*Vem pra Rua*) (both created in 2014) took advantage of the weakness of the Rousseff government and mobilized in conjunction with the media and conservative parties to overthrow it in 2015 and 2016. There is also no doubt that these groups cynically adopted the tactics of the mass demonstrations that characterized the June Days, yet they were funded, aided, and disseminated by traditional right-wing political parties, the corporate media, and international foundations.<sup>77</sup> However, in comparing the activists of the June Days and these later groups, one can see a radically different social composition and demands as well as clearly opposing political-ideological agendas.<sup>78</sup>



The argument that the June Days resulted in Rousseff's impeachment and the vicious cutbacks of the Temer government is misleading because it simply ignores and/or overlooks many other important factors in explaining the period. In this chapter, I have shown that the leftist political model of the Workers' Party is based on a notion of reformism from above, so it distrusted any social movement that criticized it. I also showed that the economic development model of the Workers' Party was exhausted during the first Rousseff government, frustrating the expectations of the population. I argued that the Workers' Party's spurious alliances with the right and its accelerated adoption of neoliberal policies fueled right-wing politics, which resulted in the president's impeachment and the Temer government's assault against workers. Finally, I showed that the very sequence of events related to the conservative turn in the country cannot be honestly connected to the June Days.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Benjamin Glyn Fogel and the editors of this collection for suggestions as well as the militants of the Free Fare Movement and Bryan D. Palmer for continued inspiration.

## NOTES

1. E. P. Thompson, "History from Below," *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, 279–80; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).
2. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "History from Below," *Social Scientist* 11, no. 4 (April 1983): 4.
3. Andrew I. Port, "History from Below, the History of Everyday Life, and Microhistory," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 11, ed. James D. Wright, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 108.
4. Ibid. See also Staughton Lynd, *Doing History from the Bottom Up* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).
5. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979); Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

6. Jeffrey Webber, "The Deadweight of Structure: A Response to René Rojas on Latin America's Pink Tide," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 7 January 2019, <https://nacla.org/news/2019/01/08/deadweight-structure-response-ren%C3%A9-rojas-latin-america%E2%80%99s-pink-tide>.
7. See, for example, Bryan D. Palmer's critical appreciation of the work of Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh: Bryan D. Palmer, "Hydra's Materialist History," *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 4 (2003): 373–94.
8. Among other texts, see E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (London: Pantheon Books, 1975); Bryan D. Palmer, *Capitalism Comes to the Backcountry: The Goodyear Invasion of Napanee* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1994); Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
9. Lynd, *Doing History*.
10. Webber, "The Deadweight of Structure." See also Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky, and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, "Marxism and Social Movements: An Introduction," in *Marxism and Social Movements*, ed. Colin Barker, Laurence Cox, John Krinsky, and Alf Gunvald Nilsen (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–40.
11. Diego Zanchetta, "Vereadores chamam manifestantes de 'criminosos' e transformam sessão em ato de repúdio," *Estado de São Paulo*, 12 June 2013; Elena Judensnaider, Luciana Lima, Marcelo Pomar, and Pablo Ortellado, *Vinte centavos: A luta contra o aumento* (São Paulo: Veneta, 2013), 55–64; Daniela Pinheiro, "O comissário: Rui Falcão e a missão de comandar o PT depois das revoltas de junho e do desgaste de Dilma," *Piauí* 83 (August 2013); Mônica Bergamo, "Em dois," *Folha de São Paulo*, 19 June 2013.
12. Paulo Henrique Amorim, "Globo derruba a grade. É o Golpe!" *Conversa Afiada*, 20 June 2013, <http://www.conversaafiada.com.br/brasil/2013/06/20/globo-derruba-a-grade-e-o-golpe>.
13. Marilena Chauí, "As manifestações de junho de 2013 na cidade de São Paulo," *Teoria e Debate*, 113, 27 June 2013, reproduced in <https://www.geledes.org.br/marilena-chauí-as-manifestacoes-de-junho-de-2013-na-cidade-de-sao-paulo/>; Marilena Chauí, "Entrevista," *Revista Cult* 182 (20 August 2013), reproduced in *O Cafezinho*, <http://www.ocafezinho.com/2013/08/28/chauí-fala-sobre-manifestacoes/>.
14. Igor Fuser, Facebook Post, 22 April 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/igor.fuser.9/posts/10214987597939291>.
15. "Houve quase ingratidão," diz ministro sobre protestos no país," *Folha de São Paulo*, 24 January 2014. Translated by the author.
16. "Lula diz que foi precipitado considerar atos de 2013 democráticos," *Folha de São Paulo*, 11 August 2017. Translated by the author.



17. Mônica Bergamo, "Entrevista com Lula," *Folha de São Paulo*, 1 March 2018. Lula repeated this claim in late 2019 in an interview with Venezuelan state television. See Telesur, "Entrevista de Lula a Telesur, *O Cafezinho*, 31 December 2019, <https://www.ocafezinho.com/2019/12/31/entrevista-de-lula-a-telesur/>.
18. Fernando Haddad, "Vivi na pele o que aprendi nos livros," *Piauí* 129 (June 2017), <https://piaui.folha.uol.com.br/materia/vivi-na-pele-o-que-aprendi-nos-livros/>. Translated by the author.
19. See Congresso em Foco, "Vice-presidente do PT compara 2013 com marchas pró-ditadura," 29 December 2019, <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/eleicoes/vice-presidente-do-pt-compara-2013-com-marchas-pro-ditadura/>.
20. Judensnaider et al., *Vinte centavos*; Erminia Maricato, ed., *Cidades rebeldes* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2013); Ruy Braga, "Cenedic: Uma sociologia à altura de Junho," *Blog do Boitempo*, 26 May 2014, <http://blogdaboitempo.com.br/2014/05/26/cenedic-uma-sociologia-a-altura-de-junho/>; Ruy Braga, *A pulsão plebeia: Trabalho, precariedade e rebeliões sociais* (São Paulo: Alameda, 2015); Marcelo Badaró Mattos, "New and Old Forms of Social Movements: A Discussion from Brazil," *Critique* 43 (2015): 485–99; André Singer, "Brasil, junho de 2013: Classes e ideologias cruzadas," *Novos Estudos CEBRAP* 97 (2013): 23–40; Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Mass Protests under 'Left Neoliberalism': Brazil, June–July 2013," *Critical Sociology* 39 (2013): 657–69; Felipe Demier, *Depois do golpe: A dialética da democracia blindada no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad, 2016); Raúl Zibechi, "Autonomy in Brazil: Below and Behind the June Uprising," *ROAR Magazine*, 21 November 2013, <http://roarmag.org/2013/11/raul-zibechi-brazilian-uprisings/>; Rudá Ricci, *Ruas, Nas: A política que emergiu em junho de 2013* (Belo Horizonte: Letramento, 2014); Aldo Cordeiro Sauda, "Do direito à cidade à anticorrupção: Deslocamento de pautas, diversificação de atores e desdobramentos de junho de 2013" (master's thesis, State University of Campinas, 2019); Sean Purdy, "Brazil's June Days of 2013: Mass Protest, Class, and the Left," *Latin American Perspectives* 46, no. 4 (July 2019): 15–36; Ruy Braga and Sean Purdy, "A Precarious Hegemony: Neo-liberalism, Social Struggles, and the End of Lulismo in Brazil," *Globalizations* 16, no. 2 (2019): 201–15. See also the various contributions, including by the present author, in "The Long Brazilian Crisis: A Forum," *Historical Materialism* 27, no. 2 (2019): 59–121.
21. Alexandre Fortes, "Os movimentos de 2013 e os novos desafios da esquerda brasileira," in *Manifestações no Brasil: As ruas em disputa*, ed. Alexandre de Freixo (Rio de Janeiro: Oficina Raquel, 2016), 41–56.

22. Marcos Nobre, *Imobilismo em movimento: Da abertura democrática ao governo Dilma* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2013); Marcos Nobre, *Choque de democracia: Razões de revolta* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2013).
23. Giuseppe Cocco, "O levante de junho: Uma potentíssima bifurcação dentro da qual ainda estamos." Entrevista especial com Giuseppe Cocco," *Instituto Humanitatis Unisinos*, 7 December 2013, <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/entrevistas/526455-entrevista-especial-com-giuseppe-cocco>.
24. Manuel Castells, *Redes de indignação e esperança: Movimentos sociais na era da internet* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2013).
25. Purdy, "Brazil's June Days of 2013."
26. Lincoln Secco, *História do PT: 1978–2010* (São Paulo: Ateliê Editorial, 2011).
27. Sean Purdy, "Lessons Earned," *Jacobin*, 19 May 2017, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/05/lessons-earned>.
28. Among many texts, see Braga, *A pulsão plebeia*; Andréia Galvão and Laurence Hallewell, "The Brazilian Labor Movement under PT Governments," *Latin American Perspectives* 41, no. 5: 184–99; Secco, *História do PT*; Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Two Transitions in Brazil: Dilemmas of a Neoliberal Democracy," *MR Online*, 14 January 2014, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2014/sf140114.html>; Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Brazil: The Debacle of the PT," *MR Online*, 30 March 2015, <https://mronline.org/2015/03/30/sf300315-html/>; Sean Purdy, "Lessons Earned."
29. André Singer, "Brasil, junho de 2013"; André Singer "Quatro notas sobre as classes sociais nos dez anos do Lulismo," *Psicologia USP* 26, no. 1 (2015): 9–10.
30. Ruy Braga, "Sob a sombra do precariado," in *Cidades rebeldes*, ed. Erminia Maricato (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2013), 79–82; Braga, *A pulsão plebeia*.
31. Jimmy Chalk, "Speaking Out in São Paulo," *New York Times Videos*, 20 June 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/world/americas/10000002291907/speaking-out-in-so-paulo.html>; Christopher Gaffney, "Global Parties, Galactic Hangovers: Brazil's Mega-Event Dystopia," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 30 October 2014; Simon Romero and William Neuman, "Sweeping Protests in Brazil Pull in an Array of Grievances," *New York Times*, 20 June 2013.
32. "Veja pesquisa completa do Ibope sobre os manifestantes," *G1*, 24 June 2013, <http://g1.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2013/06/veja-integra-da-pesquisa-do-ibope-sobre-os-manifestantes.html>.
33. See Judensnaider et al., *Vinte centavos*, 151–73.
34. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, "The Message of Brazil's Youth," *New York Times*, 17 July 2013.

35. Luiz Werneck Vianna, "A busca por reconhecimento e participação política: O combatível das manifestações," *Cadernos IHU Ideias*, no. 191, 19 June 2013, <http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/entrevistas/521147-a-busca-por-reconhecimento-e-participacao-politica-o-combustivel-das-manifestacoes-entrevista-especial-com-werneck-vianna->.
36. See, for example, Sérgio Amadeu Silveira, Sérgio Braga, and Cláudio Penteadó, *Cultura, política e ativismo nas redes digitais* (São Paulo: Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2014).
37. Jonathan Watts, "Brazil Protests Erupt Over Public Services and World Cup Costs," *The Guardian*, 18 June 2013; "The Digital Demo," *The Economist*, 29 June 2013.
38. Ann Mische, "'Come to the Streets, but without Parties': The Challenges of the New Brazilian Protests," *Mobilizing Ideas*, 4 September 2013, <https://mobilizingideas.wordpress.com/2013/09/04/come-to-the-streets-but-without-parties-the-challenges-of-the-new-brazilian-protests/>.
39. Secco, *História do PT*, 202.
40. Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Neoliberalism, Democracy, and Development Policy in Brazil," *Development and Society* 39, no. 1 (2010): 1–28; Saad-Filho, "Mass protests," 657–69; Saad-Filho, "Two Transitions in Brazil"; Saad-Filho, "Brazil"; Lecio Morais and Alfredo Saad-Filho, "Lula and the Continuity of Neoliberalism in Brazil: Strategic Choice, Economic Imperative or Political Schizophrenia?" *Historical Materialism* 13, no. 1 (2005): 3–32.
41. Auditoria Cidadã da Dívida, "É por direitos! Auditoria da dívida já!" 2014, accessed 21 January 2019, [www.auditoriacidada.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Panfleto-Manifestacoes-versao-2014.docx](http://www.auditoriacidada.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Panfleto-Manifestacoes-versao-2014.docx); Maria Lucia Fattorelli, *Caderno de estudos: A dívida pública em debate* (Brasília: Editora Inove, 2012).
42. Anay Cury, "Lucro somado de 4 bancos brasileiros é maior que o PIB de 83 países," *O Globo*, 13 February 2014; Dan Horch, "In Good Times or Bad, Brazil Banks Profit," *New York Times*, 13 August 2015.
43. Saad-Filho, "Mass Protests," 662. See also Purdy, "Brazil's June Days of 2013."
44. Marcio Pochmann, *Nova classe média? O trabalho na base da pirâmide salarial brasileira* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2012), 32.
45. Pochmann, *Nova Classe Média*, 110–18.
46. Redação RBA, "Para centrais, em vez de mexer em direitos, governo deveria cuidar da rotatividade," *Rede Brasil Atual*, 13 January 2015, accessed 21 January 2019, <http://www.redebrasilatual.com.br/trabalho/2015/01/para-centrais-em-vez-de-mexer-em-direitos-governo-deveria-cuidar-da-rotatividade-9384.html>.

47. Ruy Braga, "Precariado e sindicalismo no Sul global," *Outubro* 22, no. 2 (2014): 40.
48. Marcio Pochmann, *O mito da grande classe média: Capitalismo e estrutura social* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2014). Consult as well, Ricardo Antunes and Graça Druck, "A epidemia da terceirização," in *Riqueza e miséria do trabalho no Brasil III*, ed. Ricardo Antunes (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2014), 13–24; and André Singer, *Os sentidos de Lulismo: Reforma gradual e pacto conservador* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012).
49. Wilson Almeida, *ProUni e o ensino superior privado lucrativo em São Paulo: Uma análise sociológica* (São Paulo: Musa/FAPESP, 2014); Michele Gragnolati, Magnus Lindelow, and Bernard Couttolenc, *Twenty Years of Health System Reform in Brazil: An Assessment of the Sistema Único de Saude* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013).
50. Raquel Rolnik, "Guerra dos lugares: A colonização da terra e da moradia na era de finanças," Tese de Livre Docência, Universidade de São Paulo, 223–90.
51. Rolnik, "Guerra dos lugares," 245–48.
52. Saad-Filho, "Mass Protests," 661.
53. Armando Castelar, ed., *Gargalos e soluções na infraestrutura de transporte* (Rio de Janeiro: FGV, 2014).
54. IPEA (Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada), "Tarifa de ônibus subiu 67 pontos percentuais acima da inflação," 4 July 2013, [http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=18865](http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18865).
55. Samy Dana and Leonardo Siqueira, "Análise: A tarifa de ônibus por aqui está entre as mais caras do mundo," *Folha de São Paulo*, 17 June 2013.
56. Singer, "Quatro notas sobre as classes sociais," 9–10; Singer, "Brasil, Junho de 2013."
57. DIEESE, "Balanço das greves em 2013," *Estudos e Pesquisas* 79 (December 2015): 2.
58. Ruy Braga, *A política do precariado: Do populismo à hegemonia lulista* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2012), 96.
59. Ruy Braga, "Da política do precariado à crise do lulismo: Sobre algumas tensões do atual modelo de desenvolvimento," in *Desigual e combinado*, ed. Isabel Loureiro and André Singer (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2016).
60. DIEESE, "Balanço das negociações dos reajustes salariais de 2014," *Estudos e Pesquisas* 75 (March 2015): 2.
61. Mattos, "New and Old Forms of Social Movements," 487.
62. Guilherme Boulos, *Por que ocupamos? Uma introdução à luta dos sem-teto* (São Paulo: Scortecci, 2014).

63. Comitê Popular da Copa, 2014, accessed 21 January 2019, <http://comitepopularcopapoa2014.blogspot.com.br/>; Gaffney, "Global Parties, Galactic Hangovers."
64. Cocco, "O levante de junho"; Mattos, "New and Old Forms of Social Movements," 488.
65. Maria Luisa Barros, "Após greve, garis retornam ao trabalho com gostinho de vitória," *O Dia*, 11 March 2014.
66. See "Eleição em Números," *G1*, 29 October 2014, <http://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2014/blog/eleicao-em-numeros/5.html>.
67. Sean Purdy, "Rousseff and the Right," *Jacobin*, 5 October 2015, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/10/dilma-rousseff-impeachment-pt-petrobras-brazil/>.
68. Robson Sales, "Desemprego no Brasil atinge a maior taxa desde 2012," *Valor Econômico*, 31 January 2017.
69. Ruy Braga and Sean Purdy, "A Precarious Hegemony: Neo-liberalism, Social Struggles, and the End of Lulismo in Brazil," *Globalizations* 16, no. 2 (2019): 201–15.
70. Rafael Fagundes Cagnin, Daniela Magalhaes Prates, Maria Cristina P. de Freitas, and Luis Fernando Novais, "A gestão macroeconômica do governo Dilma (2011 e 2012)," *Novos Estudos CEBRAP* 97 (2013): 169–85.
71. Joao Feres Jr. and Veronica Daffon, "Políticas de igualdade racial no ensino superior," *Cadernos do Desenvolvimento Fluminense* 5 (2014): 31–43.
72. Felipe Demier and Rejane Hoeveler, eds., *A onda conservadora: Ensaio sobre os atuais tempos sombrios no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Mauad X, 2016); Purdy, "Rousseff and the Right."
73. André Singer, "A (falta de) base política para o ensaio desenvolvimentista," in *As contradições do Lulismo: A que ponto chegamos?* ed. André Singer and Isabel Loureiro (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2016).
74. Rafael Bruno Gonçalves, "A atuação de Marco Feliciano na comissão de Direitos Humanos e Minorias (CDHM)," *Mandrágora* 23, no. 2 (2017): 205–45.
75. Graham Denyer Willis, *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
76. Leonardo Sakamoto, "Dilma também ataca a democracia ao sancionar lei antiterrorismo, diz Boulos," *Blog do Sakamoto*, 18 March 2016, <https://blogdosakamoto.blogsfera.uol.com.br/2016/03/18/dilma-tambem-ataca-a-democracia-ao-sancionar-lei-antiterrorismo-diz-boulos/>.
77. Katia Baggio, "Conexões ultraliberais nas Américas: O think tank norte-americano Atlas Network e suas vinculações com organizações latino-americanas," *Anais do XII Encontro Internacional da ANPHLAC*, 2016.

78. Renan Truffi, "Quem são os manifestantes de 16 de agosto?" *Carta Capital*, 18 August 2015, reproduced in <https://ceert.org.br/noticias/participacao-popular/7987/quem-sao-os-manifestantes-de-16-de-agosto>; Demier and Hoeveler, *A onda conservadora*; Raúl Zibechi, "La nueva derecha en Brasil," *La Jornada*, 1 April 2016, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2016/04/01/opinion/019a1pol>.

## Old Positions/New Directions

### Strategies for Rebuilding Canadian Working-Class History



*Sean Carleton and Julia Smith*

Leon Trotsky, one of Bryan D. Palmer's clearest influences, once proclaimed: "Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones."<sup>1</sup> This is a quote—an idea, a rallying cry—that Palmer returns to regularly in his work to defend a range of political and intellectual positions, as displayed and surveyed in this volume. In his contribution to Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster's *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*, Palmer reminds us that "all that is old is not always without value."<sup>2</sup> Though Palmer's specific target in that piece was postmodernism as he sought to defend "old fashioned" historical materialism from attack in the 1990s, his larger argument is one worth highlighting: that activists and academics can learn much from history, and that revisiting and defending past positions can be useful to those in the present struggling to build a better future.

This chapter concludes *Dissenting Traditions* by reflecting on the future of Canadian working-class history, a field of study Palmer played a pivotal role in developing and defending. We understand "old" and "new" as being dialectically linked to argue that new directions in the field will emerge, in part, by returning to and defending some of its old positions, focusing in particular on ideas and projects put forward and supported by Palmer in varying ways. Our own position—and our vision for the future—does not posit some nostalgic return to "the good ol' days" of a field in formation,

nor do we suggest a replication of past work in an “everything old is new again” spirit. Instead, we contend that new directions in the field, broadly understood, can be created or “conquered,” to keep with Trotsky’s maxim, out of a defence of and critical engagement with some of its old positions and priorities. In this chapter, we will focus on four strategies for rebuilding Canadian working-class history: returning to class analysis, building institutions, teaching labour history, and engaging the public.

### **Strategy #1: Reconsidering Class**

First and foremost, we believe that working-class history must continue to focus on working people as a class defined in the Marxist sense. By this we mean class as a historical relationship, a shared lived experience shaped by specific relations of production. As Marx put it in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” “In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interest, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class.”<sup>3</sup> While scholars have since expanded on Marx’s definition, a Marxist understanding continues to focus on class as a historically specific relationship between classes and among members of a particular class. This understanding has been central to the field of Canadian working-class history as it has developed since the 1970s and has contributed greatly to its theoretical dynamism and expansion beyond a narrow focus on unions and industrial relations. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, defining and defending the Marxist understanding of class as central to historical analysis and social transformation has been a major focus of Palmer’s work, and we can learn much from revisiting this concept and his engagement with it.

Until the 1970s, analyses of industrial relations and institutional histories of trade unions dominated Canadian labour historiography.<sup>4</sup> Although these early publications provided important information about labour activity in Canada, given their focus on unions and the fact that most workers were not unionized, these studies did not examine the experiences of the majority of the working class. Moreover, as historian Mark Leier explains, the narrow analytical framework employed in these studies viewed “class consciousness and class conflict . . . as problems to be solved



rather than as areas to be understood.”<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, however, developments in international historiography and theories of class—particularly studies of working-class formation, culture, and control—led to a shift in the trajectory of labour historiography in Canada and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> A new generation of scholars turned their attention to class relations, politics, and culture, calling for an examination of the “totality of working-class experience.”<sup>7</sup>

Palmer was at the forefront of this shift. Many of his early publications examined the ways in which the development of capitalism in Canada radically transformed class relations and how working people’s experiences of dispossession and labour exploitation shaped their lives at work, at home, and in the political realm. In his first monograph, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914*, which looks at class formation in an industrializing city, Palmer shows how workers adapted to the changing nature of capitalist class relations, consistently struggling to maintain control over their working conditions in the face of increasing employer and state efforts to limit this control. His work demonstrates how “working-class culture sustains a persistent protest against industrial-capitalist disciplines and development, enriching the process of class conflict, bringing workers and employers into battle with one another, despite the apparent inevitability of working-class defeat.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900*, co-authored with Gregory S. Kealey, the authors’ attention to class conflict and working-class cultures leads them to re-examine one of Canada’s first labour organizations: the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor.<sup>9</sup> Countering assessments that viewed the Knights as a failure, Kealey and Palmer instead argue that the Order is an important example of a radical organization that offered workers an alternative way of organizing and structuring society. Since then, Palmer has continued to emphasize and defend the historical importance of class conflict and struggle in Canada and elsewhere, providing valuable insight on actors, events, and relationships that previous generations of historians have omitted or overlooked and recasting others in a new light.

Of course, class relations must also be seen as intersecting with other relationships and identities, something that labour historians, like Palmer, have consistently pointed out. One of Palmer’s major contributions to

Marxist class analysis is his insistence that class formation is inexorably linked to colonial dispossession and capitalist development in North America. Recent work in the field of Indigenous Studies engages with historical materialism to stress the connections between dispossession and accumulation, but Palmer has consistently grappled with Marxist writings on so-called primitive accumulation to make this point throughout his career.<sup>10</sup> As Alvin Finkel argues in an earlier chapter, Palmer's engagement with Marxist theory has set him apart, for better or worse, from much of the field, but it has also allowed his work to be ahead of the curve on issues like the connections between colonialism and capitalism that Marxists had been debating for over a century before Palmer put pen to paper. In this way, Palmer was defending old positions to establish new ones.

Palmer's attentiveness to issues of colonialism is evident in much of his work, from his earliest publications in the late 1970s to works released in the 2000s. In *A Culture in Conflict*, Palmer uses Marx's writings in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* to root capitalist development in the ruthless process of so-called primitive accumulation, which had the result of "establishing a propertyless labouring class, consolidating merchant capital, and concentrating land in the hands of a few leading families."<sup>11</sup> Palmer expands on these ideas in his collaborations with Kealey on the Knights of Labor, insisting that Canada's "capitalist transformation" be understood from a Marxist perspective attentive to dispossession and the process of proletarianization.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps Palmer's most detailed early accounting of so-called primitive accumulation appears in an almost eighty-page chapter published in 1984 in the edited collection *Proletarianization and Family History*.<sup>13</sup> Here Palmer uses Marxist theory, especially part 8 of Marx's *Capital*, to touch down on the brutalities of colonialism and capitalist development for Indigenous populations. While other labour historians have talked about Indigenous experiences of work for wages, there have been limited efforts to make clear the connections between colonialism and capitalism as Palmer did and as many scholars are calling for in the current conjuncture.<sup>14</sup> Returning to and critically analyzing Palmer's work in this regard will allow new generations to build on and expand a Marxist analysis of class as a relationship deeply enmeshed in and profoundly shaped by the processes of settler colonialism and capitalist development.

Unfortunately, as Palmer and other scholars have pointed out, over the past three decades the majority of historians have moved away from Marxism and the idea of class as a relationship.<sup>15</sup> Instead, many people now view class, if they account for it at all, as an identity, often linked solely to income. At the same time, despite the increased attention paid to precarity and work in recent years, the term “working class” has more or less disappeared from the political and cultural lexicon in Canada.<sup>16</sup> We need only look to the political realm for examples of the misunderstanding and misuse of class. In the 2015 federal election, all three major political parties campaigned on the promise that they would support “middle-class families—and those fighting to get into the middle class.”<sup>17</sup> In 2019, the ruling Liberal Party released a budget that focused on “investing in the middle class” and touted its supposed success in “strengthening and growing the middle class, and offering real help to people working hard to join it.”<sup>18</sup> This tendency to erase working people as a class is not limited to politicians. Historians have also contributed to this erasure, conflating changes in consumer and voting behaviour and the decline of manufacturing jobs as well as a particular type of white, heterosexual, blue-collar masculinity with the disappearance of working-class culture and political agency.<sup>19</sup> As Palmer pointed out in *Descent into Discourse*, “When specific people earn more than others, vote for parties that do not appeal to a sharply demarcated class constituency, and dispose of their wages in ways that result in different patterns of consumption, all of this is seen as repudiation of class.”<sup>20</sup>

As defenders of materialist analysis such as Palmer and Ellen Meiksins Wood have argued, the “retreat from class” that has occurred since the 1980s is extremely problematic for historical scholarship and left politics.<sup>21</sup> It not only erases the lives, struggles, and contributions of working people but also obfuscates a central dynamic of historical change. In contrast, a Marxist definition of class as a historical relationship helps us understand that class consciousness and class struggle will take different forms based on historically specific material circumstances. As Wood explains, “Class formations and the discovery of class consciousness grow out of the process of class struggle, as people ‘experience’ and ‘handle’ their class situations.”<sup>22</sup> The field of working-class history must continue to focus on documenting and analyzing how historically specific class relations intersect with other factors to shape peoples’ lives, opportunities, and

responses to their circumstances. A Marxist understanding of class is key to this project.

## Strategy #2: Building Institutions

A second strategy for rebuilding Canadian working-class history is maintaining and expanding institutions that support the field. Here again, much can be learned from looking to the past and the work of labour historians, such as Palmer, to establish and build the scholarly association and journal that have been central to the study of working-class history in Canada: the Canadian Committee on Labour History and *Labour/Le Travail*. Since their founding in the 1970s, the committee and the journal have played a crucial role in the development and proliferation of working-class history, and their continued growth and development can help the field thrive in the years to come.

As the field of labour and working-class history was developing in the 1970s and 1980s, historians created a number of institutions to support their work and build a scholarly community. The Canadian Committee on Labour History was one of the first. Founded by historians Irving Abella and David Miller, it is a subcommittee of the Canadian Historical Association/Société historique du Canada (CHA). Though membership primarily consists of academics, membership is open to anyone with an interest in labour and working-class history. In addition to holding an annual meeting, each year the Canadian Committee on Labour History hosts a labour history workshop that brings academics and activists together to discuss labour issues, past and present. The committee also awards several prizes, including the Canadian Committee on Labour History Best Article Prize and the Eugene A. Forsey Prize in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History for graduate and undergraduate work. And, perhaps most significantly, the Canadian Committee on Labour History publishes Canada's foremost labour studies journal, *Labour/Le Travail*.

*Labour/Le Travail* grew out of conversations at the 1973 CHA meeting about how to share labour history research. An informal newsletter edited by Abella and Miller soon became the *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History* and eventually, with seed funding from the federal Department of Labour, a journal. The first issue of *Labour/Le Travail* (originally

named *Labour/Le Travailleur*) was published in 1976 and contained articles by several scholars who would go on to play a central role in the field and the journal, including Palmer. Since then, the journal has published more than eighty issues containing articles, debates, review essays, and poetry that examine the depth and diversity of the working-class experience in Canada and other countries around the world.<sup>23</sup>

In the more than forty years since their founding, the Canadian Committee on Labour History and *Labour/Le Travail* have provided spaces for the development of community and the dissemination of scholarship. They have also raised the profile of working-class history within the broader field of Canadian history, and they have encouraged and celebrated the work of new generations of scholars. As Kirk Niergarth demonstrates in his chapter, the importance of *Labour/Le Travail* to the growth and development of working-class history in Canada, and the valuable contributions Palmer in particular has made to the committee and the journal, cannot be overstated.

In recent years, however, the number of people identifying as labour and working-class historians has declined. As other contributors to this volume point out, although scholars continue to study working people and labour issues, this research is instead often categorized as gender history, immigration history, or history of education or medicine. In the program for the 2019 CHA annual meeting, “labour” appeared in the title of just three papers; only two sessions explicitly referenced “work,” one of which focused on how to prepare students for the job market.<sup>24</sup> In turn, there are fewer historians participating in and supporting institutions like the Canadian Committee on Labour History and *Labour/Le Travail*. As such, the responsibility of maintaining committees, journals, and prizes, and of carving out new spaces to support the study of working-class history falls to a handful of people. The situation as it currently stands is unsustainable, and with fewer and fewer tenure-track jobs being created in history departments, the dearth of labour and working-class historians is likely to worsen in the coming years.

Nevertheless, if working-class history is to continue to exist as a field it is crucial that institutions like *Labour/Le Travail* and the Canadian Committee on Labour History as well as other labour history organizations, like the Labor and Working-Class History Association and the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association, not only survive but

thrive. Scholars can help this work along in a number of ways, including by attending annual meetings and agreeing to serve on editorial boards and award committees. At the same time, scholars of working-class history need to replenish their ranks, by fostering the development of future generations of scholars and by building new relationships with colleagues working in other disciplines. The Canadian Committee on Labour History and *Labour/Le Travail* have always embraced interdisciplinarity, and the recent partnership between the Canadian Committee on Labour History and the Canadian Association for Work and Labour Studies builds on this tradition and will undoubtedly have a positive effect on the field. Meanwhile, recent events focused on Canadian working-class history show how new generations of historians are carrying on the traditions of their predecessors. In 2018, the Canadian Committee on Labour History held a successful conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan that featured the work of many junior scholars. The following year, graduate students at Simon Fraser University put on a well-attended Canadian Committee on Labour History workshop in Vancouver, British Columbia. In 2020, a group of junior and established scholars organized a large conference on labour and the Canadian carceral state in St. Catharines, Ontario (though unfortunately it was cancelled at the last minute due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Like the first working-class history institutions established in the 1970s, these types of events provide valuable opportunities for scholars to build community, exchange research, debate ideas, and demonstrate the value and importance of working-class history.

### Strategy #3: Teaching

Creating and maintaining institutions to support the scholarly study of working-class history is significant, but we also need to fight for space within the university to teach about work and labour. In the 1970s and 1980s, working-class history was an exciting and growing field. Drawing on published work in journals like *Labour/Le Travail* and the support of groups like the Canadian Committee on Labour History, Palmer, along with other emerging scholars, developed and delivered an array of new history courses that centred the cultures and experiences of working people. Building on the popularity of social history and “history from below,” these

courses introduced new generations to the lessons of labour's past and inspired many students to go on to graduate school and, in turn, contribute to the field themselves. One obvious product from this period was Palmer's production, informed by the work of many students in his seminars on working-class history, of what remains the most comprehensive survey in the field: *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*, revised and republished in 1992 with a new subtitle: *Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*.<sup>25</sup> This creative and cyclical process was central to the establishment of the new field. New students went on to publish research in *Labour/Le Travail*, they contributed to the work of the Canadian Committee on Labour History, and they taught their own labour history classes. Teaching working-class history served the dual role of consciousness-raising and creating pathways for students to contribute to the field.

Forty years later, however, the field of Canadian working-class history, like the labour movement generally, is in decline. There are many reasons for this, and Palmer has outlined them in detail at different times.<sup>26</sup> In short, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, and partly because of the retreat from class and the proliferation of postmodernism, new generations of scholars were less interested in Marxism, socialism, and working-class history. The field's founders continued to build, with some new recruits here and there, but soon there were fewer new hands to join the project and help the work along. A stasis in the teaching of labour history eventually gave way to decline as this process continued over time. As labour historians retire from their posts, and without a surge of new scholars to take their place, fewer students are being exposed to working-class history at the undergraduate level, and they are understandably pursuing work and service in other fields. The field's atrophy, then, is not so much due to intellectual antagonism or hostility per se—though this is still a factor—as it is the result of a scarcity of scholars to rebuild the field by teaching labour history.

But if working-class history is to have a future, it must be taught in the classroom. The authors of this chapter were both introduced to Canadian working-class history during undergraduate training at Simon Fraser University, where people such as Mark Leier and Allen Seager taught undergraduate and graduate courses on the history of work and labour. We can attest to the transformational effects of learning about labour's

past in such classes. These scholars supported our studies and encouraged us to continue them by working with other labour historians, including Palmer and Joan Sangster. Intellectual networks—sustained by teaching—are essential to bringing new scholars into the field. Fewer people teaching labour history means fewer opportunities for students to learn about the subject. This is unfortunate because issues of work, class, and capitalism are increasingly of interest to new generations. Many students juggle multiple part-time jobs to cover the rising costs of their post-secondary education, and they have limited prospects for secure, well-paying employment after they graduate—not to mention the skyrocketing levels of student debt. Giving students the tools to analyze class inequality and class struggle historically can help them make sense of their lives and foster their interest in working-class history and activism.

In the age of the corporate university, where “butts in seats” is a crucial component in scheduling course offerings, it is important that those who can teach working-class history do, and that they fight for such courses to exist.<sup>27</sup> The place of working-class history in the university must be defended or it will be lost to shiny new programs promising working-class students a future as business “disrupters,” “innovators,” and entrepreneurs. We must privilege *class* struggle to articulate alternatives that put people before profits. And where labour history courses do not yet exist, they should be developed and delivered regularly. These courses can synthesize the developments of the field for students and offer a broad understanding of the “working class” that emphasizes the intersections of race, gender, and class—which will allow an increasingly diverse student population to see themselves as historical agents. Conveniently, in 2008, Palmer and Sangster produced a reader, *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History*, that can help instructors develop and deliver such courses.<sup>28</sup> It is important to organize and push from within the university, as Palmer and others did in previous years, to hire people to research and teach working-class history, and for those new hires to offer courses to attract students to the field.

#### Strategy #4: Engaging the Public

Though university enrolment is increasing—and thus more students can learn about working-class history in the classroom if such courses are



offered—we must resist the temptation to put the fate of the field solely in the hands of academia. There are few universities hiring labour historians, especially in the Canadian context, and the path from interested undergraduate student to tenured professor can be a difficult one. Therefore, we must also look beyond post-secondary institutions. While working-class history seems to be a specialization on the ropes, encouraging signs and intriguing possibilities for collaboration exist outside of the university. This must not be viewed as capitulation. Many builders of the field, including Palmer, came to working-class history through activism and engagement with the labour movement. In the area of public history, there are a number of interesting groups that are doing exciting work with working-class history that deserve our support as well as our time and energy to help develop new initiatives in more critical ways. Academic historians must continue, as those who started the field did, to build relationships with those doing public labour history.

One such venue is popular writing and journalism. Canadian labour historians have often pursued opportunities to distill the lessons of labour history in popular formats. Palmer in particular has written popular books, such as *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia*, as well as affidavits to defend a range of political activists, including anti-globalization organizer Jaggi Singh and Indigenous land defender Shawn Brant.<sup>29</sup> He has also written numerous op-eds and articles for publications like the *Toronto Star* and *Jacobin*.<sup>30</sup> As well, Palmer has been a frequent contributor to Canada's longest serving socialist publication, *Canadian Dimension*, writing numerous articles and commentaries on a range of topics, including many on issues of work and labour. This kind of popular writing is essential to helping activists learn lessons from the past so they can incorporate them into their struggles today. Scholars interested in labour and working-class history can build on this kind of engagement by contributing to print and online publications, such as *Canadian Dimension*, *Our Times*, *Briarpatch*, *ActiveHistory.ca*, and *RankandFile.ca*. There are also international online projects such as *WorkingClassHistory.com*, which publishes articles and produces podcasts on global working-class history. Nevertheless, still greater emphasis can be placed on the usefulness of deep historical contextualization of current events, making clear the connections to previous struggles, especially in Canada. Activists need a longer view of the history of the

workers' movement, and academic engagement with magazines and sites such as these can provide some of that necessary context. Seeking out opportunities to talk about issues of work and labour in ways connected to history can help, as Palmer has shown, guide public debate as well as the tactics and strategies of struggle.

There are also a number of institutions and initiatives dedicated to raising public awareness about working-class history that deserve our support and critical engagement. These include the Alberta Labour History Institute in Edmonton, the Workers Arts and Heritage Centre in Hamilton, the Workers' History Museum in Ottawa, and the BC Labour Heritage Centre in Vancouver. These groups offer a number of great services and educational programs on labour and working-class history in Canada, including curriculum guides for high school teachers, children's events, and walking tours, as well as labour history plaques, statues, and public commemorations. The BC Labour Heritage Centre even created a series of short films, *Working People: A History of Labour in British Columbia*, to popularize labour history. These films aired on the Knowledge Network and have been uploaded online so as to be easily shared on social media, where many people now get their news and information, and they make for easy inclusion in teaching at all levels.<sup>31</sup>

Public labour history initiatives need our support but also our expertise to ensure critical research continues to shape popular perceptions of working-class history. Again, Palmer has been a vocal proponent that public labour history must not simply devolve into uncritical celebration, back-patting, or navel-gazing.<sup>32</sup> Critical analyses of past tactics—and the organizers and labour leaders who advocated for them—are essential for evaluating previous victories and failures and thinking about how to organize today. We can learn from the lessons of the past only if we openly and honestly evaluate and analyze it. In this way, public labour history initiatives can serve as a resource that can inspire not just students, but also working people en masse to bring forward the lessons of labour history.

New mediums that combine academic and public labour history also deserve consideration. The authors of this chapter are members of the Graphic History Collective, which, in owing its creation in part to labour historians involved in the Canadian Committee on Labour History,

including Palmer, Sangster, and Leier, combines the insights of labour and working-class history with the medium of comics to make the lessons of labour more accessible to wider audiences.<sup>33</sup> The Graphic History Collective embodies the four strategies that we have outlined in this chapter. In terms of conquering old positions, much of our work returns to the studies of working-class history produced in the 1970s and 1980s. The comics we create focus on class formation and class conflict, and they seek to highlight inspirational stories of working-class struggle that do not shy away from critical analysis in order to develop new tactics and strategies for struggle today. For example, the Graphic History Collective created a comic book based on Palmer and Kealey's work on the Knights of Labor in Canada (see figure 10).<sup>34</sup>

Building on Palmer and Kealey's work and synthesizing new work in the field, the comic book shows how, in the process of constructing Canada as a capitalist settler society, the state dispossessed Indigenous peoples from their lands and pushed many people into cities to find work in factories.<sup>35</sup> Working conditions in cities such as Toronto and Hamilton were often poor, and by the mid-century, workers had started to organize to fight back. By the 1880s, the Knights of Labor—founded in Philadelphia in 1869—had come to Canada. We place emphasis on how the Knights of Labor appealed to workers because it asked them—regardless of skill, sex, or race—to “dream of what might be” rather than accept the poor conditions that were said to be unchangeable at the time. Our aim was to show how the Knights created a “culture” that offered people hope and mobilized workers to fight for social change. Palmer and Kealey supported the work and wrote the introduction to the comic book, arguing that new mediums, such as comics, can help connect new generations to the important lessons of labour's past. It is the authors' hope that new work in public labour history will continue to build on the foundations of the field laid in part by scholars such as Palmer.

## Conclusion

Overall, we think that the future of Canadian working-class history lies in scholars and activists working together to develop new ways to support the study of labour and working-class history broadly—both academically and publicly. This does not require a reinventing of the wheel, but rather

# Dreaming of What Might Be

## THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR IN CANADA 1880-1900

WRITERS: Sean Carleton, Julia Smith, Robin Fovrik  
ILLUSTRATOR: Sam Bradd



Workers in Canada have always had to fight to gain control at work and for power in society. This is the story of how one group,

the NOBLE AND HOLY ORDER of THE **KNIGHTS** of **LABOR**, quickly gained momentum in Canada...

...during the 1880s and 1890s by uplifting **working people** and inspiring them to struggle to improve their lives.

Figure 10. "Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Canada 1880-1900," in *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working-Class Struggle* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 15-16. Art by Sam Bradd. Courtesy of Between the Lines.

By forging their own distinct culture and by organizing large numbers of workers across divisions of skill, sex, and race, the Knights differed from many of the conservative labour organizations of the 1800s.



The Knights encouraged people to dream of "what might be" and to take action rather than give in to the poor conditions and lack of control others said were natural and unchangeable.

While the Knights of Labor did not succeed in bringing about an alternative society...



...the energy and lessons from their creative efforts live on today.

a returning to old positions in order to conquer new ones. And this is an important task, with a sense of urgency. At a time when we are told that there are no alternatives to capitalism and when the left, in Canada and elsewhere, has grown stagnant and seems confused as to what its role in social struggle should be, a hope for a better world, which runs throughout so much of working-class history, is perhaps more important now than ever. Revitalizing working-class history intellectually, institutionally, pedagogically, and publicly can help ensure that the field continues to be a resource for new struggles for social change in the present and in the future.

In the words of the scholar whose research and intellectual contributions are the focus of this collection, "All of this may seem utterly utopian. But it has never been more necessary." Palmer wrote these words in the final sentences of *Working-Class Experience* in reference to his analysis of how workers can "build a new and a better Canada through new and better class-based organizations and politics, through a class-struggle leadership and a program that rests on the collectivist class foundations of two centuries of experience."<sup>36</sup> His comments hold true for working-class history as well. We can build a new and better field through new and better organizations and politics, ones that build on the foundations of Marxist analysis, scholarly institutions, pedagogical practice, and public engagement that lie at the heart of the field established and developed by previous generations of scholars. Or, as Palmer, like Trotsky, might say, rebuilding Canadian working-class history requires us to revisit and defend old positions to chart new directions for the future.

#### NOTES

1. Leon Trotsky, *In Defence of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1973), 178.
2. Bryan D. Palmer, "Old Positions/New Necessities: History, Class, and Marxist Metanarrative," in *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*, ed. Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997), 72.
3. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 347.
4. See, for example, Harold A. Logan, *Trade Unions in Canada: Their Development and Functioning* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1948); Stuart Marshall

- Jamieson, *Industrial Relations in Canada* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).
5. Mark Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class, and the Writing of BC History," *BC Studies* 111 (Autumn 1996): 63.
  6. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976); David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
  7. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983), 3.
  8. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), xi.
  9. Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
  10. See, for example, Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
  11. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 9.
  12. Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, 27–56; Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, "The Bonds of Unity: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 14, no. 28 (November 1981): 369–411.
  13. Bryan D. Palmer, "Social Formation and Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century North America," in *Proletarianization and Family History*, ed. David Levine (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 229–308.
  14. See, for example, Fred Burrill, "The Settler Order Framework: Rethinking Canadian Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019), 173–97; David Camfield, "Settler Colonialism and Labour Studies in Canada: A Preliminary Exploration," *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 147–72.
  15. Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).
  16. For Palmer's take on the long history of precarity, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Reconsiderations of Class: Precariousness as Proletarianization," *Socialist Register 2014: Registering Class* 50 (2014): 40–62.

17. New Democratic Party, flyer, 2015. See also NDP, "Make the Economy Work for the Middle Class," 5 February 2015, <https://www.ndp.ca/news/make-economy-work-middle-class>.
18. Government of Canada, "Introduction," *Budget 2019*, last modified March 19, 2019, <https://www.budget.gc.ca/2019/docs/plan/intro-en.html>.
19. Patrick Joyce, ed., *Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010).
20. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse*, 120.
21. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New "True" Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986).
22. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 80; emphasis original.
23. Joan Sangster, "Creating a Forum for Working-Class Histories: *Labour/Le Travail*," *Scholarly and Research Communication* 9, no. 1 (2018): 1–10.
24. Canadian Historical Association, "Program," CHA – 98th Annual Meeting, Vancouver 2019, [https://cha-shc.ca/\\_uploads/5ccc3848caa56.pdf](https://cha-shc.ca/_uploads/5ccc3848caa56.pdf).
25. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1983); Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992).
26. Most recently, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Canada," in *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, ed. Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John McIlroy (Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2010), 196–230.
27. See, for example, Jamie Brownlee, *Academia Inc.: How Corporatization is Transforming Canadian Universities* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2015).
28. Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster, eds., *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2008).
29. Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987). Palmer submitted an expert witness statement for Jaggi Singh in 2010 and gave an expert witness statement in support of Shawn Brant in 2008. In the late 1990s, Palmer wrote legal briefs in support of several unions, including the Ontario Teachers' Federation, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation, and the Canadian Auto Workers.
30. See, for example, Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, "Housing the Poor During the Great Depression," *Sunday Star* (Toronto), 30 July 2017; and Bryan D. Palmer, "Teamsters and Cops," *Jacobin*, 15 July 2016, <https://>



[www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/police-brutality-philando-castile-unions-teamsters-labor](http://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/police-brutality-philando-castile-unions-teamsters-labor).

31. See BC Labour Heritage Centre, *Working People: A History of Labour in British Columbia*, Working People Film Series, Knowledge Network and BC Labour Heritage Centre, accessed 4 June 2019, <http://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/working-people/>.
32. See, for example, Bryan D. Palmer, "The Ghost of Jack Munro," Review of *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, by Rod Mickleburgh, *The Ormsby Review* 348, 22 August 2018, <https://bcbooklook.com/2018/08/22/bc-labour-movement-history/>.
33. For more on the origins of the Graphic History Collective and the work of the Canadian Committee on Labour History, see Joan Sangster, "Work and Society in Historical Perspective: Creating a New Labor-History Research Network," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 41–47.
34. See, for example, Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*; and Kealey and Palmer, "The Bonds of Unity."
35. Graphic History Collective, "Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Canada 1880–1900," in *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working-Class Struggle*, ed. Graphic History Collective, with Paul Buhle (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 15–25.
36. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 414–16.



# Afterword

## Rude Awakenings



*Bryan D. Palmer*

I was not well brought up. At least not to become what I have been presented as in the pages of this book: a historian, a writer, a dissident, a Marxist. Little in my background suggested that I would follow a course marked by these orientations, although the past—its artifacts as well as its aura—intrigued me at a young age.<sup>1</sup>

My old friend Greg Kealey alludes to this background in his sense that we shared a break from family in our journey toward becoming historians of the Canadian working class. He is no doubt right. I am sure that both Greg and I also experienced comparable bewilderment as academic colleagues assumed that, like not a few of them, we were somehow to the manor of academic life born.

This was impressed upon me as I took up my first tenure-stream appointment in the Department of History at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in the early 1980s. Like most departments, SFU was at times a battleground of conflicting colleagues, at no time more so than in the midst of 1983's Solidarity uprising, when some of us walked off the job in an illegal protest while others drove their cars up Burnaby Mountain to teach classes and sit defiantly in their offices.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, during my brief years at Simon Fraser, I found the department a stimulating hub of intellectual rigour and vibrant sociability. It was a place where collegiality worked and I made lasting friendships, encountering a challenging core of exceptional students, both graduate and undergraduate.

My introduction to the scene was nevertheless amusingly disconcerting. At an early semester social event, a new colleague, Michael Fellman, hoisted a glass and asked, "So what did your dad teach?" Michael's father was a

distinguished American academic, a scholar of civil rights and devotee of defending them. I did not know this at the time, however, and was taken aback by the assumption that I must have been reared in the shadows of university libraries. I responded that my father offered his classes in poolrooms and at racetracks, his most impressive lectures delivered from a barstool: most of what he passed on to me in various ways I spent my life trying to shed—not, I suspect, always successfully. Later, teaching at Queen's University, I was bewildered to hear that graduate student gossip was making the rounds identifying me as the son of a judge. Someone had partially overheard a conversation in which I referred to my father's lumpen petty bourgeois existence and mentioned his occasionally serving at small-town Ontario fairs as an Ontario Trotting Association judge. This translated into a designation of him being a distinguished jurist. Oral history is all in the hearing. All of this, and much more that could be recounted, is simply to make an elementary point. Some of us who entered Canadian academic life in the 1970s found the preciousness of our new environment a bit of an adjustment.

This was complicated by the turmoil of the 1960s, which served as the socio-cultural and political turnstile through which some of my generation passed as we made our way into university teaching appointments. There were those among us fortunate enough to ride the wave of higher education's expansion and political dissidence that was so much a part of the 1960s into Canadian academic jobs in the tightening times of the 1970s. For a particular grouping—including contributors to this volume, such as Greg, Leo, Alvin, and Nick—outsider status was readily apparent, at least at the start of careers. Women's historians, pursuing feminist understandings of Canada, experienced their parallel *entrée* into Canadian academic life with much more difficulty.<sup>3</sup> People of colour would fare far worse. For some, especially white males like myself, time would soon wash away a good deal of this marginality, with outsiders becoming insiders.<sup>4</sup>

In my case, a distinct upbringing, a specific personality, a willingness to embrace and extend controversy, and a politics of refusal may all have contributed to me being perceived in some quarters as the *bête noire* of the Young Turks who, in the late 1970s, were offering up different and challenging approaches to the Canadian past. My writing was certainly oppositional and pitted me against almost all comers. Which is to say that I made a good deal of my own bed and can hardly understate the

extent to which I bore considerable responsibility for the mattress sometimes being uncomfortable, as Alvin's Finkel's forthright essay in this volume suggests.

I was also more easily targeted than others. With my Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Western Ontario interrupted by a year-long sojourn in New York's New Left and an uncharacteristically abbreviated stint as an undergraduate student, comprising two academic years and summer/evening courses, I simply had no Canadian academic credentials that needed to be acknowledged. Indeed, it often seemed that I was neither this nor that: a Canadian with no national bona fides, trained in the United States and without letters of reference from those who counted in my homeland. Publishing did not seem to make much of a difference. When I applied for jobs in pre-Confederation Canadian history, I was told I was not a prime candidate because I had just co-authored an article on twentieth-century strikes in the immediate pre-World War I years. In tossing my hat in the ring for advertised positions teaching post-Confederation Canada, I found that my having published a piece on Kingston mechanics and the rise of the penitentiary in the 1830s left me typecast as a pre-Confederationist. Catch-22!<sup>5</sup>

I came to this writing on Canadian workers largely because of my radicalization. It began in high school, protesting the kinds of antediluvian rules, regulations, and regimens that monitored dress and movements. Soon I was in contact with the Maoist-inflected, Albanian-leaning Canadian Party of Labour, taking part in anti-imperialist and anti-racist actions, and walking picket lines in support of striking workers in my hometown of London, Ontario. My undergraduate course selections at the University of Western Ontario were determined by the political sensibilities of 1968, in which anti-Vietnam War protests, African American uprisings in Detroit and elsewhere, and the nature of Revolution loomed large. I opted for studying Asia, Russia's 1917 and mobilizations of dissent associated with it, and United States history, with particular attention to race and class. I took occasional refuge in the Sociology Department. Courses on social stratification taught by a wry, cigar-smoking Korean War veteran, whose circle of influence included Detroit's C. L. R. James confrères, most prominently Marty Glaberman, introduced me to Jim Rinehart, later to become a close friend and source of longstanding support.<sup>6</sup> All of these chosen, elective courses, however, came after my first year as an undergraduate,

when I necessarily enrolled in introductory lectures. After that initial year of tedium, and with the world still reeling from reverberations of May 1968, I was definitely ready to depart London. A lifelong friend and co-conspirator in the politics of high school student power, Tom Reid, and I decided to strike out for New York City. Our plan, to the extent that two nineteen-year-olds were capable of hatching one, was to experience what we could of the New Left.

Time in New York suspended my “higher education” with what I consider a more transformative pedagogical experience. I worked in a used bookstore run by two old radicals, fellow travellers of the American Communist Party, who indulged my requests for days away from packing and slogging dusty volumes to attend demonstrations. I spent my hours off the modestly paid job—I lived on the \$68 weekly wage—in study groups and political meetings, writing leaflets for the demonstrations that defined much of my life. I frequented informal “classes” at Alternate U, where the topics addressed included the Russian Revolution and whether or not American slavery was capitalist, a subject that, almost half a century later, has recently found its way into academic fashion.<sup>7</sup> I found out what was interesting in the offerings at the New School for Social Research and sat in on courses taught by Robert Heilbroner (who soon gave me the heave-ho when he discovered I was gate-crashing his party) and, if I remember correctly, Sigmund Diamond, who was more tolerant of a free rider. I read widely, rubbing shoulders and butting heads with all manner of Marxists, anarchists, and dissidents, including feminists of varied stripes and militant advocates of gay liberation. Among ourselves we argued robustly, even, at times, rudely; I retained a taste for this kind of rugged give-and-take even as it became increasingly unfashionable in the academic milieu I would later inhabit. My immediate circle, in this 1970–71 sojourn in the epicentre of American leftism, was the New York University (NYU) chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Fractured by factionalism, NYU SDS was something of a motley crew, where Progressive Labor Party–aligned Worker Student Alliance advocates, Maoists looking to a future with Bob Avakian, and a cornucopia of New Leftists, reared on a diverse body of dissident thought from Salvador Dali to Herbert Marcuse, jostled for recognition.

Upon my return to Canada, and settling back into completing a BA at Western, I became part of a collective writing the history of London,

Ontario labour, sponsored by the federal Liberal government's Local Initiatives Project/Opportunities for Youth programs in the summer of 1973. It was in this context that I first read E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). The book's impassioned prose, irreverent disdain for academic convention, and politically charged insistence on the active agency of the subaltern ignited enthusiasms for intellectual recovery that have structured much of what I have done over the better part of half a century.

In one of my American history classes at Western, I produced a substantial research paper on the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). My first serious archival foray involved researching the Wobblies in Wayne State University's impressive collection. This led to a Notes and Documents contribution in the journal *Labor History*. The late Dan Leab graciously inducted me into the world of scholarly publishing.<sup>8</sup> Interest in the Wobblies, as well as a number of personal factors, propelled me toward the State University of New York (SUNY) at Binghamton. I hitchhiked to the campus in the late summer of 1973, eager to work with one of the major historians of American labour and author of an influential study of the IWW, Melvyn Dubofsky.<sup>9</sup> Things do occasionally come full circle. If my academic career began, in part, with an interest in the Industrial Workers of the World, one of my retirement projects has been curating an exhibition of IWW printing blocks and other ephemera associated with the Wobblies.<sup>10</sup>

After two years of course work at Binghamton, I returned to Canada, hunkering down in Toronto's Kensington Market district, convinced that Canadian working-class history could be written afresh. I settled on Hamilton, Ontario's skilled workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a dissertation topic largely, as I recall, because it seemed the archetypal industrial-capitalist Canadian city, a place where the transition from the manufactory to the factory came into bold relief. It was only after returning to Ontario from my time in upstate New York that I met Greg Kealey and Russell Hann, as well as other committed researchers such as Wayne Roberts. This would be my collaborative circle, with whom I would work in the immediate years after 1975, contributing to a 1976 collection of essays that, in some ways, and alongside the founding of *Labour/Le Travailleur*, announced that the study of class in Canada was poised to take new directions.<sup>11</sup> Articulations of this would be published

dissertations on Hamilton and Toronto, appearing in 1979 and 1980, as well as a co-authored study of the Knights of Labor, which Cambridge University Press put out in 1982, and articles in a variety of journals.<sup>12</sup>

## **The Making of a Marxist; The Making of Books**

How did all of this happen? When did I become a Marxist, and why did my Marxism take the direction it did? And what explains how this led to future scholarly work and writing? What developments conditioned my intellectual trajectory? When, why, and how did I plan certain writings? What were the origins of specific texts?

Like with my attraction to labour history, Marxism was not something I learned in undergraduate classes or even honed in student-based politics. I largely missed the upheaval of campus protest. It wasn't for lack of interest. Not quite old enough to be attending university classes in 1968, the time I spent as an undergraduate was so brief and disjointed that there was little possibility for the kind of continuity that could sustain student activism. I participated in what Western had on offer as left-wing politics, although neither the university nor London as a city were hotbeds of demonstrations, sit-ins, or mass mobilizations. When there, in 1969–70 and again in 1972–73, I was at my share of meetings, participating in campaigns and frequenting marches organized by the Anti-Imperialist Front. I thumbed my way to Toronto when I saw things were happening, participating in a University of Toronto occupation on one occasion. After my return from New York, when lefty students at Western were involved in anti-war or pro-labour activities, I was involved.

Yet this hardly constituted a decisive internship in the politics of New Left student activism, and material realities further complicated and limited things. I worked my way through school as a waiter at the Iroquois Casino, a downtown London landmark that contained a supper club, a lounge, and an upstairs go-go bar. Frequented by the Forest City's largely closeted gay community as well as a mixed crowd of hustlers and hedonists, the Iroquois was as much my habitat as any classroom. I spent less time in anything passing for a student union and more time among the Greek waiters, maternal waitresses, and flamboyant hostesses with whom I worked. I knew most of the student radicals at Western, but I cannot say they constituted more of my circle of acquaintance than the hard-drinking



siding salesmen—real life variants of the protagonists in the 1987 film *Tin Men*—and surprisingly mild-mannered and reflective con men and tough guys who constituted the late afternoon/early evening clientele that I served. Looking back, I cannot say that I regret this. There is, however, no denying that my undergraduate life was quite different than that of young left-wing academics in the making, who were a few years my senior and had stretches of undergraduate agitation under their belts at the point that I was leaving high school. No matter, this was a prolonged moment alive with ideas, movements, and political currents. If one did not need a weatherman to know which way the wind blew, neither was it necessary to spend time at the university to discover the turbulent gale of swirling oppositions.

If I exited high school drawn to Mao-Tse-Tung thought, I departed New York City part of something politically different. It was there that I shed my residual Maoism, which remained influential for many in this period.<sup>13</sup> I found I could only stomach so much stultifying regurgitation of “contradiction—primary and secondary” and the ritualized “criticism/self-criticism” sessions that were *de rigueur* among forerunners of the Revolutionary Communist Party. A study session in Brooklyn, where the reading was Mao’s “On Contradiction,” brought my attraction to this variant of Marxism crashing down. Walking out of the get-together, I realized that this kind of Marxism was not for me. My pulling back from Maoist burble conditioned a deeper rethinking of what had gone off the rails with the Stalinist degeneration of the revolutionary left. On the political rebound, it was perhaps understandable that I toyed for a time with more anarchistic-inflected currents, which included a distant appreciation of the direct action, militant confrontationism of the Weather Underground and a softer politics that probed the depths of subjectivism in experimental affinity groups. I could nevertheless not shake the understanding that class was a pivotal component of any politics of revolutionary possibility, and was drawn to mobilizations that seemed to align socialism and syndicalism. There were plenty on offer in the early 1970s, and I was originally attracted, like many New Leftists searching out working-class radicalism in this period, to currents like Lotta Continua in Italy and Big Flame in the United Kingdom, politics that were reflected to some extent in the New Tendency in Canada.<sup>14</sup>

In what remained of the C. L. R. James–influenced Facing Reality collective, there was a contingent of Detroit-based working-class intellectuals rich in experience and attractive in their sensibilities, which heralded a politics of workplace militancy and resolute anti-racism, encompassing a familiarity with and involvement in the development of the non-Stalinist revolutionary left. These included Marty Glaberman and Seymour Faber. Jim Rinehart introduced me to this duo, who would prove strong supporters of my labour history scholarship in the years to come, where our paths crossed at biannual conferences on “Blue-Collar Workers and Their Communities.” But there were other impressive figures as well, including the largely unheralded historian of the slave narratives and working-class self-activity, George Rawick.<sup>15</sup> Attending a reunion of these forces around 1973 solidified the regard I had and continued to have for this political current, whose imaginative engagement with class struggles was often breathtaking. But on the level of political activity, I was disappointed in my hopes that they could chart a way forward, which, of course, may not have been their intention. I was convinced from spending time among them that nothing organizationally would ever come of these well-meaning, committed, and conceptually creative advocates of spontaneity and counter-planning on the shop floor. As brilliant as they may have been, they were metaphorically incapable of getting us to dinner, admittedly a problem widespread on the left of the time. Incapable of countenancing social democratic retreats and the mastication of revolutionary resolve, so evident in Canada’s New Democratic Party, disillusioned with all manner of Stalinisms, including Maoism, and increasingly unimpressed with a fetishization of workplace spontaneity, for me, a return to Leninism via Trotskyism seemed my only option. Trotskyism provided much that I had come to see as central to a politics of the left: appreciation of the primacy of class struggle; explanation of how revolution could be betrayed by bureaucratic deformation and programmatic abandonment of internationalism; and an insistence on the materialist and historical backgrounding of the politics of anti-capitalist opposition.

As I made my way to graduate school at SUNY–Binghamton, all of this was something that I took with me. I nevertheless refrained, for the most part, from *proclaiming* myself a Marxist, being of the view that to do so was no cavalier matter. I could not pinpoint when I first self-identified in this manner, but certainly by the early 1980s, as I grew close to the politics

of revolutionary Trotskyism, I was more comfortable in my Marxist skin, thickening as it necessarily was. It was not always easy reconciling this hardening politics with my involvement in certain campaigns, such as the anti-nuclear arms movement, where my particular kind of Marxism fit awkwardly with the political needs of a mobilization crisscrossed with contradictory currents: Christian pacifists; anti-Stalinist anarchist unilateralists; and Moscow-aligned proponents of the World Peace Council.<sup>16</sup> All of this developed, moreover, as I was caught on the academic treadmill of precarious, limited-term appointments, moving from two-year stints at Queen's University (1977–79) to McGill (1979–81), and finally landing a tenure-stream appointment at Simon Fraser (SFU) (1981–84).

I arrived at the Burnaby university in the early 1980s, when the provincial economy was caught in the vice grip of an economic malaise that registered in soaring inflation, declining production, and sinking state resource revenues. Stagflation fueled the agendas of the New Right, with the Social Credit Party coming to power under the leadership of Bill Bennett, proclaiming it would end the recessionary downturn with an all-encompassing attack on labour entitlements and social services. This, in turn, spurred the creation of a powerful extra-parliamentary opposition, the Solidarity Coalition, which soon eclipsed the New Democratic Party, characteristically MIA. At the time of British Columbia's Solidarity uprising of 1983, if I needed a lesson to confirm my Leninist and Trotskyist inclinations, it was drubbed into my political head by the sorry denouement of this momentous class struggle. An intense and escalating mobilization of opposition marched and protested, rallied and met in diverse constituency-based groups, published a weekly newspaper, and blanketed the province with leaflets. Job actions were scheduled; teachers struck at the public schools and the universities. A vast coalition of trade unionists, women, ethnic and racial minorities, Indigenous peoples, the disabled, welfare recipients, radical lawyers, and all manner of progressives battled a reactionary state and its attempt to realign the policies of provincial governance with a sweeping legislative package of restraint. The Socreds promised austerity on steroids; Solidarity countered with a people's resistance. Like tens of thousands of others, I was deeply involved. My days and nights were spent attending mass demonstrations and smaller organizational meetings; serving as a New Westminster alternate delegate to the Solidarity Coalition; walking picket lines while

on strike at SFU; and writing articles for the movement's newspaper, *Solidarity Times*, as well as other left-wing publications like *Canadian Dimension*, *Labour Focus*, and *Speaking Out*. This went on for months, with protests and workplace actions building momentum. Timetabled by the labour bureaucracy, which had no intention of following through on mass action, a general strike was promised, then ultimately derailed. Solidarity was brought to its knees on the eve of a provincial walkout, declared *finis* by Jack Munro on the patio of the provincial premier, with whom he had conducted a historic *tête-à-tête*. Boss of the International Woodworkers of America, Munro was a caricature of the trade union leader as *labour fakir*, his patented bravado a blustering put-down of the politics of the left and those who championed uncompromising resistance. As an all-consuming class battle, Solidarity rivalled anything I had experienced up to that point; I would not see the likes of it again for the next forty years, although the resistance to Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" in Ontario's 1990s was certainly an important popular uprising, comparable in some respects. I would write about Solidarity in a book put out by a Vancouver-based publisher, New Star, as well as in articles that would appear in a variety of places, including the Verso-released, Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker–edited, *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook*, in 1988.<sup>17</sup>

*Solidarity* is indicative of how much of my writing was prodded into being by the moment. There is no virtue in this and, indeed, there may be some vice. But my account of Solidarity, like many other books, grew out of the immediacy of a specific time and set of events, in this case a mobilization of dissent with which I was involved. *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* was written out of great sadness at the death of an admired friend, originating as an obituary for *Labour/Le Travail* that simply seemed to pile up in page upon page as I wrote through night after night. These books happened, as it were, with me overtaken by occurrences out of my control, about which I felt a need to write.

This was certainly also the case with *Capitalism Comes to the Backcountry: The Goodyear Invasion of Napanee*, a study of the tire plant built a few kilometres from my home in Newburgh, Ontario in the late 1980s. A corporate decision to relocate to a small town in eastern Ontario, however indicative this was of trends in capitalist restructuring, was not something I ever imagined writing a book about. When neighbours in the small

village where I lived interviewed for work at the new, just-in-time facility, they grew outraged by the liberties taken in the questions asked by Good-year managers. They pressed me, as someone they knew to be a writer and person supportive of workers and unions, to put something on paper about what was going on in our backyard. I felt compelled to respond.

A very different book emerged out of a quite unrelated shift in the academic interpretive climate; its origins also lay in my sense that something happening around me warranted attention. *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* was my attempt to intervene in a global intellectual development—the rise of “post” thinking and the influence of the linguistic turn on historiography—but it was also the kind of book that could be written out of my particular circumstances of the time. For a variety of reasons, envisioning a new research project was difficult and travel to archives was not really possible. Reading widely in critical theory and its impact on the writing of history was something I could manage in the late 1980s.

Other books were born of teaching. *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]*, for instance, was the product of being pressed by a department chair (most unfairly, I thought at the time!) to teach a course that reached beyond the working-class history lectures and graduate seminars I had been offering for more than a decade. I could never have written such a book, moreover, were I not the book review editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, with an expansive and eclectic appreciation of what the journal should be covering in its review section. The review copies that crossed my desk allowed me to read widely and sample subjects well outside my field of established expertise. I borrowed the idea—if not the content—of writing histories of the night from a Trent colleague, Keith Walden, who was teaching a seminar on this topic, focusing largely on Canadian subjects. I wanted to be more audacious, and by narrowing consideration of the night to marginality and transgression I expanded the chronological and geographic scope considerably. Lectures developed for the course became chapters of the book, a template I also followed when teaching in Canadian Studies at Trent, where seminars on working-class history were not really wanted, being too narrow in their disciplinary orientation and, in any case, already on offer in the History Department. This was how *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* came into being.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of my ongoing biographical treatment of the founder of American Trotskyism, James P. Cannon, this project certainly related to my political development and appreciation of the historic significance of the Left Opposition. When I finally got the ball rolling on this immense project in the mid-1990s, I envisioned it quite broadly as an undertaking that would, while focusing on Cannon, provide an overall treatment of the history of Trotskyism in the United States, this being a subject of less than benign neglect on the part of historians researching the revolutionary left. Now conceived as a trilogy, the Cannon books have been supplemented by a three-volume documentary history of American Trotskyism, in which the main architect has been Paul Le Blanc. In addition, a book-length account of the Left Opposition–led Minneapolis teamsters’ strikes of 1934 spun off from the Cannon research. I wanted its appearance to intersect the more working-class elements of the Occupy uprising, but a series of delayed decisions by presses postponed its appearance and the agitation at which it was directed sputtered and died out. At least, however, the book appeared in time to be part of the eightieth anniversary of the Minneapolis strikes. I spent an engaging week in the city talking to groups, delivering a lecture at the public library, sharing a Teamsters’ Union picnic stage with former Democratic Senator Al Franken, and meeting the committed contingent of working-class activists who keep the memory of the 1934 strikes alive. If the study of James P. Cannon developed in a planned way, it has certainly taken on a life of its own, expanding well beyond my original, more limited, conception.<sup>19</sup>

Even this protracted program of writing on Cannon was interrupted by the pressing need, after the 2007–2008 financial crisis, to address workers and economic downturns. My co-authored *Toronto’s Poor: A Rebellious History* was certainly not a book that existed on anything approximating a wish-list radar screen. Had two pressure points not converged, the book would not have come to fruition. Gaétan Héroux, an anti-poverty activist whom I met through John Clarke and my support of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, had amassed an impressive amount of research on the poor in Toronto, but was having difficulty putting it together in a form appealing to publishers. He asked me if I would be interested in working on a book with him. At first I begged off, knowing that while Gaétan had the beginnings of a well-documented study, it required new research, reorganization, the building of bridges among disparate

sections, some with stronger evidence than others, and an integration with a broad historiography. The task just seemed too daunting. At the same time as Gaétan and I were discussing all of this, Leon Fink, Joe McCartin, and Joan Sangster urged me to produce a paper on workers and economic crises for a conference they were organizing in Washington, DC. I proposed to Gaétan that we experiment with something less than a book, co-authoring a paper for the conference that would focus on Toronto's poor in the 1830–1930 years. We would see how that modest proposal worked out and then decide if a book would be doable. The collaboration flourished and publications I had never really envisioned took form, the product of circumstances coming together as much as any long-thought-out, conscious design.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps this is how all books are written. Few of us envision our productions quite as clearly as some suggest we should. If much of what I have published has happened “unbidden and unplanned,”<sup>21</sup> I am content with how all of this has turned out. Projects that I proposed, justified, and researched diligently sometimes, for one reason or another, did not get completed in the form that I imagined would do them justice. But they usually fed into other writing. A study of Upper Canada in the 1830s, for instance, stalled in an overwhelming mound of difficult to assimilate original research, sidelined too many times by other projects that events seemed to force upon me. Yet this material found its way into some of the more original early chapters of two editions of *Working-Class Experience* (in 1983 and 1992), structured how I conceived the historiography of pre-Confederation Canada, and was eventually boiled down to a suggestive essay.<sup>22</sup>

In the end, the poststructuralist penchant to do away with the author may have something to it. Intentions, as conscious authorial direction, are probably subordinate to meanings, which are never—for better or for worse—the sole preserve of the writer. Foucault is probably right that our published words are less what we want them to be and more of an ensemble of conflicted understandings, filtered through a maze of the personal and the political, situated along a spectrum of contexts. Books are received and interpreted quite differently by readers aligned with us and those arrayed against us, being disposed to see in our sentences interpretations of worth or proclamations to dispute, “as both battle and weapon, strategy and shock, struggle and trophy or wound, conjuncture and vestige, strange meeting and repeatable scene.”<sup>23</sup> This is partly how I understand my own

writing and its reception. Where Foucault and I differ is that I have been more forthright about intellectual exchange. It can extend meaning just as it is able to expose distortion and disingenuousness, not always absent among academics. I have always chosen, and choose again, to answer critics back, asserting the presence of the author as engaged political being, rather than either merely the object of discourse or, in an inflated sense, the claimant of ultimate authority.

## On Polemic and Provocation

This has all meant that some of my writing, though by no means all, has taken the form of polemic. To the extent that I am a polemicist, I at times embrace a literary form, in Perry Anderson's words, "whose history has yet to be written." If Anderson offers this assessment from his perch within English arguments, how foreign is polemic in comparable Canadian academic settings? It is not only that polemic's rules are poorly understood, but that its *raison d'être* is incomprehensible to both a professoriate generally situated along a spectrum of respectable politics, prideful of its many conversations of nuanced (and postured) civility, and to a younger contingent of progressive scholars, who tend to travel in circles of the like-minded. Polemic rattles all manner of cages. Its purpose *is* to disrupt. As a "discourse of conflict," the effectiveness of polemic "depends on a delicate balance between the requirements of truth and the enticements of anger, the duty to argue and the zest to inflame. Its rhetoric allows, even reinforces, a certain figurative license."<sup>24</sup> It is one thing to *refuse* to listen to an intellectual opponent, quite another to hear them out and respond with vigour. An intensity of feeling is not bad manners, even less a heated repudiation of reason. On the contrary, it has the potential to be a *genuine, necessary, and productive* provocation, a rejoinder, in the best sense of the word, to positions demanding retaliation.<sup>25</sup> Polemics, of course, are seldom appreciated by those on the receiving end. As Alvin Finkel notes, those like me who have at times embraced this genre have often been regarded as "rude."

The problem in contemporary Canadian historical writing, however, is hardly that it has too much rudeness and rancor, but that there is so little debate and intellectual controversy. I will gladly defend instances of criticism that some find particularly sharp in the interests of reviving



illuminating disputation. Clarifying the politics of difference, breaking the logjam of sociability networks and relative sameness that has routinely (and especially now) prevailed in Canadian historiographic circles, advances scholarship at the same time that it makes it more interesting. Creative analytic tensions within fields like business, labour, and social history—commonplace in my youth—have faded from view; spirited argument is, as a consequence, quite rare, to the point that some have referred to “debatophobia.”<sup>26</sup> “Art is living,” concludes Perry Anderson, “only if it provokes dispute,” and history is as much, or more, art as it is science.<sup>27</sup>

Marx’s favourite quotation, attributed to René Descartes, was “*De omnibus dubitandum*,” or, more colloquially, “Question everything.”<sup>28</sup> This does not mean that all queries end in rejection of views arising from interrogation, only that posing them will sometimes confirm positions. In other cases, they lead to rejections of specific stands; or, finally, and yet again, they culminate in recognition of complications and complexities. Challenges made are, moreover, not always either right, or even appropriate, but the costs of *not* raising them are far greater than the many debilitating prices paid for diplomatically avoiding debate. Differences that arise *only* among those who are on clearly opposed sides of the political fence are of course necessary. But they by no means exhaust the course of exchange. Just as the crucial definition of the defence of freedom of speech is standing up for the rights of those with whom one is in fundamental disagreement, the true test of intellectual debate may well lie in arguments waged with those who share much, but also depart from one another in significant ways. In my case, I have certainly stood up against the most reactionary critics of social history, as well as the architects of neoconservative state policies. This is rather like a bodily function, necessary for life, but hardly sufficient for charting new ways forward for the left. It is because of this that I have not been shy about breaking from the “popular front” of progressives. This entails recognizing, on the one hand, our common ground, but, on the other, drawing lines of distinct separation—methodologically and conceptually as well as politically—through the broad axioms that animate those committed to exploring the proliferating “limited identities” and “peculiarities” of the Canadians. Few working-class historians of my generation, for instance, have been as resolute as I in calling out the conservatism of the labour

bureaucracy, earning me the enmity of a number of trade union leaders and their hired staff. None of this is pleasant, but questioning everything does not mean truncating the process of interrogation at the point that it becomes uncomfortable. Doing dissidence in this way leads one into controversies, as it repeatedly has for me over a history of nearly fifty years in Canadian academic life.<sup>29</sup>

## Breaking Bad

My early scholarship on Canadian working-class history was generously received, often feted with awards and recognitions in prize committee deliberations. Yet there were also regular and routinized drubbings, as Alvin Finkel details in his chapter. With no connection to the University of Toronto (and no one engaged in understanding the Canadian historical profession should underestimate the significance of the U of T Department of History in the period reaching from the post–World War II period into the 1970s), I may have been a convenient scapegoat for figures like Kenneth McNaught. At the time, McNaught was more likely to wield the public lash hardest against those who were not associated with his own program, touched as he was with a certain paternalist regard for proper academic bloodlines. Arguably the doyen of moderate social democratic thought in Canadian historical circles of the late 1950s and early 1960s, McNaught was a pioneering patrician defender of civil rights in the mould of J. S. Woodsworth, whose early life he chronicled in loving detail. He was revered in some circles, and well known in the United States among radical historians, sitting on the editorial board of *Labor History*, teaching seminars in both Canadian and American history, and authoring an impressive analytic foray into socialism and progressivism that showcased his interpretive range.<sup>30</sup> Supervising a number of prominent historians of Canadian labour, including David J. Bercuson, he was, especially given his growing disenchantment with student radicalism over the course of the late 1960s, disdainful of both the personnel and politics of New Left scholarship in the 1970s.<sup>31</sup>

McNaught regarded my writing of the late 1970s as the “most overt amongst the celebrants of the rich and vibrant culture of the artisan,” and took exception to what he described as my “turgid neo-Marxist theoretical framework.” But he spent little time actually engaging with the writing

itself. Citing my book *A Culture in Conflict* and my essays that, like it, addressed the experience of the skilled worker, McNaught also referenced a lengthy article on charivaris and whitecapping in nineteenth-century North America. This piece can hardly be considered to have been overly concerned with artisans, and about it McNaught said nothing. It nonetheless figured in a startling conclusion to a jaunty essay on writing on labour and the left in the 1970s, commissioned by the *Canadian Historical Review*. McNaught implored historians to address the smart trade union leadership of the immediate post–World War II era, a contingent that secured Canadian workers so much, and whose purpose was “not to defend an Archie Bunker-charivari culture but, rather, to liberate those who had been entrapped by the economic-cultural constraints imposed by political capitalists.”<sup>32</sup>

This non sequitur endnote actually explained a great deal. Social democratic leaderships, not rough cultures of opposition, were the legitimate stuff of labour history, and never the twain could meet. Research about anything predating a respectable quest to break out of the undue restraints limiting workers, foisted on them by a specific component of capitalism rather than the continually crisis-ridden general regime of acquisitive individualism itself, was ridiculed, reduced to a sitcom caricature of the working class as reactionary buffoonery. McNaught’s implicit message was profoundly ahistorical. It sidestepped the actual point of my discussion of rough music. Rituals of this kind were an indication of how the plebeian masses, over the course of a century of confrontation with the disciplines and moral regulation of an emerging capitalism, often resorted to defiant, rowdy refusals that stepped outside of attempts to subject unruly subjects to law and other forms of compulsion.

Ironically, as much as McNaught would be at pains to deny this, in the *longue durée* of class formation, there may have been connections between nineteenth-century forms of rough music and the willingness of a rebellious and rising mass production trade unionism to test the limits of law and its capacity to contain working-class struggle.<sup>33</sup> The contexts of these expressions of resistance and refusal were of course markedly different, as were the ends they envisioned. There was no causal connection of overt class opposition that might connect shivarees, strikes against wage cuts, and socialist aspirations, but what such disparate deeds and dedications revealed about tensions inherent in class society could

well be illuminating, perhaps providing the basis for a productive discussion. And the means employed to secure collective bargaining rights and other entitlements in the World War II era were never as genteel and law-abiding as McNaught's oppositional contrasts suggest. All of this, however, was something that a scholar of his political sensibilities could never acknowledge. It was not surprising to see McNaught's student and ally, Bercuson, typecast a book Kealey and I published in 1982, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, in ways many readers found incomprehensible: "pretentious, problematic, and tedious . . . a Sunday sermon . . . dry, boring, and devoid of any feeling for the workers."<sup>34</sup>

### Bliss Was It in That Dawn to Be Alive

Those of us committed to a particular kind of intellectual work battled back, some more vociferously than others. Upon reflection, nothing is more apparent, however, than the good fortune of the cohort of which I was a part, in spite of the difficulty many had in securing academic employment. Kealey and I were among a small group blessed with benevolence, lucky to secure jobs when many of our allies did not, although my ride in the academic marketplace was a bit bumpier than Greg's. I eventually settled into tenure-stream appointments at, first, SFU, then Queen's, ultimately winning the professorial lottery with a Canada Research Chair appointment in Canadian Studies at Trent. Material security's foundational importance aside, employment was not, for any of us, what registered as decisive in our beginnings as historians in the making. Rather, to have experienced historical research and writing in the cauldron of 1968's aftermath was exhilarating.<sup>35</sup> Every trip to the archives, each essay written against the grain or lecture delivered with contrarian purpose allowed us to stand the ground of defiant dissent. All of the initiatives taken as part of a collective stamped what we were doing as not only cooperative but creative, an enterprise of excavation that ploughed against received wisdoms and promised discoveries aplenty.

This was not, of course, a revolutionary moment of transformation, like that alluded to in Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Nonetheless, the famous 1790s poetics of expansive possibility still resonate with my recollections of being a part of charting exciting new analytic territory.

O, pleasant exercise of hope and joy!  
For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood  
Upon our side, us who were strong in love!  
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven!

.....  
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,  
When most intent of making of herself  
A prime Enchantress—to assist the work  
Which then was going forward in her name!<sup>36</sup>

It was not so much, as was often argued by pedestrian political critics, that we were a solidly similar cohort that travelled in packs, dressed in uniforms (our ostensibly patented leather jackets), and sported the same longish and loutish hair—this superficial similarity being equated with the seamless analytics of foreign-inflected radical thought.<sup>37</sup> As so many chapters in this collection make abundantly clear, especially the thoughtful commentary on my politics provided by Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, there was never a consensus among the overlapping groups of critical historians, sociologists, and political scientists who came of age in the 1970s and of which I was a part. If we did not know, and could not agree about, what we were *for*, it was comfort enough to know what we were adamantly *against*. For the historians among us, this *oppositional* platform certainly earned us the enmity of a part of the profession.<sup>38</sup>

Yet it must be granted, as well, that there were those who treated us fairly, even as they looked on our historical practice quite critically. Authoritative figures at the very pinnacle of the Canadian Historical Association, such as Ramsay Cook, Carl Berger, and even to some extent Desmond Morton, viewed the new writing on class appearing in the 1970s and 1980s with considerable skepticism. Nonetheless, they gave those of us associated with this *nouvelle vogue* at least something of our due, and, particularly in the case of Cook, were capable of looking beyond their criticism to be strong advocates, as was a slightly younger figure, himself a pioneer of new ways of looking at Canadian history, Michael S. Cross.<sup>39</sup>

Many historians, by no means believers in the analytic direction of the new writing on Canadian workers and their past, nevertheless utilized this research and its approach in their teaching. Thus, when Terry Crowley

published an edited text on historical methods, he noted that Marxism “has been a minority current in Canada, felt for the most part in the area of working-class history.” He excerpted a statement from the introduction to *A Culture in Conflict*, noting that it tackled “the question of class from a Marxist perspective, but . . . also examines the relationship between Marxist theory and history.”<sup>40</sup> When Mel Watkins and H. M. Grant published a collection of writings addressing the contours of Canadian economic history, they selected an abridged portion of the introduction to *Dreaming of What Might Be* as part of the discussion of the late nineteenth-century transition to industrial capitalism.<sup>41</sup> Just as my own unlikely emergence as a Canadian Marxist historian was a process of uneven and combined development, so, too, was the response to the writing that was so central to this complicated process. If there were those who went on the attack, there were many others, however mixed their judgments, far more positive in their assessment, and this included a pioneering contingent of feminist historians who worked closely with and within *Labour/Le Travail* over the course of the 1980s.<sup>42</sup>

## Reflections

A collection such as this, so gratifying in its warmth and diverse expressions of regard, necessarily prompts reflection. Some of this is invariably self-critical, if only because the questioning and challenging accounts of friends, former students, and supportive and sympathetic colleagues are inevitably muted. It is of course gratifying to learn that there are younger colleagues, like Chad Pearson, who have appreciated my tone, which has, at times, truly tended toward the rude. I can, paraphrasing Frank Sinatra, acknowledge that my way has had its pitfalls. “Regrets, I’ve (truly) had a few,” certainly, but on balance it is not so much that they are “too few to mention” as that dwelling on them necessarily produces imbalances that I neither want to *encourage* or regard as helpful.

Any author whose published work has faced critical scrutiny will concede that, in hindsight, they might well have produced a different book. Historians are especially subject to this kind of reconsideration, given that new research and new reading necessarily leads to rethinking. In terms of my publications, this is most emphatically the case. I cannot imagine writing a book like *A Culture in Conflict* the same way were I to tackle the

subject it addressed, again, today. It is not even possible to conceive of the topic as it once presented itself, the intellectual goal posts of the perceived playing fields of scholarship having moved so much over the course of many years. Most influential, perhaps, has been feminist scholarship, and its approach to gender and sexuality, as I suggested in a new preface to the second edition of *Working-Class Experience*.<sup>43</sup> Graduate students with whom I worked in the 1980s and early 1990s at Queen's University were charting innovative research projects in just these fields. All of them were encouraged to be critical, including of my own views and publications, and a number of them were not shy in exercising this freedom of expression. They affected profoundly how I looked at the past, even if I did not always agree entirely with the ways in which history was being looked at anew. If my early writings on Canadian labour addressed class in ways innocent of later concerns with gender, subsequent studies, most especially *Cultures of Darkness*, spent far more time addressing subjects such as women and sexuality, commenting on reproduction as much as production and addressing representation alongside materiality.

Books are products, not only of authors, but of times, and publications need to be considered *and* reconsidered in this light. With respect to my own writing, I am concerned very little about whether everything I put on to the page was "right," whatever the calculation. Far more interesting to me are other questions. They include grappling with method and the use or abuse of evidence; locating the historiographic context in which a text was written, evaluating what the meaning of that writing was at the time of its publication, and then exploring how relevant this proved to be over time, as a field changed, new work enlivening it; and, finally, interrogating the theoretical framework within which research and writing develops. Drawing up a tabulation of what was *not* done and how this is a detriment to the analysis can of course be significant, although absolutism is always to be guarded against. Such a negative balance sheet only really takes on meaning if it is related to the kinds of larger concerns I have just noted. It is this bigger picture of questioning in particular ways that will prove most stimulating and allow for a possible assessment of what the positive contributions of any text might or might not be. To do this, of course, means that judgment must at least pay attention to the nuances of positions slotted into categories of evaluation, something not always apparent in historiographic commentary.

To conduct something of an auto-critique, for instance, in the case of *A Culture in Conflict*, the list of what I might do over is long. But it would also be tempered by specific kinds of recognitions. If I invested too much in an analysis of the cultural realm, this was because spheres of the everyday had received next-to-no consideration in the thin body of research into Canadian working-class life up to the 1970s. To take a specific manifestation of this cultural dimension, the associational life of the fraternal order, it is apparent that many regarded the presentation of this milieu in *A Culture in Conflict* as overly skewed toward the “class interests” of workers.<sup>44</sup> Yet, such a rewriting of workers back into this mutual benefit society milieu was absolutely necessary if the presence of class and the tensions associated with it in the late nineteenth century were to be appreciated. Moreover, there was in this early study acknowledgement that working-class involvement in friendly societies was two-sided, contributing to the kinds of mutuality and collectivism that might feed into resistance in certain circumstances, at the same time as fraternal society life might, through cross-class alignments and ideological attractions, reinforce accommodation to the status quo. I would later expand on this, addressing gender, ethnicity, race, and other markers of difference receiving too little attention in my earlier publications.<sup>45</sup> As a concrete expression of how my interactions with students shifted my thinking, I was pushed to important clarifying re-considerations of fraternalism (at the same time as I hope I pushed him) through engagement with Darryl Newbury’s 1992 MA thesis. It explored male associational culture and working-class identity in ways that accented the meaning of lodges as gendered brotherhoods, protective of familialist values.<sup>46</sup> Even these kinds of reflections tend to funnel understandings in ways that suggest a kind of “timeless” transcendence, in which an accumulation of criticism takes us “beyond” texts that were building blocks in a process of interpretive development.

When historians venture on to the highly contested terrain where theory, recoveries of long suppressed histories of the dispossessed, and interrogations of evidence that is both socially constructed and capable of illuminating opaque aspects of the past lie, intellectual work can get particularly combative. Consider, for instance, a book that critics love to hold out as an example of me at my derisive worst, *Descent into Discourse*. It is marked, as Chad Pearson makes abundantly clear, with an at times strong language of repudiation. But, equally important to recognize is what



Ted McCoy stresses in his warm and insightful outline of specific stages of my scholarship: the book does *not* repudiate either the importance of language or the capacity of *some* writing associated with discourse-activated critical theory to make a contribution to knowledge.<sup>47</sup> Close readings of *Descent into Discourse* would recognize this, although such scrutinizing engagements are not, sadly, the norm in our times. In my judgment, it *was* necessary to stake out ground against what constituted a theoretical repudiation of materialist orientations to the past, a trend that was definitely and defiantly channeling historians of the 1980s and 1990s in analytic directions I found not only wayward, but counterproductive. Many others were also of this view and warmed to the book in the face of its hostile reception in quarters where, it must be said, the attitude to discourse was wantonly *parti pris*.<sup>48</sup> My critique had nothing to do with denying language's importance, but made a strong case for situating determination at the interface of material and non-material aspects of historical causation. If the linguistic turn exhibited less proselytizing zeal and ultimacist insistence on discourse's determinative authority, I would not likely have bent my pen against it. Or, equally important, if the driving force of the new critical theory did not rail so incessantly against metanarratives (largely scapegoating Marxism and class analysis), I might not have felt the need to defend an interpretive politics of totality central to the social histories of the 1970s.<sup>49</sup>

To the extent that the excesses of "critical theory's" embrace by historians have been tempered of late, the critique I levelled has proven prescient, however much this would be denied in many quarters. And differentiating myself from much of the extreme postures of poststructuralism/postmodernism *writ large* did not inhibit me from drawing on specific productive aspects of critical theory, especially the early writing of Foucault.<sup>50</sup> I pushed to address marginality throughout history in ways that, as Ted McCoy and Nick Rogers note in their discussions of *Cultures of Darkness*, brought sophisticated commentary on both the discourses and material determinations of dispossession together, aligning Marx and all manner of contemporary thinkers.<sup>51</sup>

In this sense, *Descent into Discourse* and *Cultures of Darkness* were not conflicted texts, but a pairing, and one that would, as a number of commentators in this volume appreciate, insist that Marxism and class analysis were not restrictive and reductive ways of looking at the world, but, rather,

possible means of widening analytic *and* political vision. One reflection of this was my co-authored *Toronto's Poor*, in which the treatment of class, so often studied as *waged* work, is expanded to address those excluded from the formal labour market. All of this writing explores discourse, and not discourse in the making of exploitation and oppression, inequality, and subordination. As such, my books and articles have worked to attend not only to the resilience and resistance of the dispossessed, however varied and differentiated their experiences, but to power's prerogatives.

## Refusals

Writings like *A Culture in Conflict*, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism*, and *Dreaming of What Might Be* were expected to rock interpretive boats. So, too, were the two editions of *Working-Class Experience*, especially the second edition. Figures like McNaught, Bercuson, and Granatstein espoused predictable animosities, fueled by the conjoined premises of an anti-theoretical empiricism and ideological hostility whenever Marxism reared its challenging head, either as a conceptualization of the past or as a politics of anti-capitalist objection and opposition in the present. These conventional critics were uninterested in *Descent into Discourse*, however, and if they ever read the text there is little in their published work to indicate a familiarity with it.

Not quite so with other critics, whose rejection of the book's ideas and arguments still managed to exhibit little actual engagement with what *Descent into Discourse* said. Even before this opposition ossified, the transparently anti-left dismissals of the 1970s and early 1980s mainstream would blur into related commonplace criticisms in the 1990s, emanating from eminently progressive quarters. A commitment to the recovery of varied forms of resistance and a willingness to defend a particular kind of historical materialism singled me out for dismissal and scorn from a small, but influential group, a particular set of overlapping contingents of gender and labour historians. These critics shared friendships forged in Toronto-based study groups and graduate schools. Attractions to Marxism and its commitment to revolutionary possibility were waning in the 1990s as these overlapping contingents converged.<sup>52</sup> They were by no means representative of the entirety of the Canadian historical profession, however, let alone those academics and left-wing readers in other disciplines or outside of

the academy. The gender side of this pairing, often associated with the publication of a groundbreaking collection of essays, *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*,<sup>53</sup> exhibited an increasingly warm embrace of poststructuralist theory, referencing Michel Foucault, Joan Scott, and even Friedrich Nietzsche. For the labour component, which was less likely to overtly shed a materialist epistemology, there were nevertheless signs that original attractions to class struggle and resistance were being replaced in some quarters with an increased focus on resilience. This was expressed in a growing unease with attributing much significance to Marxist appreciations of class consciousness, the addressing of which would come to be challenged, often in insouciant ways.

An opening shot, albeit one lobbed cavalierly, appeared in the introduction to *Gender Conflicts*. The authors of this manifesto-like statement chose to structure their arguments in favour of a new approach to women and gender by targeting, not mainstream Canadian historiography, about which they said virtually nothing, but those working-class historians, of whom I was the only worthy cited, who merely juxtaposed "descriptions of structures of domination with examples of resistance." This ostensibly celebrated the working class as a heroic, "morally pure" subject.<sup>54</sup> An odd echo of this could be heard in Craig Heron's dismissive review of the second edition of *Working-Class Experience*, discussed by Alvin Finkel earlier in this volume. Heron thought my book imposed "the search for simon-pure class-consciousness as the central organizing framework of a working-class history."<sup>55</sup> As I explained, class (and self-identification within it and recognition of the differences among classes) exists even when class consciousness in the Marxist sense (entailing an understanding of the necessity of struggling against capitalist exploitation and the special oppressions it spawns) is absent, as it most decidedly had been for much of the history I was addressing. "A study of class consciousness in Canada for the most part would be an exploration of silences and absences," I wrote, adding that, "For many Canadian historians this relegates class to a category of marginal significance: other factors matter, but class does not. I see things differently." A class structure of inequality and difference gave rise to mobilizations and struggles *and* expressions of cultural difference. This conditioned understandings of class place that could, in certain circumstances, help construct pathways to the realization of a more robust class consciousness, in the Marxist sense.<sup>56</sup>

Yet this was by no means all that I was interested in or wrote about in *Working-Class Experience*. Gender factored into how I rethought working-class history in the late 1980s and 1990s, when graduate students working with me, such as Karen Dubinsky and Annalee Lepp, were engaged in important doctoral research on violence and patriarchal authority within working-class families.<sup>57</sup> When I integrated this into my account, balancing it with appreciation of the family as a site of mutuality, resilience, and survival, Heron was not impressed, castigating my discussion of the presence of gendered power within labouring households as “an almost sordid preoccupation with conflict and oppression.” Suggesting that my previous work had somehow been unique in its avoidance of important, now-recognized topics, Heron declared, “Palmer has had to admit that no one can any longer write social history that ignores gender.”<sup>58</sup> Yet, Heron failed to acknowledge that his writings of the late 1980s, admittedly not unlike mine and those of most other male labour historians, contained little on either women or gender.<sup>59</sup>

Some dissertations completed at York University got in on the act. A standard trope, evident in the published books of Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* and Robert F. Kristofferson, *Craft Capitalism: Craftworkers and Early Industrialization in Hamilton, Ontario, 1840–1872*, was to interpretively distance study from the early writing of Palmer and Kealey. Misrepresentation was the order of the day. Marks insisted that friendly societies were depicted in *A Culture in Conflict* as containing “primarily working-class membership” and that bodies like the Orange Lodge were represented in Palmer’s and Kealey’s writings as “bastions of working-class culture.” Nothing of the kind was ever said.<sup>60</sup> Kristofferson’s mangling of quotations was particularly egregious.<sup>61</sup> The reviewer of his book in the *American Historical Review* noted that Kristofferson’s novel exercise in textual reconstitution “caricatures what Palmer actually says” and that a “sophisticated argument is substantially misrepresented.”<sup>62</sup> Not unlike the *Gender Conflicts* authors, but extending the critique to include Kealey, Kristofferson proclaimed our publications were nothing more than products of a “politically-motivated research agenda” that threatened to “degenerate into a search for the country’s first class-conscious worker.” Kristofferson concluded: “craft workers might not have carried around with them an inherent propensity towards socialist action.”<sup>63</sup> Who knew that this was

what *A Culture in Conflict, Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism*, or *Dreaming of What Might Be* were about? Not their authors. It was difficult to conjure up a search for socialist class consciousness out of my discussion of Hamilton's Isaac Buchanan-influenced producer ideology or Greg Kealey's detailed exploration of working-class politics in Toronto, let alone our account of the Knights of Labor's uncertain groping toward a program of labour reform. The approach was to *explore* the complexity of class formation in the complicated spheres of working-class thought and political engagement.<sup>64</sup>

I was reminded of E. P. Thompson's comment on the silence of the Fabian historians in the face of hostile put-downs. J. L. Hammond and Barbara Hammond, whose pioneering accounts of British labour were subjected to endless reproach by a gaggle of reactionary defenders of capitalism's uplifting Industrial Revolution capacities, took what they no doubt considered a "high road," abstaining from replying to their critics. They "turned too often towards their critics a genteel cheek of silence," wrote Thompson, "and, after that, they were dead. For more than twenty years the ideological school of history has been able to knock 'the sentimentalists' with impunity—a certain scowl, a suggestion of anti-sentimental rigour, has served to cover any lacunae in scholarship."<sup>65</sup>

How many turns? How many cheeks? When I replied to some of this criticism, focusing perhaps unduly on Lynne Marks's *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, and raising questions about how *some* gender historians were using evidence and *some* others were proclaiming a too easy assimilation of historical materialism and poststructuralist theory, these interventions led to an onslaught of rebuke, private as well as public.<sup>66</sup> Alvin Finkel details the more cloistered initiative of Franca Iacovetta, Lynne Marks, and four other historians and labour studies social scientists to discipline me, as editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, for having published critical historiographic commentaries in other journals. Marks offered a lengthy rejoinder to my essay that addressed her writing, sidestepping most issues, deflecting them with the insistence that my engagement with her problematic use of evidence and misrepresentation of historiography could be written off as little more than my supposed antipathy to the study of religion.<sup>67</sup>

Mariana Valverde, the most theoretically inclined member of the *Gender Conflicts* collective, managed to get in the last word. Describing me as "the self-styled son" of E. P. Thompson, Valverde claimed that my career was

based on “invective” and “vitriolic attacks.” I was responsible for the sad situation in which younger historians were of the impression that “to be theoretical was to be anti-labour history and anti-Marxist.”<sup>68</sup> Almost a decade later, Valverde was still beating this drum of personalized attack. When her *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925* was reprinted in 2008, Valverde complained that historians had not sufficiently appreciated her study. She declared, without a shred of evidence, that “the eyeglasses that Palmer’s polemics provided for his fellow left-wing historians (none of whom, to my knowledge, had read Derrida or Foucault to the extent that Palmer had) were firmly on people’s noses as they read my book.” She again linked me with Thompson, insisting, astoundingly (and, again, with nothing to back up such a wild assertion), that our writing identified class consciousness “with the crusade against theory. If you took theory seriously, you were a traitor to the working class.”<sup>69</sup> As scapegoating and unfounded assertion, this was pretty wild.<sup>70</sup>

Much was at stake in all of this, including how history is written, its relationship to theory, and how argument can and should be waged.<sup>71</sup> No doubt many contemporary historians, concerned with weightier matters, regard this as little more than a distended tempest in a scholastic teapot. Perhaps. Yet it served as prelude to a sorry example, commented on more generally by John McIlroy and Alan Campbell in their chapter in this volume, of how debate and intellectual exchange is too often stifled in today’s scholarly journals. One of my articles that elicited strong response from the Toronto-based gender and labour circles was “Historiographic Hassles.” It was published by *Histoire sociale/Social History* along with Valverde’s “Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis,” with the editors’ stated, and laudatory, intention of fomenting controversy within the field of social history. But when disagreement indeed erupted, the response of the *Histoire sociale/Social History* editors was not to remain true to their original purpose and encourage debate and discussion, but to shut it down, doing so in a remarkably personalized and partisan manner. First, they allowed Lynne Marks extensive space to respond to my commentary, which was as it should be. Second, they refused me, the author they had published with the explicit intention of creating debate and discussion, the right of a short rejoinder to Marks, which was most emphatically *not* what should have been done. Third, and finally, when I submitted a response

to Valverde's essay, they promptly rejected it for publication, a startling decision differentiating the treatment they accorded Marks and what was meted out to me.

Scholarship, in this unequal exchange, was not so much furthered as small-group allegiances solidified, criticism of a particular kind furloughed, and the possibility of clarification, perhaps even reconciliation, thwarted. Defended with platitudes about what advances knowledge and what does not, what constitutes acceptable discourses of disagreement and what does not, this kind of shutting down of intellectual exchange is unacceptable. By all means let there be boundaries established within which debate flourishes in productive ways, applicable to all involved, but editorial gate-keeping that prejudges what (and who) counts in the clash of reasonable interpretive wills should have no place in scholarly publishing.

## Authors and Editors

I tried to do things differently when editing *Labour/Le Travail*. This was a part of my longstanding friendships and working relations with Greg Kealey and Alvin Finkel, but I believe that almost *everyone* involved with this collection of essays has contributed to *Labour/Le Travail* in one way or another. Over the course of fifteen years as book review editor, almost twenty years as editor/co-editor, and roughly forty-five years as contributor and board member, I did my best to open the journal's pages to critical thinking, and to encourage and defend the importance of scholarly debate and the public airing of interpretive difference.<sup>72</sup>

As Kirk Niergarth's generous account of my stint as *Labour/Le Travail* editor suggests, the journal under my direction followed policies that continued a longstanding proclivity to expand subject areas and actively promote discussion and debate. We discouraged the use of the book review section as a venue of exchange, precisely because we expected reviews to be critical and authors to find cause for complaint with how their scholarly work was addressed. Our considered view was that cluttering up the book review section with endless responses and rejoinders was less productive than having debates, if they truly were significant, take place elsewhere. So, we did our best to encourage irate authors to set the record straight regarding critical reviewers in ways other than inevitably truncated replies to short monograph assessments. Once this policy was in place,

and adhered to consistently, we received surprisingly few requests on the part of disgruntled authors that they have space to “correct” or respond to contentious reviews. Aside from this conscious policy decision, which might seem to sideline conflicting analyses, we allowed authors a wider latitude than was commonplace in academic publishing in terms of length, and controversy exchanges were encouraged. Criticisms of my own writing were commonplace in articles published in *Labour/Le Travail* under my editorship, the odd one coming, legitimately, from graduate students I was supervising. If I occasionally requested that particular characterizations of my publications take on a more nuanced stand, reflective of what I actually wrote, I endorsed the publication of a great many articles with which I disagreed, even some in which misrepresentations of my writing appeared.

Kirk’s benevolent comment on my editorship rightly distinguishes an individual scholar’s role as editor *and* author, and for his purposes understandable reciprocities converge in both these spheres. There is something to this congealment, of course, because editors are informed parties in the process of manuscript evaluation, but there is also, in the end, a distinct separation. An author has to be true to their particular self, to the principles, interpretations, and intellectual–political stands *they* embrace, based on rigorous research. This is *why* an author writes, or it is at least what I believe should animate researchers taking their findings into print. Up to a point, this coincides with what an editor does. Ultimately, however, the responsibility of a scholarly journal’s director is not to themselves as a thinking and critical subject, but to a set of pluralistic ground rules pushing authors to improve their submissions on their own terms. As Kirk points out, editors can of course serve authors well, mediating peer review assessments, which can often be at odds with one another and that are, on occasion, unfair. Editorial expertise can provide helpful guidance as to what to accent in the revision process, and also prod authors to refine their scholarship and expand ways of situating their writing historiographically and theoretically. An editor’s role is not to reproduce themselves, however, nor to protect their friends, but to nurture the best in what authors submit. No editor can completely separate themselves from fashionable trends, personal likes and dislikes, and other subjective considerations, but as much as these can be put to the sidelines, the better will be the editorial process. Inevitably this means that an editor, unlike an author, contributes as an individual up to the point, ill-defined and somewhat vague, that it is then



necessary to step back into a fair-minded suppression of the self. This is how I tried to function as editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, listening to peer reviewers at the same time as I was guided by specific principles. Authors were pressed to marshal evidence well, expand their theoretical and historiographic horizons, and make their analysis as strong as it could be. This may all seem self-evident, a statement of the obvious. Yet throughout my academic career, I can attest to article submissions to journals where such axioms of editorial practice were anything but evident. Editing *Labour/Le Travail* was something I am proud to have done well, diligently, and, I believe, without rudeness.

### Thompson's Times

There is perhaps too little rudeness in the chapters in this volume, however thankful I may be that I have been largely spared the rod of criticism that I myself have wielded so often. The tributes that appear in this collection I value greatly, appreciative of their substance and spirit of positive engagement with areas of my research, writing, and politics. Differences abound, of course, as they should, and they prompt me to offer some thoughts and occasional counters.

Nick Rogers, for instance, provides an insightful and stimulating commentary on Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. It left me rethinking much of what I read in that formidable book, published so long ago. The power of Thompson's voice was augmented by the book's unique structure and tone, defiant of conventional academic modes of presentation.<sup>73</sup> Thompson was more concerned with how the book would be read by a group of autodidact militants in Yorkshire than within a graduate seminar at Oxford, the text being researched as its author taught Workers' Education Association classes. It utilized specific sources, often gathered through meticulous mining of local and regional experience (not unrelated to Thompson's adult education teaching), to *generalize*, doing so against the grain of orthodoxies, be they conservative, Fabian, or reductionist Marxist. History, for Thompson, was always *argument*. If, in the abstraction of his claims, Thompson overstated certain positions or failed to account for this or that particularity, as Nick's piece often suggests (sometimes undoubtedly correctly), a part of this can be explained by how and why Thompson was writing in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

*The Making's* academic assimilation, indeed its elevation to a canonical text, was something of an accident of history, its publication in 1963 coinciding with a subsequent explosion of youth radicalization and political mobilization that catapulted the text and its sensibilities into the limelight of interpretive notoriety. This forced its author to adjust to the norms of scholarly cautions, as he stated in a 1976 interview:

I've become a bit more inhibited since [the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class*], simply because, although the book has been received very generously in some academic quarters, it has been subjected to very sharp attacks, especially in Britain. In order to meet these I have had to sharpen my own scholarly equipment. When you suddenly realize that you are being watched by this largely conservative profession you have to be very sure that your statements are as accurate, as precise, as well documented as possible. That can be a slight inhibition.<sup>74</sup>

Implicit in this reflection are three important dimensions of the making of *The Making of the English Working Class*. First, the author had little of the largesse and research infrastructure of a university appointment at his disposal. Second, his purpose in writing the book was as much political as academic, although these were never entirely distinct or counterposed orientations. And third, the period in which this book was written was an intellectual moment and political era far different than our current times. Recognizing all of this is not to exempt *The Making* from the kinds of scholarly criticisms Nick is raising. Rather, it is to recognize the study contextually. Doing this, I believe, might recast how the book should be read today with respect to subsequent academic findings, alerting us to complexities relating to how authors in different situations present events and evidence.

One part of what *The Making of the English Working Class* was conceived to be doing was offering Thompson's Workers' Education Association students the weapon of educated understandings about how workers confronted the rising industrial capitalism of earlier times so that they could combat the conventional wisdoms of the 1950s. None of this is unrelated to Nick's critique of Thompson. In addressing Thompson's reading of specific kinds of evidence, for instance, Nick implies that critics have a point when they allude to how he privileges the Sadler Committee of

1832, but dismisses the 1833 Factory Commission. What is actually written in the relevant pages of *The Making* seems to me more analytically subtle than this oppositional characterization, but that is perhaps not the main point. Thompson was attentive to historiographic complications that do not factor into Nick's commentary, but that relate to why Thompson addressed a working-class audience inundated with historical propaganda in particular ways. For in discussions of evidence and its use, Thompson's explication in *The Making of the English Working Class* routinely balances what can be gleaned from documents with how they have been drawn upon in the reactionary politics of interpretation dominant in academic circles in the 1950s. This was often associated with the authors involved in the influential collection of essays edited by Frederick Hayek, *Capitalism and the Historians*. An ideological consensus associated with this "optimistic" interpretive school frames how Thompson discusses much, including the Sadler Committee and the Factory Commission. Capitalism's cutting of a destructive swath through early nineteenth-century plebeian life had been obfuscated with an at times frolicsome set of 1950s claims and aggressive assaults on previous "pessimistic" scholarship associated with the Hammonds, Webbs, and other Fabian-inclined writers. This historiographic punching back situates how Thompson assesses particular kinds of 1830s inquiries and panels, as well as the documentation they generated. It is never, then, simply a question of why one set of sources is correct and another body of material suspect.<sup>75</sup> Thompson wrote perceptively about this, whether he was addressing the discontents of class in the early nineteenth century or the nature of the *New Left Review* over the course of the 1960s.<sup>76</sup>

### Political Lacunae and Lenin

Politically, while I had great respect and considerable affection for Edward Thompson, I did have differences with him. Nick cites my Leninism, something Edward never tired of teasing me about (Dorothy Thompson, also always gracious and generous as far as I was concerned, was harder edged in her criticisms of my politics). My relationship to Leninism and Trotskyism is alluded to by a number of contributors to this volume. This is fair enough, but Leninism actually intrudes lightly on much of my historical writing, the subjects I have tackled often being situated in pre-Leninist

times. Appreciations of Leninism factor most decisively in my relatively recent publications on United States Communist Party historiography and the emergence of American Trotskyism, understandably so.

In their contribution to this collection, John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, with whom I have had a productive dialogue and personal friendship for the better part of two decades, chart important distinctions between Bolshevism and Stalinism. They lay out yet another critically important commentary on why the degeneration of the Russian Revolution over the course of the 1920s remains a central interpretive issue confronting those who address the history of Communist parties. Discerning readers will appreciate, however, that McIlroy and Campbell are more inclined to see in both Bolshevism and Leninism “the cocoon in which Stalinism incubated” than I would concede. The metaphor itself seems to me inadequate, if only because Stalinism could not help but come about within Bolshevism/Leninism, but it ended up being an unambiguous repudiation of these origins, rather than part of an evolution. I am far more positive about Lenin’s contribution and the first years of the International, and rather dubious about failing to draw lines of political distinction more sharply against the admittedly highly significant work of Cold War historians, such as Theodore Draper, than are McIlroy and Campbell.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, McIlroy and Campbell, like Draper and other anti-Communist historians from whom they are quite distinct but with whom they share some interpretive ground, tend to see the program of Bolshevization (not to be confused or equated with the more general political designation of Bolshevism) promoted by the Communist International in the mid-1920s as a suppression of democracy. Like Jacob Zumoff, I have a slightly different approach. We acknowledge Bolshevization’s dual nature. Under the pressure of Zinoviev’s bureaucratic impulses and incipient Stalinization, Bolshevization was too often imposed mechanically with the heavy hand of Moscow’s ultimate authority. Yet it was also the case, especially within the foreign-language federations of the American Workers’ Party and throughout the unusually hardened and debilitating factionalism of the United States Communist movement, that those accepting Bolshevization struggled to address problems demanding redress if the revolutionary left was indeed to build a viable and coherent opposition to capitalism in the United States.<sup>78</sup>

I appreciate what McIlroy and Campbell have accomplished in their always rigorous and unrivalled contributions to Communist historiography. Yet to address the metaphor on which they conclude their contribution to this volume is to stake out an important differentiation between how they approach the Communist past and my own perspective. It is of course undeniable that a hippopotamus is not a giraffe, and that it does not take a zoologist to recognize this. Yet, if scientists agree there are but two species of hippos, there is an ongoing discussion/debate about how many giraffe subspecies exist. McIlroy, Campbell, and I stand against so many historians of Communism in our like-minded insistence that Stalinism matters, and this continues to be a fundamental issue that remains critical to fight out with those who are in denial about this basic political matter. How this relates to the brief but pivotal history of revolutionary internationalism that drew militants to the cause of Lenin, Trotsky, and Bolshevism in the era of the Soviet Revolution and its consolidation remains a central historical concern for all who see the need to change the world. Nevertheless, there is no uniform, uncomplicated agreement on issues of this kind. Where Bolshevism ends and Stalinism begins, as well as how this relates to our understandings of specific policy initiatives like the Bolshevization campaign formally proclaimed within the Comintern in 1924–25, is interpretively contested terrain. As in so many areas of historical inquiry, forthright discussion and elaborations of difference are essential to clarifying much, and no historians have done more to bring the issues into sharp relief than McIlroy and Campbell.<sup>79</sup>

When drawing on history to address events like British Columbia's Solidarity, it is difficult *not* to conclude that without the disciplined leadership of a workers' party, class struggles in our time will inevitably spiral downward in compromise, even capitulation. Our current moment is surely replete with evidence that neither liberalism nor conservatism has answers for the dilemmas posed acutely by capitalism and its recurrent crises. The politics of austerity and a now decades-long reign of neoliberalism have left working-class standards of living and the safeguards and entitlements of trade unionism and the welfare state of advanced capitalism in tatters. With the revolutionary left in disarray and even a conservatively-led and bureaucratically-ordered labour movement plummeting to the point that its effectiveness as a political force is at its lowest ebb in living memory, perhaps in even a century, the working class as an agent of social

transformation is, for many, a non-entity. Yet if workers are not centrally involved in rewriting the script of the social relations of production and everyday life, change of any meaningful kind is simply not going to happen.

This necessity of advancing class politics in an age of declining expectations and the retreat of organized oppositions of the left was central to my longstanding relationship with Leo Panitch. His tragic death in December 2020, a consequence of complications arising from COVID-19, saddened all of the contributors to this collection.<sup>80</sup> In their canvassing of my research, writing, and politics, Leo and his close friend and collaborator Sam Gindin offer an assessment of how I have struggled to address this imperative. They, too, raise the spectre of my Leninism. In the absence of breakthroughs that are successful in confronting capitalism and bringing its armies of accumulation and structures of governance to their knees, I continue to think that Lenin and the Bolshevik tradition constitute a reservoir of class struggle politics that the left forfeits at considerable cost. When I have proof that a new kind of politics is gaining both adherents *and* achievements, advancing principled politics, I will be more than happy to revise my belief in the need for a rebirth of the Fourth International. This left politics will have to provide convincing evidence that Leninism has been surpassed in its insights into how revolutionary breakthroughs are to be achieved, highlighting and elaborating another body of strategic and tactical thought that promises radicalizing successes. This is a tall order indeed. Whatever the ostensible breakthroughs of our time, I remain agnostic about the prospects. Social democratic reform of an exploitative regime of accumulation and its rampant excesses has run into a variety of brick walls. Episodic uprisings of guerrilla activists or the politics of identitarian particularity, however momentarily inspiring or pragmatically attractive, have proven inadequate. Mobilizations associated with a range of social movements, including environmental demands to halt climate change or campaigns like those of Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, or Indigenous demands for land reclamation are indeed enthralling. But their capacity to transform politics in our time has not yet been confirmed. Political challenges associated with Bernie Sanders in the United States or Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom, uprisings such as Occupy or the Arab Spring, and anti-capitalist opposition to austerity from Greece to Brazil have not yet translated into a new politics of a sustained and successful kind. Until such episodic *instances* of resistance reconstitute the

tactical and strategic imperatives of anti-capitalist politics, I will continue to stand older, more traditional, ground, albeit with my ears cocked and eyes open to fresh alternatives.

As Sean Carleton and Julia Smith note in their concluding chapter to this book, I value defending old positions and accomplishments in the struggle to bring new possibilities into being. I do not think this necessarily shackles us to the limitations of the past. Rather, engaging with history offers us ways of understanding predicaments that are rarely *sui generis*, even as circumstances change. In invoking Leninism, moreover, I am *not* (nor are many sympathizers associated positively with this tradition of revolutionary politics) suggesting that we exist within the structures of political economy that prevailed at the time of the Russian Revolution. Nor am I advocating a mechanical implementation of the strategic imperatives growing out of 1917, grafting them mindlessly on to the entirely different actualities of a century later. That said, Lenin's fundamental contribution, in which tactical flexibility could best be realized through a disciplined, combative party of revolutionary resolve and programmatic clarity, seems to me as alive in terms of our needs as ever. My embrace of Trotskyism, and how this has played out in the scholarship of my later years, is a reflection of this belief.

Leo and Sam, for all of their generosity toward me personally (which is certainly apparent in their chapter, but has extended well beyond the pages appearing in this volume, and included many kindnesses on Leo's part before his death), look to Trotskyism and see largely "infamous factionalism." This fixation on the fissiparous Left Oppositionist, I am afraid, leads Leo and Sam astray. When I note that the Minneapolis Communist Party members who would later constitute the leadership of the teamster rebellion of 1934 did not know what was at stake in the "animosity to Trotsky and his critique of the Communist International" in 1928–29, Leo and Sam focus on this statement. They suggest "this may have been a blessing," implying that liberation from the "obsessive debates" associated with Trotskyism allowed the Minneapolis revolutionaries to wage a successful class struggle. For militants, ignorance was, if not a kind of bliss, an odd freedom that could then lead to momentous advances for workers.<sup>81</sup>

My view could not be more different. Revolutionary Minneapolis teamsters addressed their lack of knowledge about Trotskyist politics: they called on the Communist Party to allow a debate around what was at stake,

and they educated themselves quickly. It was *as Trotskyists* that they then led organized labour out of the wilderness of the open-shop town. The Drivers' Union they headed waged three strikes in less than eight months, conflicts marked by an impressive degree of organization, foresight, and negotiating savvy. Victories in these strikes, moreover, owed much to the material support and political acumen of non-union Trotskyist comrades. These conscious revolutionaries rallied to the cause of the Teamsters. They came from near and far to edit the daily strike newspaper; organize the unemployed to support the struggles of those working on the trucks, in the markets, and throughout the coal yards and other venues of the transportation sector; provide the leadership of a powerful and defiant Women's Auxiliary; offer up an adroit menu of tactical innovations; and chart an adept and protracted course. The marginal and cash-starved nascent Trotskyist movement in the United States tithed its entire membership to support the struggle of Minneapolis workers. As I argue in *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934* (2013), becoming Trotskyists and joining what was the nucleus of a class struggle party was central to the success that a dedicated core of revolutionaries achieved in advancing the politics of *both* trade unionism and revolutionary socialism in Minneapolis during the 1930s. As one non-Trotskyist member of the Strikers' Committee of one hundred stated unequivocally about the working-class upheaval that galvanized Minneapolis workers and reconfigured class relations in the city, "The rank and file was really the power of the whole movement but they still needed that leadership to lead them. I don't care how good the army is, without a general they're no good. These people moved in gradually from the Socialist Workers Party to help and I say without them there wouldn't have been no victory."<sup>82</sup>

### Bliss May Be Their Dawn

To raise the kinds of questions/criticisms that I have posed above is not meant to be rude. I owe the friends, colleagues, and past students who have given me the gift and labours of their commentary my thanks for treating me seriously, fairly, and exceedingly kindly. Some, if not all, have undoubtedly curbed their legitimate fault-finding in the interest of munificence. My commentaries about the issues raised—involving historical method, analytic stands of importance, and a politics that is both interpretive and



applicable to our current struggles—are reflective of the back-and-forth of argument that has always characterized my relationships inside and outside of academic life, be they with close collaborators or those from whom I am separated by considerable disagreement.

It is to the former students involved in this production that I owe my greatest debt and my ultimate thanks for this wonderful volume, which means so much to me precisely because it is a tribute coming from those whose views I value greatly. The former graduate students I have worked with over forty years of academic life have been many—I supervised roughly seventy MA and PhD students to completion at Queen's and Trent University—and they constitute, as a collectivity, an amazing contingent of challenging and imaginatively creative individuals.

Sean Purdy was one of a large and stimulating cohort of MA/PhD students working with me at Queen's University in the 1980s and 1990s. Those were heady days, when working-class history seemed to be at the cutting edge of a new and politically charged Canadian historiography. I was fortunate to be a part of, and indeed chair for five years, a graduate program that saw so many gifted and energetic students help to redefine the nature of scholarship as it evolved in a new century.<sup>83</sup> It is appropriate that Sean is present in this volume, representing a distinct cluster of graduate students, for among them he has perhaps come to symbolize both the internationalism and the rigorous tenacity of left-wing research and writing that I regard as central to my own intellectual and political being. As Sean worked on his dissertation about Regent Park, he found his way to a politics of lifelong oppositional dissidence.<sup>84</sup> I am especially proud that he has contributed a chapter situated at the crossroads of my intellectual and political life, addressing a class struggle mobilization in recent Brazil, where Sean has become an authoritative commentator on the tumultuous politics of his adopted country. I admire the extent to which he has integrated into the Brazilian milieu, teaching in the History Department at the University of São Paulo and routinely called upon as a public intellectual to offer comment on political developments in the United States. I also owe him much, and I am thankful to Sean for inviting me to and hosting me in Brazil over the years. It is in good part because of this that I have been introduced to the vitality of the revolutionary left in what is one of the most politically charged societies of Latin America. Students like Sean made working at Queen's an exceptional experience.

At Trent, the times were different, but the excellence of students interested in labour and social justice was similar. Three of these students, Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy, and Julia Smith, came to Trent's interdisciplinary Frost Centre to work with Joan Sangster and me.<sup>85</sup> Historians at heart, Sean, Ted, and Julia gambled on working through their degrees in a Canadian and Indigenous Studies program where many of their teaching assignments and interactions with professors and fellow graduate students demanded they don interpretive hats whose brims extended well beyond their disciplinary comfort zones. They did much to make the Centre a stimulating environment in which the working class and the dispossessed in general were central to dialogues both provocative and productive.

These former students shepherded this book into being. The flock they assembled and managed so that this text could be published was anything but an easy grouping to orchestrate, I am sure. The contributions of Sean, Ted, and Julia to this collection are not only complimentary, but bring to the fore central themes, outlining where I have been as a scholar, how I have viewed historical analysis, and where the fields I have been involved in might go in the future. It is fitting that their reflections in some ways define and frame this book, setting a stage on which other contributors offer commentaries and closing the volume with a vigorous statement on the need to revitalize working-class history. Sean, Ted, and Julia, with whom I worked particularly closely in the last years of my teaching career, were the kinds of students that all instructors value. I cherish what they gave me with their intelligence, dynamism, and commitment. It has been my good fortune to be associated with them, and with so many other students who have gone on to do such fantastic work and accomplish so much. There is in this development of generations the continuity of a scholarly and political constituency with which I am grateful to have been associated and among whom I will continue to work. Bliss may be their dawn, to be alive in the creations of new awakenings. If not rude, they will always be, I am sure, revelatory.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dimitry Anastakis, Russell Jacoby, and Joan Sangster for reading and commenting on this afterword. They bear no responsibility for its content. The editors of this volume—Sean Carleton, Ted McCoy,

and Julia Smith—have worked tirelessly with me, offering many suggestions. I thank them for their considerations, which have been many.

#### NOTES

1. On attractions to things historical, see Gareth Stedman Jones, "History and Theory: An English Story," *Historien: A Review of the Past and Other Stories* 3 (2001): 103–24.
2. For my discussion of Solidarity, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987).
3. Note, among other commentaries, Joan Sangster, "Feminists in Academe: From Outsiders to Insiders?" in *Academic Callings: The University We Have Had, Now Have, and Could Have*, ed. Janice Newson and Claire Polster (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2010), 178–86.
4. For a recent discussion of the outsider status of United States labour historians in the 1960s and 1970s, see Gabriel Winant, "Hurrah for the Time Man!" *Dissent* 66 (Summer 2019): 130–39.
5. Some of this personal history, here and in what follows, is outlined in Bryan D. Palmer, "Becoming a Left Oppositionist," *Canadian Dimension* 39, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 56–63. The articles in question: Craig Heron and Bryan D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901–14," *Canadian Historical Review* 58, no. 4 (December 1977): 423–58; Bryan D. Palmer, "Kingston Mechanics and the Rise of the Penitentiary, 1833–1836," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 13, no. 25 (May 1980): 7–32.
6. See James Rinehart, *The Tyranny of Work* (Don Mills, ON: Longman Canada, 1975); Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1980); Martin Glaberman, *Be His Payment High or Low: The American Working Class of the Sixties* (Detroit and Somerville: Bewick Editions and New England Free Press, 1975); Martin Glaberman, *The Working Class and Social Change: Four Essays on the Working Class* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1975); Martin Glaberman and Seymour Faber, *Working for Wages: The Roots of Insurgency* (New York: General Hall, 1998); Martin Glaberman, ed., *Marxism for Our Times: C L. R. James on Organization* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); C L. R. James et al., *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013).

7. See Bryan D. Palmer, "'Mind Forged Manacles' and Recent Pathways to 'New' Labor Histories," *International Review of Social History* 62, no. 2 (August 2017): 279–303.
8. Bryan D. Palmer, "'Big Bill' Haywood's Defection to Russia and the IWW: Two Letters," *Labor History* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1976): 271–78. My first publication was accepted after the *Labor History* contribution but would appear before it: Bryan D. Palmer, "Class, Conception and Conflict: The Thrust for Efficiency, Managerial Views of Labor and The Working Class Rebellion, 1903–22," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 7, no. 2 (July 1975): 31–49.
9. Melvyn Dubofsky's major work at the time was *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), although I was drawn to the critique of William Preston, "Shall This Be All? US Historians versus William D. Haywood et al," *Labor History* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1971): 435–53. See also Bryan D. Palmer and Melvyn Dubofsky, "A City Kid's View of Working-Class History: An Interview with Melvyn Dubofsky," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 53–81.
10. The exhibition was staged at Hamilton's Workers Arts and Heritage Centre in 2020, interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. See Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, "One Big Union: The Revolutionary Graphics of the IWW," 2 September 2020 to 31 October 2020, <https://wahc-museum.ca/event/one-big-union-the-revolutionary-graphics-of-the-iww/>.
11. Bryan D. Palmer, "Give Us the Road and We Will Run It': The Social and Cultural Matrix of an Emerging Labour Movement," in *Essays in Canadian Working Class History*, ed. Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 106–24.
12. Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979); Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867–1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Among my contributions to scholarly journals in this period would be, Palmer, "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976): 5–31; Heron and Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike"; Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in 19th-Century North America," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 5–62; Palmer, "Kingston Mechanics."

13. See Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002).
14. My last graduate student to complete a thesis under my supervision studied the New Tendency. See Sean Antaya, "Struggling for a New Left: The New Tendency, Autonomist Marxism, and Rank-and-File Organizing in Windsor, Ontario During the 1970s" (master's thesis, Trent University, 2018). This political current receives surprisingly little attention in those rare recent studies that carry the history of the broad New Left of the 1960s into related developments in the next decade. My recollection is that the politics associated with the New Tendency, Lotta Continua, and Big Flame were more influential in central Canada in the early to mid 1970s than is evident in a reading of Ian Milligan, *Rebel Youth: 1960s Labour Unrest, Young Workers, and New Leftists in English Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), and Peter Graham and Ian McKay, *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019).
15. George Rawick, "Working-Class Self-Activity," *Radical America* 3, no. 2 (March–April 1969): 23–31; George Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (New York: Praeger, 1973); Don Fitz and David Roediger, *Within the Shell of the Old: Essays on Workers' Self Organization (A Salute to George Rawick)* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1990); Alex Lichtenstein, "George Rawick's *From Sundown to Sunup* and the Dialectic of Marxian Slave Studies," *Reviews in American History* 24, no. 4 (December 1996): 712–25.
16. For a time, I was a corresponding editor of *Canadian Dimension*, and my writing for the magazine often focused on the anti-nuclear arms movement. See Bryan D. Palmer, "Rearming the Peace Movement," *Canadian Dimension* 16 (July/August 1982): 3–6; "Marching Once a Year is Not Enough," *Canadian Dimension* 17 (September 1983): 30–32; "The Tragic Return of 007," *Canadian Dimension* 17 (December 1983): 16–17. See also Bryan D. Palmer, "The Empire Strikes Back: Historical Reflections on the Arms Race," *Studies in Political Economy* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1983): 103–19. I founded Academics for Nuclear Disarmament, a body that, befitting my organizational incompetence, functioned almost entirely as a "paper" entity. Some stationery no doubt survives somewhere.
17. Palmer, *Solidarity*; Bryan D. Palmer, "British Columbia's Solidarity: Reformism and the Fight Against the Right," in *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s*, vol. 3, *The Year Left*, ed. Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1988), 229–54. Jack Munro presents himself in the way that I have described him. See the first chapter of his autobiography, tellingly, defiantly, and proudly titled, "Derailing the

- Solidarity Express,” in *Union Jack: Labour Leader Jack Munro*, Jack Munro and Jane O’Hara (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988), 1–17.
18. Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
  19. Two of the three Cannon volumes are completed, one published in 2007, the other in press, to appear in 2021. See Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Bryan D. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1929–1939* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2021). Bryan D. Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers’ Strikes of 1934* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014) grew out of the Cannon project, as did the multi-volume documentary history of Trotskyism in the United States, on which I worked with Paul Le Blanc and others: Paul Le Blanc, Bryan D. Palmer, Thomas Bias, and Andrew Pollack, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965, Part I: Emergence – Left Opposition in the United States* (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Paul Le Blanc, Bryan D. Palmer, and Thomas Bias, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965, Part II: Endurance – The Coming American Revolution* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Paul Le Blanc and Bryan D. Palmer, eds., *US Trotskyism, 1928–1965, Part III: Resurgence – Uneven and Combined Development* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). For the eightieth anniversary of the 1934 Minneapolis strikes, see Bryan D. Palmer, “Dining Out in Dinkytown: Remembering the Minneapolis Truckers’ Strikes of 1934,” in *May Day: Workers’ Struggles, International Solidarity, Political Aspirations* (Toronto: Socialist Project, 2016), 51–65.
  20. See Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, “Cracking the Stone: The Long History of Capitalist Crisis and Toronto’s Dispossessed,” *Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 9–62; Gaétan Héroux and Bryan D. Palmer, “Marching Under Flags Black and Red: Toronto’s Dispossessed in the Age of Industry,” in *Workers in Hard Times: A Long View of Economic Crises*, ed. Leon Fink, Joseph A. McCartin, and Joan Sangster (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 19–44; Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, *Toronto’s Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).
  21. E. P. Thompson, *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), vii.
  22. Bryan D. Palmer, “Upper Canada,” in *Canadian History: A Reader’s Guide*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to Confederation*, ed. M. Brook Taylor (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 184–236; Bryan D. Palmer, “Popular Radicalism and the Theatrics of Rebellion: The Hybrid Discourse of Dissent in Upper Canada,” in *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions, and Social Experience in*

- Post-Revolutionary British North America*, ed. Nancy Christie (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 403–39.
23. Michel Foucault, "Preface to the 1972 edition," *History of Madness* (London: Routledge, 2006), xxxviii. Foucault's positions can be interpreted as urging authors to back away from engaging with criticism: "We should not try to justify the old book, nor reinsert it into the present; the series of events to which it belongs, and which are its true law, are far from being over" (xxxviii). That said, Foucault was known to respond to critics. See his "Reply to Derrida," Appendix 3, *History of Madness*, 575–90.
  24. Perry Anderson, "In Memoriam: Edward Thompson," in *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (London: Verso, 2007), 178–79.
  25. Edward Thompson, "The Long Revolution (Part I)," *New Left Review* 1, no. 9 (May–June 1961): 25.
  26. I believe the term was coined by Alvin Finkel, but see Joan Sangster, *Through Feminist Eyes: Essays on Canadian Women's History* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2011), 30–35.
  27. Anderson, "The Vanquished Left: Eric Hobsbawm," in *Spectrum*, 320.
  28. Karl Marx, "Confession," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 42, *Marx and Engels: 1864–68* (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 567–68.
  29. Among many writings of mine of this kind, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Modernizing History," *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History* 2 (Autumn 1976): 16–25; Bryan D. Palmer, "Listening to History Rather Than Historians: Reflections on Working Class History," *Studies in Political Economy* 20, no. 1 (1986): 47–84; Bryan Palmer, "Canadian Controversies," *History Today* 44, no. 11 (November 1994): 44–49; Bryan D. Palmer, "Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident View of Granatstein's Meaning," *Canadian Historical Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1999): 676–86; Bryan D. Palmer, "Historiographic Hassles: Class and Gender, Evidence and Interpretation," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33 (May 2000): 105–44; Bryan D. Palmer, "Radical Reasoning," *The Underhill Review: A Forum of History, Ideas, and Culture* 3 (Fall 2009): 1–32, <https://www3.carleton.ca/underhillreview/09/fall/reviews/palmer.htm>; Bryan D. Palmer, "The Ghost of Jack Munro," Review of *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, by Rod Mickleburgh, *The Ormsby Review* 348, 22 August 2018, <https://bcbooklook.com/2018/08/22/bc-labour-movement-history/>; Bryan D. Palmer, "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?" *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 199–232.
  30. See Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J. S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), and Kenneth

- McNaught, "Socialism and Progressivism: Was Failure Inevitable?" in *Dissent: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1968), 251–71.
31. Note Kenneth McNaught, *Conscience and History: A Memoir* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 190–91, and for McNaught's flippant view of 1970s writing on Canadian labour and the left, "E. P. Thompson vs Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review* 63, no. 2 (June 1981): 141–68. Further commentary on McNaught's place in these early controversies is in Palmer, "Historiographic Hassles," 107–17; Bryan D. Palmer, "Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History: A Dialectical View," in *Interventions and Appreciations*, vol. 2, *Marxism and Historical Practice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), 48–64.
  32. McNaught, "E. P. Thompson vs Harold Logan," 150, 168. I am also singled out for dismissal in Kenneth McNaught, "Socialism and the Canadian Political Tradition," in *On F. R. Scott: Essays on His Contributions to Law, Literature, and Politics*, ed. Sandra Djwa and R. St J. Macdonald (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 89–90.
  33. For a statement that gestures lightly toward this possibility see Bryan D. Palmer, "What's Law Got to Do with It? Historical Considerations on Class Struggle, Boundaries of Constraint, and Capitalist Authority," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 41, no. 2 (2003): 465–90.
  34. David J. Bercuson, Review of "Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900," by Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer," *Business History Review* 57, no. 4 (Winter 1983): 589–91.
  35. Note my comments in Bryan D. Palmer, "Canada's '1968' and Historical Sensibilities," *American Historical Review* 123 (June 2018): 773–78. I have offered a wider view of the 1960s in Palmer, *Canada's 1960s*.
  36. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude; or Growth of a Poet's Mind: An Autobiographical Poem* (London: Edward Moxon, 1850), 299–300.
  37. See, for instance, H. V. Nelles, "Creighton's Seminar," *Canadian Forum* 60, no. 702 (September 1980): 6. Barely six months later, Nelles offered a more generous assessment of Canadian social history in "Rewriting History," *Saturday Night* (February 1981): 11–16.
  38. Among two writings that can be cited, David J. Bercuson, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing," *Labour/Le Travailleur* 7 (Spring 1981): 95–112; and the especially truculent, J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998),



- a telling forerunner of which was J. L. Granatstein, "No Hostages Taken in War Between Historians," *Toronto Star, Saturday Magazine* (24 June 1989).
39. Ramsay Cook, "The Making of Canadian Working Class History," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 115–25; Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 307; Desmond Morton, "Some Millennial Reflections on the State of Labour History," *Labour/Le Travail* 46 (Fall 2000): 11–36; Michael S. Cross, "Canadian History," in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, vol. 3, ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976), 63–83; Michael S. Cross, "Social History," *Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/social-history>.
  40. Terry Crowley, ed., *Clio's Craft: A Primer of Historical Methods* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 225–52.
  41. M. H. Watkins and H. M. Grant, *Canadian Economic History: Classic and Contemporary Approaches* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 141–65.
  42. For a discussion of feminist historians and *Labour/Le Travail* in this period, see Joan Sangster, "Feminism and the Making of Canadian Working-Class History: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future," *Labour/Le Travail* 46 (Fall 2000): 127–66.
  43. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 11–28.
  44. Bercuson's critique, "Through the Looking Glass of Culture," 100, is noteworthy, for while he raises many objections to what I say, unlike some critics I will address below, he does not suggest that I am blind to the cross-class nature of fraternalism.
  45. On fraternalism, for instance, see my discussions in *A Culture in Conflict*, 39–43; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Butterworth, 1983), 78–81; *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 95–98; Bryan D. Palmer, "Mutuality and the Masking and Making of Difference: Mutual Benefit Societies in Canada, 1850–1950," in *Social Security Mutualism: The Comparative History of Mutual Benefit Societies*, ed. Marcel van der Linden (Bern: Peter Lang, 1996), 111–46.
  46. Darryl Jean-Guy Newberry, "No Atheist, Eunuch, or Woman': Male Associational Culture and Working-Class Identity in Industrializing Ontario, 1840–1880" (master's thesis, Queen's University, 1992).
  47. Success in striking a complementary melding of discourse-oriented critical theory and historical materialism is best achieved in the forging

of conceptualization through encounters with layers of disparate kinds of evidence, and is most productively applied to specific topics, of which the history of sexuality, marginality, and regulation are but some of the most obvious. Consider, for instance, Steven Maynard, "Through a Hole in the Lavatory Wall: Homosexual Subcultures, Police Surveillance, and the Dialectics of Discovery, Toronto, 1890–1930," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2 (October 1994): 207–42; Steven Maynard, "Horrible Temptations': Sex, Men, and Working-Class Male Youth in Urban Ontario, 1890–1930," *Canadian Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (June 1997): 191–235; Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family, and the Law in Ontario, 1920–1960* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001); Joan Sangster, "Pardon Tales' from Magistrate's Court: Women, Crime, and the Court in Peterborough County, 1920–50," *Canadian Historical Review* 74, no. 2 (June 1993): 160–97; Todd McCallum, *Hobohemia and the Crucifixion Machine: Rival Images of a New World in 1930s Vancouver* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2015).

48. The English social historian Patrick Joyce wrote off historical-materialist critiques of the linguistic turn with patronizing disdain. "The least said of these positions the better," huffed Joyce; see "The End of Social History?" *Histoire sociale/Social History* 20, no. 1 (January 1995): 78. But he then opted not for silence, but for censure: "Palmer's denunciation of myself, but especially Stedman Jones, has all the usual, and hateful, vocabulary of 'betrayal' and 'treachery' typical of the old New Left at its worst." There was nothing hateful in my engagement with the work of historians such as Joyce and Stedman Jones, and, in placing 'betrayal' and 'treachery' within inverted quotes, Joyce was actually flagging that they had never appeared in anything I wrote. Stedman Jones, of course, was a major figure in the New Left that Joyce denounced. See Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 10.
49. See, for instance, Eric J. Hobsbawm, "From Social History to the History of Society," *Daedalus* 100 (Winter 1971): 20–45; E. P. Thompson, "Responses to Reality," *New Society* 26, no. 574 (4 October 1973): 33–35.
50. I was always drawn to the earliest Foucault (1961–63), in which I found stimulating, useful examples of how critique of conventional sensibilities and empirical investigations could culminate in advances both theoretical and historiographic. Foucault's later trajectory I found less appealing. This did not feature centrally in *Descent into Discourse* because the purpose of that text was a polemical intervention into how particular kinds of theory were being used in historical writing, but it was nonetheless gestured to

briefly (see page 25). With the publication of Foucault's *History of Madness* (2006) in English, the impressive nature of the early Foucault, animated by rich empirical explorations and critique-driven study, was especially evident. Insightful comment on the later Foucault can be found in Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent, eds., *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

51. I found it fascinating that some historians who abhorred *Descent into Discourse* expressed surprise that they would actually enjoy and appreciate *Cultures of Darkness*. Consider, for instance, Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, who felt compelled, in a review of *Cultures of Darkness*, to refer to *Descent into Discourse* as an "ill-tempered tirade," confessing that, "I had half expected to hate this [subsequent] book"; see Wasserstrom's "Seeing in the Dark," *History Workshop Journal* 55 (Spring 2003): 226–30. Geoff Eley, in a laudatory review of *Cultures of Darkness*, referenced *Descent into Discourse* as sallying forth with "bracing theoretical verve and some polemical excesses," with which he obviously disagreed. But he found *Cultures of Darkness* an exciting and exemplary text. See Geoff Eley, Review of "Bryan D. Palmer, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression*," *Left History* 8, no. 1 (2002): 106–12.
52. For an argument related to this claim, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism: The Poverty of Theory Revisited," *International Review of Social History* 38 (August 1993): 133–62.
53. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
54. Karen Dubinsky et al., "Introduction," in Iacovetta and Valverde, *Gender Conflicts*, xvii–xviii. See also Lynne Marks, "Heroes and Hallelujahs – Labour History and the Social History of Religion in Canada: A Response to Bryan Palmer," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 34, no. 67 (May 2001): 169–86. "Moral purity" was not a term I ever used and the subjects I studied, such as those in "Discordant Music," fit this bill awkwardly at best. In *Dreaming of What Might Be*, there is a chapter on the underside of the Knights of Labor that is actually about what might be regarded as immorality (see pages 173–203).
55. Craig Heron, "Towards Synthesis in Canadian Working-Class History: Reflections on Bryan Palmer's Rethinking," *Left History* 1, no. 1 (1993): 109–21, quotation at 113.
56. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 23, 27–28.
57. *Ibid.*, 24. The dissertation work referenced would later be published as Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in*

- Ontario, 1880–1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Annalee Lepp, *Dis/membering the Family: Marital Breakdown, Domestic Conflict, and Family Violence in Ontario, 1830–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).
58. Heron, “Towards Synthesis in Canadian Working Class History,” 117.
59. Note Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988), where it was noted that the focus was on steelworkers, “who were not women” (10), and Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1989), which has less on women, I would suggest, than either edition of *Working-Class Experience*, in which the bulk of the chapters, contrary to Heron’s assertions, contain sections relating to women. Among the labour histories of this period, the writing of Wayne Roberts was something of an exception in the treatment accorded women and gender. See Alice Klein and Wayne Roberts, “‘Besieged Innocence’: The ‘Problem’ and Problems of Working Women in Toronto, 1896–1914,” in *Working Women: Ontario, 1850–1930*, ed. Janice Acton, Penny Goldsmith, and Bonnie Shepard (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1974), 211–60; Wayne Roberts, *Honest Womanhood: Feminism, Femininity, and Class Consciousness Among Toronto Working Women, 1893 to 1914* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1976). None of the early writing on Canadian workers assessed masculine gender identity with much sophistication, although Heron would later advance this area analytically in *Lunch-Bucket Lives: Remaking the Workers’ City* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2015). This subject was simply not highly visible on the radar screen of Canadian historians in the early to mid 1980s. See Steven Maynard, “Rough Work and Rugged Men: The Social Construction of Masculinity in Working-Class History,” *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (Spring 1989): 159–69.
60. Contrast Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 108–9, 115; and Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 39–46. Note as well, Palmer, “Give Us the Road,” 111, where fraternalism is discussed in terms of the failure of records to reveal a “a homogenous working-class base,” with the overrepresentation of merchants, salesmen, and clerks evident in some lodges. Many other examples of this kind of thing could be cited. See Palmer, “Historiographic Hassles,” 128–41.
61. Robert B. Kristofferson, *Craft Capitalism: Craftworkers and Early Industrialization in Hamilton, Ontario, 1840–1872* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
62. Douglas McCalla, Review of “*Craft Capitalism: Craftworkers and Early Industrialization in Hamilton, Ontario, 1840–1872*, by Robert B.

- Kristofferson," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1513–14.
63. Kristofferson, *Craft Capitalism*, 127, 213.
64. See also Robert B. Kristofferson, "A Culture in Continuity: Master-Man Mutualism in Hamilton, Ontario During Early Industrialization," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 39, no. 78 (November 2006): esp. 427–28. Note, in contrast, Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 97–122; Kealey, *Toronto Workers*, 124–71, 216–73; and Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, 396.
65. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 934.
66. Palmer, "Historiographic Hassles," 105–44; Bryan D. Palmer in "On the Case: Explorations in Social History: A Roundtable Discussion," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 2 (June 2000): 281–87.
67. Marks, "Heroes and Hallelujahs." I have not accorded religion sufficient attention in my research, just as Marks has not spent a lot of time addressing class conflict in her writing. Different scholars inevitably place an accent on different areas of study. That said, nothing in my commentary on Marks in "Historiographic Hassles" suggested opposition to the study of religion. Rather, my criticisms focused on issues of evidence and its use and whether or not particular interpretations and arguments were convincing.
68. Mariana Valverde, "Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33, no. 65 (May 2000): 64–66.
69. Mariana Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 9.
70. Valverde might better have heeded her own Nietzschean-inspired admonition. Those engaged in historical inquiry, she suggested, should be "skeptical of Antichrists as well as of more conventional prophets: we might remember that just because there is no absolute truth, does not mean there aren't any lies" (Valverde, "Some Remarks," 76.) Note the pertinent comments in Pierre Bourdieu's, *Homo Academicus* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 3, warning of "anecdotal denunciation," "fueled by resentment" and directed at "constructed individuals" rather than "empirical individuals."
71. Valverde's presentation of how discourse theory was evolving, distinguishing itself from its origins where poststructuralism, postmodernism, and the linguistic turn congealed and fractured, was helpful, providing a kind of conceptual cartography of the trajectory of a developing governmentality paradigm. Yet this was premised on the unhelpful tendency to see theory *only* within this framework. Thompson's "The Poverty of Theory; or an Orrery of Errors," in E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other*

*Essays* (London: Merlin Press, 1978) is presented as an unadulterated attack on *all* theory, rather than a critical engagement with one body of analytic work that is itself a theoretical statement. It is as though Marx's *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the Philosophy of Poverty by M. Proudhon* (1847) was a repudiation of the entire philosophical tradition. Historical materialism is considered as *merely* politics, and thus *not* theoretical. Historians, necessarily working in an empirical idiom, are considered prisoners of empiricism, as if C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959) had never been written. For an insightful discussion of the dialectical engagement of conceptualization, theoretical abstraction, and empirical historical research, in which the weighing of evidence and its complex meanings takes place, see McCallum, *Hobohemia and the Crucifixion Machine*.

72. This approach was not always reciprocated by other scholars with whom I at times disagreed. One reflection of this was that, as book review editor, I approached Joan Scott to review *Descent into Discourse*. She declined, noting that she did not have the time it would take to adequately address everything I had wrong and that she did not want to come off as defensive and vengeful. Fair enough. Four years later, Scott delivered the Third Annual Freedeman Memorial Lecture in the History Department at SUNY–Binghamton, an event honouring a former professor and good friend of mine, Charles Freedeman. The first two lectures had been delivered by Bonnie Smith and myself, and I contributed materially to the fund establishing the Memorial Lecture. Scott, late in the arrangements for the lecture, made it a condition of her delivering the talk that I not be invited.
73. I address the significance of the non-academic way in which *The Making of the English Working Class* was structured in Bryan D. Palmer, "Paradox and Polemic; Argument and Awkwardness: Reflections on E. P. Thompson," *Contemporary British History* 28, no. 4 (December 2014): 382–403.
74. Henry Abelow, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Schneer, eds., *Visions of History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 7.
75. See Friedrich Hayek, ed., *Capitalism and the Historians* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954); Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 370–73. How evidence and types of evidence are used relates to Thompson's sensitive and critical reading of the *different* kinds of comments offered by nineteenth-century spies, a point central to Greg Kealey's discussion of *The Making* in this volume.
76. Nick offers comment on the *New Left Review*, addressing the oft-written-about clash of Thompson and Perry Anderson, distancing himself from

- the view that the latter took the *Review* in a particular direction. The issue demands a fuller commentary and, in particular, consideration of Thompson's position as outlined in E. P. Thompson, "Where Are We Now?" in *E. P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left*, ed. Cal Winslow (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), 215–48; the discussion in Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-up of Britain* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 59–104, 197–246; and the reflections of Anderson in "In Memoriam: Edward Thompson," 177–87, among many relevant sources.
77. See, for instance, Bryan D. Palmer, "What Was Great about Theodore Draper and What Was Not," *American Communist History* 8, no. 1 (June 2009): 15–21.
  78. Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, esp. 5–6, 222–37, 244–55; Jacob A. Zumoff, *The Communist International and US Communism, 1919–1929* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 153–90.
  79. I adhere to the view that Bolshevization and its implementation can indeed be chronologically located in the 1924–25 years, however much there were indications of its centralizing impulses as early as 1922. This has long been the conventional view among historians of the Communist International. See, for instance, Helmut Gruber, ed., *Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern: International Communism in the Era of Stalin's Ascendancy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974), xiii–xvi; John Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 53–54. For my views on Communist historiography and some of the issues touched on above, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism," *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 139–73; Palmer, "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?" 199–32; Palmer, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left*, esp. 252–54.
  80. For my tribute to Leo, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Socialist Savant: Leo Panitch (1945–2020)," *Canadian Dimension*, 18 January 2021, <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/socialist-savant-leo-panitch-1945-2020>.
  81. Panitch and Gindin quote me on the Minneapolis Teamster militants and their 1920s lack of knowledge concerning the Communist International's opposition to Trotskyism, citing Bryan D. Palmer, "James Patrick Cannon: Revolutionary Continuity and Class-Struggle Politics in the United States, 1890–1974," in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 2, 286, but they also reference, in other contexts, Palmer, *Revolutionary Teamsters*.
  82. Moe Hork, quoted in Philip A. Korth, *The Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 184. Hork

designates the Minneapolis Trotskyists as members of the Socialist Workers Party, formed later in the decade, but he is clearly transposing this later party name on to the forerunners of this organization, who would have been members of the Communist League of America in 1934.

83. I discuss some of the work of these graduate students briefly in Palmer, "Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History," in *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 2, 84–85.
84. For one accessible statement on Sean Purdy's Regent Park research, see Sean Purdy, "'Ripped Off' by the System: Housing Policy, Poverty, and Territorial Stigmatization in Regent Park Housing Project, 1951–1991," *Labour/Le Travail* 52 (Fall 2003): 45–108.
85. I have said nothing about Joan Sangster in this afterword, only because she has not been involved in the production of this volume. This is thus not the place to express my gratitude. Yet I cannot imagine what the last decades would have been like without her. If we do not agree on everything, including some of the issues raised by this book—such as my Leninism—our views of scholarship and the principles that should govern intellectual work have never diverged. I like to think that in our time together, mutual support and daily interaction have pushed our different but related research and writing forward in stimulating ways.



# Selected Works of Bryan D. Palmer

## 1970s

- "Class, Conception and Conflict: The Thrust for Efficiency, Managerial Views of Labour, and the Working Class Rebellion, 1903–1922." *Review of Radical Political Economics* 7, no. 2 (July 1975): 31–49.
- "Give Us the Road and We Will Run It': The Social and Cultural Matrix of an Emerging Labour Movement." In *Essays in Canadian Working-Class History*, edited by Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, 106–24. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.
- "Modernizing History." *Bulletin of the Committee on Canadian Labour History* 2 (Autumn 1976): 16–25.
- "Most Uncommon Common Men: Craft and Culture in Historical Perspective." *Labour/Le Travailleur* 1 (1976): 5–31.
- "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901–14," with Craig Heron. *Canadian Historical Review* 58, no. 4 (December 1977): 423–58.
- "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America." *Labour/Le Travailleur* 3 (1978): 5–62.
- A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914*. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979.
- "Working-Class Canada: Recent Historical Writing." *Queen's Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 594–616.

## 1980s

- "Kingston Mechanics and the Rise of the Penitentiary, 1833–1836." *Histoire sociale/Social History* 13, no. 25 (May 1980): 7–32.
- "The Bonds of Unity: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900," with Gregory S. Kealey. *Histoire sociale/Social History* 14, no. 28 (November 1981): 369–411.
- The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History*. Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981.

- "They Ride Horses Don't They? Historical Musings on the Canadian State and its Agents." *Our Generation* 14 (1981): 28–41.
- "Classifying Culture." *Labour/Le Travailleur* 8/9 (1981/1982): 153–83.
- Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900*, with Gregory S. Kealey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Reprint, Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1987; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- "The Empire Strikes Back: Historical Reflections on the Arms Race." *Studies in Political Economy* 12, no. 1 (Fall 1983): 103–19.
- "Town, Port, and Country: Speculations on the Capitalist Transformation of Canada." *Acadiensis* 12 (Spring 1983): 131–39.
- Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800–1980*. 1st ed. Toronto: Butterworth, 1983. Reprint, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*. 2nd ed. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992.
- "Emperor Katz's New Clothes; or with the Wizard in Oz." *Labour/Le Travail* 13 (Spring 1984): 190–97.
- "Social Formation and Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century North America." In *Proletarianization and Family History*, edited by David Levine, 229–308. New York: Academic Press, 1984.
- "Labour in Nineteenth-Century Canada." In *Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History*, edited by W. J. C. Cherwinski and Gregory S. Kealey, 51–57. St. John's, NL: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1985.
- "Taking It': Ontario Workers' Struggles." In *Lectures in Canadian Labour and Working-Class History*, edited by W. J. C. Cherwinski and Gregory S. Kealey, 183–98. St. John's, NL: Committee on Canadian Labour History, 1985.
- "Three Blind Professors." *Socialist Studies Bulletin* 1 (Winter 1985): 16–28.
- "Listening to History Rather Than Historians: Reflections on Working Class History." *Studies in Political Economy* 20, no. 1 (1986): 47–84.
- The Character of Class Struggle: Essays in Canadian Working-Class History, 1850–1985*. Edited by Bryan D. Palmer. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.
- "The Rise and Fall of British Columbia's Solidarity." In *The Character of Class Struggle: Essays in Canadian Working-Class History, 1850–1985*, edited by Bryan D. Palmer, 176–200. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.
- "Labor History at the Crossroads: The Mid-Life Crisis of Working-Class Studies in America." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 247–53.
- Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia*. Vancouver: New Star Books, 1987.
- A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement, 1927–1985*. Edited by Bryan D. Palmer. St. John's, NL: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1988.

- "Reformism and the Fight Against the Right: British Columbia's Solidarity." In *Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s*. Vol. 3 of *The Year Left*, edited by Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker, 229–54. London: Verso, 1988.
- "What the Hell: Or Some Comments on Class Formation and Cultural Reproduction." In *Popular Cultures and Political Practices*, edited by Richard B. Gruneau, 33–42. Toronto: Garamond Press, 1988.
- Work and Unions in Canada*. About Canada. Ottawa: Canadian Studies Directorate, 1988.
- "The American Way of Seeing Class." *Labour/Le Travail* 24 (Fall 1989): 245–52.

## 1990s

- Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.
- "The Eclipse of Materialism: Marxism and the Writing of Social History in the 1980s." *Socialist Register 1990: The Retreat of the Intellectuals* 26 (1990): 111–46.
- "Great Upheavals: The 1880s and 1890s." In *Who Built America? A Social History of Working People in the United States*, vol. 2, edited by Stephen Brier and Herbert G. Gutman, 61–157. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- "Is There Now or Has There Ever Been a Working Class?" *History Today* 42 (March 1992): 51–54.
- "The Emergence of Working-Class Collectivity." In *Who Built America? A Social History of Working People in the United States*, vol. 2, edited by Stephen Brier and Herbert G. Gutman, 61–157. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.
- Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*. 2nd ed. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992.
- "Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism: The Poverty of Theory Revisited." *International Review of Social History* 38 (August 1993): 133–62.
- "Homage to Edward Thompson, Part I." *Labour/Le Travail* 32 (Fall 1993): 10–71.
- "Poststructuralism/Postmodernism, Internationalism, and Socialism." *Socialist Alternatives* 2 (Winter 1993): 48–62.
- "The Changing Face of Labour Protest." In *The Land Transformed, 1800–1891*. Vol. 2 of *Historical Atlas of Canada*, edited by R. Louis Gentilcore, Plate 57. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.
- "The Condition of Postmodernity and the Poststructuralist Challenge to Political Meaning." *Maryland Historian* 24 (Spring–Summer 1993): 55–71.
- "The Poverty of Theory Revisited: Or, Critical Theory, Historical Materialism, and the Ostensible End of Marxism." *Left History* 1, no. 1 (1993): 67–101.
- "Canadian Controversies." *History Today* 44 (November 1994): 44–49.

- Capitalism Comes to the Backcountry: The Goodyear Invasion of Napanee*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1994. Published also as *Goodyear Invades the Backcountry: The Corporate Takeover of a Rural Town*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994.
- E. P. Thompson: *Objections and Oppositions*. London: Verso, 1994.
- "Homage to Edward Thompson, Part II." *Labour/Le Travail* 33 (Spring 1994): 13–68.
- "Thompson's Tone." *Studies in Political Economy* 43 (Spring 1994): 11–17.
- "Upper Canada." In *Beginnings to Confederation*. Vol. 1 of *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide*, edited by M. Brook Taylor, 184–236. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
- "Bread and Roses: Sheila Rowbotham—The Political and the Accessible in the Writing of Gender History." *Radical History Review* 63 (1995): 159–65.
- "Les sociétés mutualistes au Canada (1850–1950)." In *Mutualités de tous les pays: Un passé riche d'avenir*, edited by Michel Dreyfus and Bernard Gibaud, 99–112. Paris: Mutualité Française, 1995.
- "Small Unions and Dissidents in the History of Canadian Trade Unionism." In *Hard Lessons: The Mine Mill Union in the Canadian Labour Movement*, edited by Mercedes Steedman, Peter Suschnigg, and Dieter K. Buse, 39–49. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1995.
- "Learning to Love the Cops." *Literary Review of Canada* 5, no. 6 (June 1996): 12–14.
- "Mutuality and the Masking/Making of Difference: Mutual Benefit Societies in Canada, 1830–1950." In *Social Security Mutualism: The Comparative History of Mutual Benefit Societies*, edited by Marcel van der Linden, 111–46. Bern: Peter Lang, 1996.
- "Nineteenth-Century Canada and Australia: The Paradoxes of Class Formation." *Labour/Le Travail* 38 (Fall 1996): 16–36. Published simultaneously in Australia in *Labour History* 71 (November 1996): 16–36.
- "Night in the Capitalist, Cold War City: Noir and the Cultural Politics of Darkness." *Left History* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 57–76.
- "Old Positions/New Necessities: History, Class, and Marxist Metanarrative." In *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*, edited by Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, 65–73. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997.
- "Before Braverman: Harry Frankel and the American Workers' Movement." *Monthly Review* 50, no. 8 (January 1999): 33–46.
- "Foucault and the Historians: The Case of 'On the Case.'" *Literary Review of Canada* 7, no. 10 (Summer 1999): 11–17.
- "In the Belly of the Bear: A Russian Diary [Part 1]." *Literary Review of Canada* 11 (1999): 19–23.
- "In the Belly of the Bear: A Russian Diary [Part 2]." *Literary Review of Canada* 99 (2000): 24–27.
- "Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident View of Granatstein's Meaning." *Canadian Historical Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1999): 676–86.

## 2000–2010

- Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression [From Medieval to Modern]*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- "Historiographic Hassles: Class and Gender, Evidence and Interpretation." *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33, no. 65 (May 2000): 105–44.
- Labouring the Canadian Millennium: Writings on Work and Workers, History and Historiography*. Edited by Bryan D. Palmer. St. John's, NL: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2000.
- "Pluralism Popped." *Literary Review of Canada* 8, no. 4 (May 2000): 9–12.
- "Class Dismissed." *Literary Review of Canada* 9, no. 2 (March 2001): 18–21.
- "How to be Difficult: Advice from an Unrepentant Radical." *Literary Review of Canada* 10, no. 2 (March 2002): 13–15.
- "Reasoning Rebellion: E. P. Thompson, British Marxist Historians, and the Making of Dissident Political Mobilization." *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002): 187–216.
- "Renegades: J. L. Cohen, Bill Walsh, and the Tragedies of the Canadian Left." *Journal of Canadian Studies* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 207–24.
- "Communist History: Seeing It Whole. A Reply to Critics." *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 203–14.
- "Hydra's Materialist History." *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 4 (2003): 373–94.
- "Leon Trotsky: Planet Without a Visa." *Left History* 9, no. 1 (2003): 79–96.
- "Rethinking the Historiography of United States Communism." *American Communist History* 2, no. 2 (December 2003): 139–73.
- "The Hands That Built America: A Class-Politics Appreciation of Martin Scorsese's *The Gangs of New York*." *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 4 (2003): 317–45.
- "What's Law Got to Do with It? Historical Considerations on Class Struggle, Boundaries of Constraint, and Capitalist Authority." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 41, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2003): 465–90.
- "Whom Do You Trust?" *New Labor Forum* 12 (Spring 2003): 92–99.
- "Race and Revolution." *Labour/Le Travail* 54 (Fall 2004): 193–221.
- "Rhyming Reds and Fractious Fictions: Canada's Heritage of Literary Radicalism." *American Review of Canadian Studies* 34, no. 1 (March 2004): 99–128.
- "The Making of the English Working Class di Thompson, quarant'anni dopo." *Passato e presente* 62 (2004): 85–110.
- "Maurice Spector, James P. Cannon, and the Origins of Canadian Trotskyism." *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (Fall 2005): 91–148.
- "Movimentos noturnos: Um prólogo profano às histórias da noite." *Textos de História: Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em História da UnB* 13, no. 1–2 (2005): 205–30.
- "CSI Labor History: Haymarket and the Forensics of Forgetting." *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 3, no. 1 (March 2006): 25–36.

- "Fin-de-Siècle Labour History in Canada and the United States: A Case for Tradition." In *Global Labour History: A State of the Art*, edited by Jan Lucassen, 195–226. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006.
- "Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History: A Dialectical View." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17, no. 2 (2006): 33–60.
- "Left History on the Middle Ground." *Left History* 11, no. 1(2006): 47–57.
- "American Communism in the 1920s: Striving for a Panoramic View." *American Communist History* 6, no. 2 (December 2007): 139–49.
- "Canada's Workers Movement: Uneven Developments," with Michael Goldfield. *Labour/Le Travail* 59 (Spring 2007): 149–77.
- James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- "Las políticas de Hobsbawm: se ha detenido la marcha hacia adelante del Frente Popular." In *Los historiadores y la historia para el siglo XXI: Homenaje a Eric J. Hobsbawm*, edited by Gumersindo Vera Hernández et al., 93–104. Conaculta-INAH, Mexico, 2007.
- "Marxismo metropolitano y amplitud analítica en la historia de Hobsbawm." In *Los historiadores y la historia para el siglo XXI: Homenaje a Eric J. Hobsbawm*, edited by Gumersindo Vera Hernández et al., 145–58. Conaculta-INAH, Mexico, 2007.
- Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History*. Edited by Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- "La historia social y la coyuntura presente." *Historia Social* 60 (2008): 185–92.
- "Popular Radicalism and the Theatrics of Rebellion: The Hybrid Discourse of Dissent in Upper Canada." In *Transatlantic Subjects: Ideas, Institutions, and Social Experience in Post-Revolutionary British North America*, edited by Nancy Christie, 403–39. Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008.
- "Wildcat Workers in the 1960s: The Unruly Face of Class Struggle." In *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History*, edited by Bryan D. Palmer and Joan Sangster, 373–94. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- "New Left Liberations: The Poetics, Praxis, and Politics of Youth Liberation." In *The Sixties in Canada: A Turbulent and Creative Decade*, edited by M. Athena Palaeologu, 65–149. Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2009.
- "Radical Reasoning." Feature Review Essay. *The Underhill Review: A Forum of History, Ideas, and Culture* 3 (Fall 2009): 1–32. <https://www3.carleton.ca/underhillreview/09/fall/reviews/palmer.htm>.
- "That Was Then, and This Is Now: Socialist Reflections on Responding to Capitalist Crises: Priority #9: Build a Socialist Left, Inside and Outside of the Unions." *Labour/Le Travail* 64 (Fall 2009): 167–72.

- "What Was Great About Theodore Draper and What Was Not." *American Communist History* 8, no. 1 (June 2009): 15–21.
- "Canada." In *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives*, edited by Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John McIlroy, 196–230. Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2010.
- "The Personal, the Political, and Permanent Revolution: Ernest Mandel and the Conflicted Legacies of Trotskyism." *International Review of Social History* 55, no. 1 (April 2010): 117–32.
- "The Democratic Revolutionary: Reviving Lenin." *Left History* 15, no. 1 (2010): 169–74.

## 2011–2020

- H-Diplo Roundtable Review of *From Victoria to Vladivostok: Canada's Siberian Expedition, 1917–19*, by Benjamin Isitt. *H-Diplo* 12, no. 15 (2011): 14–22. <https://issforum.org/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XII-15.pdf>.
- "Profits of Doom: Spectres of Capitalist Crisis." *Labour/Le Travail* 67 (Spring 2011): 189–201.
- "Cracking the Stone': The Long History of Capitalist Crisis and Toronto's Dispossessed, 1830–1930," with Gaétan Héroux. *Labour/Le Travail* 69 (Spring 2012): 9–62.
- "Indians of All Tribes': The Birth of Red Power." In *Debating Dissent: Canada and the Sixties*, edited by Lara Campbell, Dominique Clement, and Gregory S. Kealey, 193–210. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.
- "The Black and the Red." *New Left Review* 77 (September–October 2012): 151–60.
- "The Irrepressible Revolutionary: Marx for the Uninitiated, the Unconvinced and the Unrepentant." *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 40, no. 1 (2012): 119–35.
- "A história enquanto debate: A análise contestadora de 'A Formação da Classe Operária Inglesa.'" *Mundos do Trabalho* 5, no. 10 (July–December 2013): 13–35.
- "La historia como polémica: El análisis de contrarios en 'La formación de la clase obrera en Inglaterra.'" *Sociología Histórica* 3 (December 2013): 59–92.
- "Paradox and the Thompson 'School of Awkwardness.'" In *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, edited by Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor, 205–27. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.
- Revolutionary Teamsters: The Minneapolis Truckers' Strikes of 1934*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- "The Artist Formerly, and Again, Known as Rodriguez: A Life Beyond Imagination." *Against the Current* 162 (January/February 2013): 31–35, 44.
- "Marching under Flags Black and Red: Toronto's Dispossessed in the Age of Industry," with Gaétan Héroux. In *Workers in Hard Times: A Long View of Economic Crises*, edited by Leon Fink, Joseph A. McCartin, and Joan Sangster, 19–44. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

- "Paradox and Polemic; Argument and Awkwardness: Reflections on E. P. Thompson." *Contemporary British History* 28, no. 4 (December 2014): 382–403.
- "Paradoxo e polêmica, argumentos e constrangimento: Reflexões sobre E. P. Thompson." *História e Perspectivas* 1 (January–June 2014): 55–89.
- "Reconsiderations of Class: Precariousness as Proletarianization." *Socialist Register* 2014: *Registering Class* 50 (2014): 40–62.
- "The Unbearable Precariousness of Working and Artistic Being: The Labours of Carole Condé + Karl Beveridge." In *Precarious: Carole Condé + Karl Beveridge*, 17–22. Waterloo, ON: Robert Langen Art Gallery, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2014.
- "A Tate Gallery for the New Left: Portraits, Landscapes, and Abstracts in the Revolutionary Activism of the 1950s and 1960s." *Labour/Le Travail* 75 (Spring 2015): 231–62.
- "Caminhoneiros vermelhos: O sindicalismo democrático nos Estados Unidos." *Outubro* 23, no. 1 (2015): 15–32.
- Interpretive Essays on Class Formation and Historical Practice*. Vol. 1 of *Marxism and Historical Practice*. Leiden: Brill, 2015. Reprint, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017.
- Interventions and Appreciations*. Vol. 2 of *Marxism and Historical Practice*. Leiden: Brill, 2015. Reprint, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017.
- "La lutte de classes et les dépossédés." *Actuel Marx* 58 (2015): 28–45.
- "History." In *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late-Capitalist Struggle*, edited by Kelly Fritsch, Clare O'Connor, and A. K. Thompson, 191–97. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016.
- "The Socialist Dimension." In *Canada Since 1960: A People's History*, edited by Cy Gonick, 462–98. Toronto: James Lorimer, 2016.
- "'They Shall Not Pass': Evictions and the Toronto Unemployed Movement, 1932–1936." In *III International Conference: Strikes and Social Conflicts: Combined Historical Approaches to Conflict. Proceedings*, edited by Martí Marín Corbera, Xavier Domènech Sampere, and Ricard Martínez i Muntada, 1052–66. Barcelona: CEFID-UAB, 2016.
- Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History*, with Gaétan Héroux. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016.
- "Canadian Studies at the Crossroads, Again!" *Journal of Canadian Studies* 51, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 10–36.
- "Legacies of 1917: Revolution's *Longue Durée*," with Joan Sangster. *American Communist History* 16, nos. 1–2 (2017): 1–45.
- "'Mind Forged Manacles' and Recent Pathways to 'New' Labor Histories." *International Review of Social History* 62, no. 2 (August 2017): 279–303.
- "The Distinctive Heritage of 1917: Resuscitating Revolution's *Longue Durée*," with Joan Sangster. *Socialist Register* 2017: *Rethinking Revolution* 53 (2017): 1–34.



- US Trotskyism 1928–1965. Part I: Emergence – Left Opposition in the United States.*  
 Edited by Bryan D. Palmer, Paul Le Blanc, Thomas Bias, and Andrew Pollack.  
 Leiden: Brill, 2017.
- “Approaching Working-Class History as Class Struggle: A Canadian Contemplation;  
 A Marxist Meditation.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 42 (2018): 443–56.
- “Canada and the United States.” In *Handbook Global History of Work*, edited by Karin  
 Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden, 111–30. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg,  
 2018.
- “Canada’s ‘1968’ and Historical Sensibilities.” *American Historical Review* 123, no. 3  
 (June 2018): 773–78.
- “Response to Commentaries.” *Dialectical Anthropology* 42 (2018): 489–94.
- “The French Turn in the United States: James P. Cannon and the Trotskyist Entry  
 into the Socialist Party, 1934–1937.” *Labor History* 59, no. 5 (2018): 610–38.
- “The Ghost of Jack Munro.” Review of *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia  
 Labour Movement*, by Rod Mickleburgh. *The Ormsby Review* 348 (22 August 2018).  
<https://bcbooklook.com/2018/08/22/bc-labour-movement-history/>.
- US Trotskyism 1928–1965. Part II: Endurance – The Coming American Revolution.*  
 Edited by Bryan D. Palmer, Paul Le Blanc, and Thomas Bias. Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- US Trotskyism 1928–1965. Part III: Resurgence – Uneven and Combined Development.*  
 Edited by Bryan D. Palmer and Paul Le Blanc. Leiden: Brill, 2018.
- “A Left History of Liquorice: What It Means to Write ‘Left’ History.” *Left History* 23,  
 no. 1 (2019): 8–27.
- “‘Gagging’ the Revolutionary Party’: The First Smith Act Trial and the Rule of Law.”  
 In *The Class Politics of Law: Essays Inspired by Harry Glasbeek*, edited by Eric Tucker  
 and Judy Fudge, 171–88. Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2019.
- “How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?” *Labour/Le Travail* 83  
 (Spring 2019): 199–232.
- James P. Cannon and the Emergence of Trotskyism in the United States, 1929–1939.*  
 Leiden and Boston: Brill, forthcoming 2021.



## Contributors

**Alan Campbell** is an Honorary Senior Fellow and formerly Reader in Labour History at the University of Liverpool. He has published widely on the history of Communism in Britain and on the social history of the Scottish miners and their trade unions. He served on the Executive Committee of the Society for the Study of Labour History for many years and as its Chair from 2008 to 2011.

**Sean Carleton** is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of History and Native Studies at the University of Manitoba. His research examines the history of colonialism, capitalism, and schooling in Canada. Sean is also a co-founder of the Graphic History Collective and a co-author of *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019) and *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A Graphic History of the Strike in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019).

**Alvin Finkel** is Professor Emeritus of History at Athabasca University. President of the Alberta Labour History Institute and past president of the Canadian Committee on Labour History, he is the author, co-author, or co-editor of thirteen books and over fifty book chapters and scholarly journal articles. His latest book is *Compassion: A Global History of Social Policy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

**Sam Gindin** was the research director for the Canadian Auto Workers (now Unifor) from 1974 to 2000 and also assistant to the president from 1985 to 2000. After leaving the union he was the Packer Chair in Social Justice at York University from 2000 to 2010. He is the co-author, with Leo Panitch, of *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2013), which was awarded the Deutscher Memorial Prize in the UK and the Davidson book prize in Canada. Other books include *The Canadian Auto Workers: The Birth and Transformation*

of a Union (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1995); *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives*, co-authored with Leo Panitch and Greg Albo (Oakland: PM Press, 2010); and an expanded and updated American edition of *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn*, with Leo Panitch and Steve Maher (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020).

**Gregory S. Kealey** is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of New Brunswick. He is the Founding Editor of *Labour/Le Travail* and served as its editor from 1976 to 1997 and again from 2016 to 2017. His most recent books are *Spying on Canadians: The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Security Service and the Long Cold War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017) and, with Reg Whitaker and Andrew Parnaby, the prize-winning *Secret Service: Political Policing in Canada from the Fenians to Fortress America* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

**Ted McCoy** is an Associate Professor in Sociology and Law and Society at the University of Calgary. He is a historian of punishment and has published on penitentiaries and crime in Canada's nineteenth century. His books include *Hard Time: Reforming the Penitentiary in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2012) and *Four Unruly Women: Stories of Incarceration and Resistance from Canada's Most Notorious Prison* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), and he is the co-editor of *Canada's Legal Pasts: Looking Forward, Looking Back* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2020.)

**John McIlroy** has taught at the Universities of Oxford, Manchester, where he was Reader in Sociology, Keele, where he was Professor of Industrial Relations, and Middlesex, where he was Professor of Employment Relations. He is currently a Visiting Professor in the Business School at Middlesex University. He has published extensively in the fields of adult education, labour history, and employment relations.

**Kirk Niergarth** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities at Mount Royal University in Calgary, Alberta. His first book "*The Dignity of Every Human Being*": *New Brunswick Artists and Canadian Culture between the Great Depression and the Cold War* (Toronto: University

of Toronto Press) was published in 2015. He is currently at work on a book about Canadians who visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

**Bryan D. Palmer**, a long-time editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, has published extensively on the history of labour and the revolutionary left. Among his more than twenty published monographs and edited collections are the award-winning volumes *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890–1928* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) and the co-authored (with Gaétan Héroux) *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016). His articles and commentaries have appeared in *New Left Review*, *Jacobin*, *Canadian Dimension*, and the *American Historical Review*, among many academic and popular venues. His books and scholarly articles have been translated into Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Greek, Turkish, and other languages. Having taught for forty years at universities in Canada, Brazil, China, and the United States, he retired from Trent University in 2018, where he was a Canada Research Chair from 2001 to 2015.

**Leo Panitch** died in December 2020 as this volume was going to press. Leo was Emeritus Distinguished Research Professor of Political Science at York University in Toronto and co-editor of the *Socialist Register*, whose annual volumes he edited for thirty-five years. His more recent books are *Searching for Socialism: The Project of the Labour New Left from Benn to Corbyn* with Colin Leys (London: Verso, 2020); and the expanded and updated American edition of *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn* with Sam Gindin and Steve Maher (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020). His book *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire*, also with Sam Gindin, was awarded the Deutscher Memorial Prize in the UK and the Davidson book prize in Canada. His other books include: *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives*; *American Empire and the Political Economy of Global Finance*; *Renewing Socialism: Transforming Democracy, Strategy and Imagination*; *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms*; *The End of Parliamentary Socialism*; *Working Class Politics in Crisis*; *Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy*.

**Chad Pearson** teaches history at Collin College, a community college in Plano, Texas. He is the author of *Reform or Repression: Organizing America's Anti-Union Movement* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), and is co-editor with Rosemary Feurer of *Against Labor: How US Employers Organized to Defeat Union Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017). He has published essays in *Counterpunch*, *History Compass*, *Jacobin*, *Journal of Labor and Society*, *Labor History*, *Labour/Le Travail*, and *Monthly Review*. He is currently writing a book about different types of employer violence, which he wants to call *Capital's Terrorists: Anti-Labor Violence in the Long Nineteenth Century*.

**Sean Purdy** teaches and writes about workers and social movements in the Americas at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. In addition to scholarly articles on the urban history of the United States and Brazil in both English and Portuguese, he recently published a critical biography of Douglas MacArthur, *O General Estadista: Douglas MacArthur e o Século Americano* (São Paulo: Intermeios, 2018).

**Nicholas Rogers** is Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus in the Department of History, York University, Toronto. His latest book, launched April 2020, is *Murder on the Middle Passage: The Trial of Captain Kimber* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2020).

**Julia Smith** is an Assistant Professor in the Labour Studies Program at the University of Manitoba. She studies the political economy of labour relations in Canada and the history and politics of women's labour activism. Julia has published articles on feminist union organizing and labour relations in the airline and banking industries. She is also a member of the Graphic History Collective and a co-author of *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019) and *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A Graphic History of the Strike in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019).



