

A Left History of Liquorice: What It Means to Write “Left” History¹

Bryan D. Palmer

I have long appreciated the existence of *Left History*, just as I am an advocate of doing left history. So, I welcome the opportunity to offer a few words on the field. In what follows I have been guided by the editors’ concerns with what constitutes left history and whether it remains a viable standpoint; how it relates to activism; and other such questions. Reflecting on the current practice of left history, I returned to the 2006 *Left History* forum, this discussion being a sequel to that earlier set of commentaries.² Much has changed since 2006, but in many ways *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.

2006/2019

In 2006 Barack Obama had not been elected the first African American President in the history of the United States, and no one could have imagined Bernie Sanders making an ostensibly socialist run for the roses against a beleaguered and arrogant Hillary Clinton. As Stephen Harper headed a government in Canada, the view was that Canada trailed behind the Americans in the realm of progressive politics. Now, with Justin Trudeau in the federal saddle we seem, even if the ride has gotten bumpier for the fashionable young Prime Minister of late, to be running well ahead of a United States administration given to racist scapegoating of Muslims and Mexicans, a politics of crass pocket-lining, wildly mercurial foreign policy pontifications, and an endless parade of high crimes and misdemeanors. The mainstream governance of Canada turns, seemingly, on rhetorics of reconciliation and diversity, not *revanchiste* reaction. Climate change threatened in 2006, but it was not yet recognized as reaching the apocalyptic extremes that many now recoil from in fear. Feminists certainly addressed sexual harassment in the early twenty-first century, but the ways in which the “Me Too” campaign would bring to the forefront the abuses of women have been startling. Precarious labour existed, of course, as it always has, but it did not register on the radar screen of concern in 2006 the way it does now.³ And while years ago we were accustomed to recurrent capitalist crises punctuating the political economy of everyday life with regularity since 1973, few anticipated the devastating destructiveness of the 2007–2009 financial meltdown, which sent shock waves throughout the world and actually revived interest in Marxism.⁴

For leftists, the world was a bad place in 2006, rife with inequality; oppression’s odour was difficult to ameliorate in even the most complacent olfactory cells. We can quibble about what was better and what has become worse over thirteen

years. The final conclusion is surely that what was once unacceptable remains terrible, and that how the left registers in today's political climate is, at best, ambiguous and ambivalent.

The Left Today: At Best, Ambiguity/Ambivalence, at Worst...

To be sure, there are signs of left revival that give many cause for optimism. Young people are now clearly more committed to the politics of inclusion, resisting racism, sexism, homophobia, and environmental degradation with more vigour and consistency than predecessor generations. Even in the heart of the imperial beast, Donald Trump's United States, socialism has managed to become part of the loose vocabulary of young voters, and inside the Democratic Party there is undoubtedly more left-wing and avowedly radical ferment than there has been for decades.⁵

Yet, a part of what is so disappointing is that, for all the hoopla that certain "democratic socialists" command in the contemporary media, the revolutionary or far left is probably weaker now than it has been for a century or so. The last decade and more has not really changed the downward trajectory of the organized left, which began in the 1970s and has continued unabated over the course of almost 40 difficult years of dispersal. The organized left, outside of mainstream parties of conventional politics such as the Democratic Party in the United States, the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, and the New Democratic Party in Canada, has largely gone the way of the dinosaur.⁶ Left experiments amid the ongoing crises of capitalism in countries like Greece have not fared well, while in one-time strongholds of seemingly democratic (but in reality, quite compromised) left politics such as the Brazil of the Workers Party, the descent into barbarism has been precipitous.⁷

Understanding the collapse of the revolutionary left from the 1970s to the present involves complicated and layered histories of subjective shortcomings and objective constraints. The implosion of Stalinist communism contributed to this, as did a political economy of accelerating and intensifying capitalist crisis. So, too, did the internal fracturing of left organizations under the pressures of New Left sensibilities in the 1960s and the demise of the new communist movements of the 1970s, evident in Canada and the United States and continuing to this day with the recent fracturing and disbanding of the International Socialist Organization (ISO). All of this is a consequence of internal fragmentations reflecting obvious (and truly unnecessary and sometimes unfathomable) failures on the part of left-wing leadership in specific political organizations. That this history of poor judgement and unacceptable behaviour has been pressured by material conditions not of the left's making is undeniable, but it is also no excuse for the courses taken, many of which have alienated committed leftists.⁸ In addition, the disorganization of the revolutionary left was given more than a nudge by the "dirty tricks" of the state's so-called intelligence agencies, which infiltrated, disrupted, and publicly besmirched left-wing militants and the movements they affiliated with.⁹

Some will claim that the robust reality of identity politics in our time—

and liberal commitments to diversity and humane treatment of visible minorities and other obviously oppressed sectors of society, from the transgendered to the disabled—constitutes an advance of progressive politics and speaks to the health of the left and, indeed, the extension of its ideas. There is something to this, of course, but this development has paralleled an absolute decimation of the actual organizations of the far left, which now register on the radar screen of civil society weakly, if at all. Episodic politics of protest, from huge demonstrations against the powerful institutions of global capitalism at G8 and G20 Summits, seem to go up with a bang, only to come down with a long-term whimper. Mobilizations such as *Occupy!*, *Black Lives Matter*, and *Idle No More*, however much they may galvanize support at specific times, appear somewhat mercurial and seem to lack the overall staying power and wider politics of dissent that characterized older left organizations, such as, for all its flaws, the Communist Party.¹⁰

Future single-issue campaigns are of course inevitable. Capitalism generates potential gravediggers. It also, unfortunately for the left, has proven adept at keeping the shovels wielded busy in excavations of a diverting kind, as politics in the age of Trump and Brexit make abundantly clear.¹¹

All of this registers decisively in our times. With the far left no longer a presence, and conservative thought and the mean-spirited ideology of austerity ascendant, the political terrain has experienced a seismic shift to the right. In Canada, Progressive Conservatism or “pink Toryism,” a political current of influence in the 1960s, is an endangered political species in the early twenty-first century. Instead of John Robarts or Bill Davis, we have Doug Ford. The Liberal Party, for all of the young Trudeau’s promotion of diversity, buttresses corporate capital at every turn and carries a small and shrinking stick as it negotiates a market-oriented continentalism. The days when the Liberal Party might harbour the likes of Eric Kierans or Walter Gordon, nurturing a dissident such as Mel Watkins, are long gone.¹²

As for the New Democratic Party, its socialist substance is virtually unrecognizable. It used to be said, among New Left radicals, that New Democrats were “liberals in a hurry.” They now appear to be “Tories going slow.” Like modern social democracy throughout the world, Canada’s once-named “party of socialism” has squandered the possibility of electoral victory and the authority of governing from the left with concessionary fetishization of balanced budgets and advocacy of antediluvian resource policies that can only take us closer to the environmental abyss. The “S” word is no longer spoken in polite NDP company.¹³

A decisively important extra-parliamentary institution, the organized labour movement—defending working-class interests and, at its best, taking up many other progressive causes and sustaining the left—is in particular disarray at the current political conjuncture. War on the trade unions is almost a given under capitalism, and employers and the state have only reluctantly, and under considerable class struggle pressure, conceded limited and always constrained rights to a combative working class. Labour’s capacity to secure some gains in the post-World War

II years reaching from 1945–1975 consolidated a regime of partial entitlements that was a century in the making. Since the mid-1970s, however, this post-war settlement has been unraveling as capital and the state have launched an invigorated offensive against the trade unions.¹⁴

This class war waged from above registers in declining union densities and a demonstrable retreat of organized labour. Waning militancy, and political incoherence result. Jim Selby, who has worked with Alberta unions for decades, has recently concluded that

The labour movement's inability to effectively respond to neoliberalism has resulted in reduced union membership and declining public status and influence of unions. This is having a cascading effect on other institutions that are at least peripherally linked with the working class, from the rightward march of social democratic parties to the move away from class as the foundation of labour history.

The recent history of trade unions in Canada constitutes for Selby a forty-year “protracted and losing engagement with employers.”¹⁵

To be sure, public sector unions in Canada have maintained high rates of affiliation, at roughly 75 percent, but their capacities to engage in meaningful job actions have been severely curtailed by draconian anti-strike legislation. Stephen McBride has compiled a list of 218 pieces of federal legislation passed in Canada between 1982–2016 that restrict collective bargaining and trade union rights, many of them directed against those working for various levels of government. In the private sector union densities have been plummeting. From a high point of roughly 40 percent in the 1980s, the percentage of the workforce organized in the Canadian private sector has declined from 36.4 percent in 1997 to 25.2 percent in 2016. Among manufacturing workers, the decline is even more notable, falling to 16.1 percent. As deindustrialization assails this core Fordist sector of the Canadian economy, the number of manufacturing workers whose relations with employers are governed by collective agreements fell by 42 percent between 1997–2016. A working class facing this worsening climate is understandably reluctant to challenge capital and defy the state: annual strike counts, which might exceed 1,000 in the 1970s, fell to less than 300 in the mid-1990s and dropped to 200 in the opening years of the new century. They further collapsed to a mere 125 in 2006. Recently, in 2018, the yearly total of Canadian strikes reached a new modern low of half that number, involving a meagre 22,000 workers. Comparable figures for the mid-1960s would have approached 500 strikes per annum and hundreds of thousands of workers.¹⁶

Once-militant unions like Unifor (formerly the Canadian Automobile Workers) reflect this sorry recent history. It has conceded much in bargaining two-tier collective agreements that institutionalize lower pay and inferior pensions for

recently-hired workers, nurturing trade union support for Liberal governments in the mistaken belief that its industry will be “protected” by mainstream politicians. When this strategic blunder is exposed as a dead-end, with the announcement of plant closures in Oshawa terminating thousands of jobs, workers are educated in a long-learned but difficult lesson that neither the federal Liberals nor the provincial Tories are willing to act in their interests. But their union is doing very little to teach them this elementary left politics. As Unifor dickered over 300 jobs, the auto workers’ union concentrated much of its fire on Mexican workers, calling for Trump-like tariffs/boycotts against cars produced in Mexico.¹⁷

What has happened since 2006, then, can hardly be said to have changed things greatly, either for the left, or for historians who research and write about the past in order to stake out interpretive ground that contributes to the critique of capitalism and colonialism and the discontents they have spawned. Left history is still a broad undertaking that seeks to use the scrutiny of the past to underscore the necessity of radical change in the present. It stands to reason, however, that when the times are not propitious for the far left, writing left histories becomes less likely, if not more difficult. Progressive historians, in bad times like ours, may well temper their arguments and scale down the audaciousness of studies of the past, settling for less the better to register their research in a climate distinctly unwelcoming of left-wing ideas.

Left Histories in Bad Times: Reaching Toward Totality

It also needs to be recognized that however left-wing historiography might become, such research and writing, on its own, will never be a decisive lever in changing our times from bad to good. The kind of socioeconomic transformation that leftists envision cannot be realized by studies of the past. Left histories play a more modest role, providing examples to be thought through, reflections to be banked in the collective memory of resistance, and prods to the imagination. This is a small, if not inconsequential, accomplishment. It can enhance possibilities of mobilization that will carry through into action, helping words become deeds. Left histories will speak loudest and with most impact, however, when organizations, campaigns, and struggles challenge exploitation and oppression and win victories that contribute to liberation. This, in turn, stimulates the writing of more left histories, and of histories that are likely to be more left.¹⁸

Without rebuilding the revolutionary left and the labour movement, the social movements and coalition politics of our times that give so many hope and that garner such enthusiasm among progressives are deprived not only of valuable allies, but also of congruent voices of *critical* support. The capacity to sustain an organizational, institutional, and material presence of the left, premised on a staunch defence of working people and all other oppressed segments of society as well as a relentless and wide-ranging critique of capitalism, will necessarily frame much of the possibility for left histories being written.

In the absence of this rejuvenation and regroupment of the revolutionary left and the rebuilding of the labour movement it is not surprising that left histories might well be struggling. My impression is that we are seeing less in the way of left histories than was common decades ago, but the situation has probably not worsened drastically since 2006. Some will certainly disagree with this judgement, claiming that we now have *more* left history than in times past. By their standards of assessment, they may be right.

There is no denying that subject areas have shifted ground in terms of what is popular and what is not: studies of native peoples and colonialism are definitely on the rise. Writings addressing labour history are in notable decline, although there has been a contemporary push to expand the reach of the field into transnational, global histories of work.¹⁹ Modern labour studies is thriving, but much of this research and writing is not particularly historical or left.²⁰ Environmental history is another area of expanding interest, as are disability studies. Women's and gender history continues to be a subject explored by many, although within this broad field there is now less interest than there once was in political economy, trade unions, and the like. Studies of garment workers have been supplanted by research on sex work. As Terry Eagleton commented in 1996, "the libidinal body" is in, "the labouring body ... out."²¹

The problem, in my view, is not that we now have more explorations of the commercialized erotic realm, but that we have, in tandem, less writing on women's employment in more conventional industrial, service, and domestic sectors. We need to examine work that is paid as well as unpaid; work that produces goods as well as services; work in the realms of reproduction and production; work that creates commodities as well as pleasure (with reflection, perhaps, on the utility of the items and the nature and meaning of gratifications).²² It is also important to appreciate the work that goes into surviving when conventional waged work is unavailable.²³ In short, reflecting on work as a central component of human activity highlights what should be a mandate of left history: it is the totalities of historicized experience that we should be striving to capture, even if this ambitious and generalized interpretive reach can only be undertaken by first assembling discrete particularities.

Changing Concerns and Left History

Our understandings of what constitutes a left critique of historical development has been expanded, evidenced most clearly in the pairing of capitalism/colonialism. This coupling has emerged with a more self-reflective assessment of aboriginal/settler relations. Histories of aboriginal peoples raise a series of disturbing questions. They extend the critique of capital, to be sure, but left history is also prodded to confront the ways in which dispossession of native peoples and the creation of a colonial settler society was premised on and contributed to ongoing racialized privilege.²⁴

How this will ultimately affect left history as a broad approach remains to be seen, and how it fits with the totality of concerns that leftists address poses demanding challenges. There are, as well, currents of Indigenous scholarship that may not be very left at all, as Indigenous commentators on the left have recognized in their critique of the politics of recognition. As long as the discussion remains framed by mainstream concern with “reconciliation,” inclinations toward liberal incorporation/legitimation are likely to dominate—the politics of symbolic apology standing in for struggles that demand material redress.²⁵ A challenging politics of left opposition is sometimes sidelined and the kinds of broad mobilizations that bring together the linked but differentiated grievances of the dispossessed—encompassing native peoples and all of those who suffer exploitation and oppression—made more, not less, difficult.

Environmental histories highlight this general problem even more acutely. Such writing can constitute a devastating assault on capitalism’s reduction of nature to a commodity. In exposing capital’s willingness to despoil in rapacious pursuit of profit, the study of ecological degradation/destruction can contribute mightily to left history.²⁶ Built environments such as the large factory have recently been the subject of impressive studies that provide left history with important material moorings.²⁷ But environmentally-situated research can also be disappointingly apolitical in excusing the material and ideological throwing of the dice that capital now encourages and engages in through a variety of actions that risk the future of humanity.²⁸

The history of the differently abled, similarly, can proceed from critique and a demand to recognize capitalism’s role in causing the injuries and diseases that often define disability. It can take aim as well at a market-driven society’s inclination to limit the ways in which many other markers of disabling difference are alleviated so as to allow people access to equal playing fields of contributions and productions. But to the extent that capitalism’s complicity in, containment of, and contribution to the continuity of disability and its discontents is not confronted by studies in this field of inquiry, it will not so much contribute to left history as truncate it.²⁹

Disseminating Dissent/Encouraging Debate

In immersing myself in the provocative pieces produced about left history in 2006 I did not find myself thinking that there are dramatically new ways we can promote left history and reach out to audiences of the dispossessed. Disseminating left history views has always been understood as crucially important, demanding use of a variety of techniques employed with imagination. While there are now more social media outlets and opportunities on the internet to spread the word of research, its meanings, and how it relates to contemporary struggles, the project is not qualitatively different than it was years ago. Different kinds of historians will choose distinct and diverse ways of bringing their findings to audiences that extend beyond graduate seminars and those who read monographs published by university presses.

Some will opt for podcasts, some for publications; there will be those who tweet and those whose texts of choice appear in scholarly journals. Some scholars are clearly drawn to graphic histories, a medium that has been utilized for decades and that is now experiencing a resurgence.³⁰ Our audiences will include academics and students, workers and left-wing constituencies, and various social movements, all of which will be addressed and reached out to in different ways and through a variety of venues, depending on the topic. We can do little more than embrace a diversity of approaches.

If widening dissemination is crucial, so too is appreciating that dialogues of difference, while often uncomfortable, are not only inevitable but productive. Left history is about contentions. It is always posed *against* the structures and abuses of power, but it is also invariably about disagreements among ourselves on the left. How we interpret what happened in the past is never going to be a seamless consensus. We will argue with one another as much, perhaps, as we pose our collective selves against those who defend the crimes of the powerful. We must not succumb, as the left is in retreat, to the tendency to back away from political differences because, supposedly, we must all be together against the enemy. “Debatophobia,” as Joan Sangster has called it, extols difference in all realms, but repudiates it in the sphere of ideas and political engagements, precisely the areas where difference needs to be aired and argument hammered out, so that clarity of how we approach the transcendence of our subordination can be reached.³¹

This will mean actively arguing through what kinds of feminism we embrace, which brand of anarchism, socialism, or communism we draw inspiration from, what kinds of trade unionism we want to build, and what sort of oppositional movements we will join and work within. At the same time as we resist the right, we are invariably engaged in a project of defining, redefining, and differentiating the left.³² For left historians, this also entails analytic separations within historical practice, both in terms of contesting interpretation and questioning research orientations and the relationship of evidence and argument.³³ Too often this is met in historical circles with the nonchalant rejoinder, “why bother?” The suggestion is that “there are no substantial disagreements on the left,” and that our targets must be those on the identifiable right. This has a tendency to suppress actual debate across the spectrum of left historians, or to stifle a willingness to speak out.³⁴ At times, such “debatophobia” can also take a truly nasty course, in which critical engagement with scholarly analysis and historical method is castigated in personalized caricature and worse.³⁵

For all of this, left history is a workable orientation. Its differentiation, for instance, is no greater than in other realms of historical inquiry—women’s history, labour history, Indigenous history—all are fractured by interpretive clashes, distinct methods that often structure research in ways that are at odds, and variegated theoretical frameworks. Like all of these fields, left history can nonetheless be identified by some basics of orientation. Touching down on some of these raises issues of

left history's subject matter and its bedrock sensibilities.

A Left History of Liquorice

My view of the subject of left history is open-ended and inclusive. Left history is not *a* topic or a set of concerns. Rather, it is an approach, applicable to virtually anything. This is not to say, however, that anything *is* left history.³⁶

A left history of liquorice can be imagined, for instance, although it is perhaps not as obviously identifiable a left topic as the labour revolt of 1917–1925. To explore liquorice in a left-wing way necessitates a certain materialist orientation, which is foundational to any left history, especially the treatment of a commodity.³⁷ This would begin with outlining the colonial relations central in harvesting the plant extract in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and India, so that an American firm, M & F Worldwide Corporation, which controls roughly 70 percent of global liquorice production, would profit from marketing candy and other commodities to a largely European and North American consuming public. In this approach to liquorice, various labour processes in the developing world and in the advanced capitalist west would have to be addressed in ways illuminating particular acts of dispossession, including the displacement of Indigenous peoples. There will be blood on the hands of some, and profuse bleeding on the part of others. This reciprocal violence, often involving armed conquests and coerced subordinations, seizures of land, and the tribute then exacted, is central to left history. Research and writing exploring such processes looks at the structures of determination that hedge humanity in, but also probes, dialectically, the active agency that strives to break out of boundaries of constraint. Profit, consumption, and diet would figure in liquorice's left history which, from a material base of exploitation and monopoly, spins outward in entwined circles of meaning encompassing tastes and toxins, folk medicine, merchandizing and money. The commodity becomes a prism refracting the relations of power within which it is embedded and through which its history is exposed. Analyzing the labour revolt of 1917–1925 is no less complicated, but its left substance is more easily discernible in the transparency of a topic structured by class struggle.

My point is not that left histories of liquorice should be subordinated to left histories of labour conflict. On the contrary, a scrupulously analyzed, deeply researched, and elegantly presented left history of liquorice will be better and of more use to us in understanding important dimensions of capitalism, colonialism, commodities, and conflicts of all kinds than a poorly done history of overt and dramatic struggle. Left history can never simply rest on its laurels for being the just cause—describing the obvious in a narration of events lending themselves to left sympathies and speaking to our own cherished sensibilities and support networks. Finally, it is the interpenetration of histories of liquorice and labour, where commodities, the social relations of production, the fruits of consumption both bitter and sweet, and active struggles of resistance find an interface. As left historians we

can hope that perhaps this kind of research and writing will contribute to creating analytic keys able to unlock understandings of the past, helping to open doors into alternative futures.

First Premises

As much as some topics of historical consideration lend themselves to left interpretation more readily than others, it is nonetheless the case that there are certain foundational premises in how left history operates—a *method* of approach that, if carried out, will go a long way toward establishing the rigour of the examination. Whatever our differences, it is surely incumbent on all left historians to recognize that scrutiny of any topic begins with a materialist assessment, which develops an appreciation of inequality that operates at the macro and micro levels, reaching from capitalism and colonialism into relations of class, gender, and race, blurring the lines seemingly separating the public and the private.

A left history that operates in this way, moreover, will be especially attentive to how ways of life—mediated by the deep influence of histories of hegemony—invariably turn, through time, into ways of conflict. Difference is posed in left histories, ultimately, as struggle, which exists not only in uprisings and overt clashes of particular interests, but also in moments of suppression and subordination, even quiet resignation. As too many of the currently fashionable histories of capitalism reveal, avoiding the ways in which people of the past have fought and forced on to the pages of historical reconstruction appreciations of opposition and alternative produces histories with a certain slippery, antiseptic feel. They are perhaps less left than they are narratives crying out for the inclusion of what has been left out.³⁸

Attending to the agency of the exploited and oppressed is surely fundamental to left history although, again, this by no means restricts what kinds of topics can be studied. A left history of bourgeois accumulation or the conspicuous consumption of the truly rich is not only doable but to be encouraged. A significant part of what would make such a history left, however, would be situating this regime of acquisitive individualism and opulence in a wider discussion of social relations. How surplus is extracted and the dimensions of not only what the haves manage to hoard, but the costs levied on the have nots in the process, factor into such an interpretive project, as well as the ways in which acquiescence to the inequalities resulting are secured and sustained.

Benjamin's Nameless and How They Can Be Studied

Intellectual and political work on the left often exhibits shifts through time. In my case, I was originally animated by the concern expressed by Walter Benjamin, when he wrote in his thesis *On the Concept of History*: “It is more arduous to honour the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless.”³⁹ I have not abandoned that pursuit, but in

current writing on the revolutionary left I am addressing frontally those militant socialists who struggled to build organizations and extend the consciousness of the exploited and oppressed so that the nameless would provide a historical reckoning in their creation of an alternative socio-economic order.⁴⁰ Few of us, over long years of research and writing, hew to exactly the same line of inquiry and argument.⁴¹

How do subjects of study, interpretive direction, and political involvement relate to one another? My answer to this query is two-sided. On the one hand, it is undeniably the case that much excellent left history is the product of researchers who are advocates of particular politics on the left. This is hardly surprising. On the other hand, there is nothing intrinsically validating about left histories being written by activists.

It may well be that the insights gained from involvement in contemporary struggles infuse research and writing on specific topics of the past with a particular intellectual vibrancy. There are those who travel the road from activism to academic research and writing, just as others commence with a subject of inquiry, pursue it through the attainment of advanced degrees, and find themselves, at some later point, on the front lines of struggles. There is no denying that an author's passions in the political realm can carry over into their treatment of the subjects they study, and that is a good thing, *if it is done properly*. Yet it is not mandatory that any historian writing rigorous and imaginative accounts of the past need be involved in anything in the present. The primary task of left history is to produce studies of depth, sophistication, and substance that reveal how society is ordered in ways that reproduce inequalities that demand redress. That kind of work can be done in conjunction with activism or without current political involvements.

We should be wary of subjecting left history to a kind of means test, in which someone's activist credentials or lack of them structure the regard in which they are held or not held. This is especially true in Canada, a large country that is quite small and constricted in terms of its intellectual and academic culture. Too much is already dependent on sociability networks and pre-existing understandings of what constitutes proper left sensibilities. If we link activism and the practice of being a historian, what constitutes the right kind of activism on the left will inevitably become a treacherous slope down which judgements easily slide. It would be a blow to left history if some kind of hierarchy of activisms (like a privileged scaffolding of topics) crept into our assessments about authors and their subjects of study.

In terms of these subjects of study, I especially appreciated Geoff Eley's modest proposal in 2006 that left history, while it is not necessarily *only* about the left, should never abandon the study of socialism and socialists—this history being an important chapter in the struggle to extend democracy.⁴² The parties and people constituting the left of the past remain a reservoir into which we can reach to find legacies of resistance both inspiring and instructive. Modern-day leftists who often lack the embeddedness in institutions, mobilizations, and solidarities that defined

many revolutionaries of the past can benefit immeasurably from widening their appreciation of the revolutionary left and its development over time. A sure grasp of this history, on the part of many who claim to be leftists, is sadly lacking, and receding by the decade.

Left historians today face an uphill battle. A confident, resurgent, and powerfully-placed right-wing is now more vocal in opposition to us than such forces have been in the recent past. Ugliness is licensed at the pinnacles of power, and right-wing ideas, percolating throughout society for decades in a post-1960s pressure-cooker of reaction, have now burst into prominence. For years, many of us on the left within academia fought for pluralism, recognizing that the best that could be accomplished in a bourgeois institution like the university was to call it to order and demand that it allow a full array of thought to flower within its confines. Contrary to a lot of ideologically mounted, ill-informed, exaggerated comment on the victory of the left in the so-called “culture wars,” universities never became bastions of left-wing thought and activism. But something was achieved in creating spaces for dissent: securing recognition in historical writing that subjects once unimaginable should be explored, and that research *critical* of power’s practice was legitimate.

This moment of pluralism, which coincided with the expansion of universities in the years after the 1960s, produced possibilities for left histories in the academy over the course of the four decades reaching from the 1970s into the twenty-first century. It may be, however, that neo-liberal austerity, curbs on hiring, and an insurgent backlash in the wider political culture premised on ignorance and bigotry, combined with a lowest-common-denominator market approach to teaching and scholarship, will be reducing the possibilities of left history in the increasingly restricted milieu of contemporary academic life. Left history needs to dig in its heels and produce more and better works. This will help ensure its survival into different and more propitious times, when its lessons and its contribution can fall on the fertile soil of enhanced possibilities for resistance and struggle. We don’t want ourselves to become Benjamin’s “nameless.”

NOTES

¹ (Editor's Note) This article is part of a special *Left History* series reflecting upon changing boundaries in the practice of left history, and outlining the challenges historians of the left must face in the current tumultuous political climate. This series extends a conversation first convened in a 2006 special edition of *Left History* (11.1), which asked the question, "what is left history?" In the updated series, contributors were asked a slightly modified question: "what does it mean to write 'left' history?"

² The *Left History* forum, "What is Left History?" included contributions by Molly Ladd Taylor, William A. Pelz, Geoff Eley, Franca Iacovetta, Jeet Heer, Craig Heron, Liza Piper, Linda Kealey, Vijay Prashad, Karen Dubinsky, and the author. *Left History*, 11, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 12–68.

³ My views on precarious labour, premised on the need to *historicize* the problem, are outlined in Bryan D. Palmer, "Precariousness as Proletarianization," *Socialist Register 2014: Registering Class*, 50 (2013): 40–62.

⁴ Discussions of capitalist crises of relevance include Murray E.G. Smith, *Global Capitalism in Crisis: Karl Marx and the Decay of the Profit System* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2010); Greg Albo, Sam Gindin, and Leo Panitch, *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives* (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2010).

⁵ Much of the fanfare about "socialism" and civil society in the United States relates to the growth and dynamism of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). This socialist current within the Democratic Party is fighting against a long history that would suggest the problematic nature of cultivating illusions in what the revolutionary left can accomplish inside America's liberal centre party. See, for instance, Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986). Discussion and debate relating to the DSA is extensive. For a sampling only see Dan La Botz, "DSA Two Years Later: Where Are We At? Where Are We Headed?" *Medium*, January 4, 2019, <https://medium.com/@danlabotz/dsa-two-years-later-where-are-we-at-where-are-we-headed-3d3912bb8736>; Nire Bryce, "On 'Beefs', DSA, Leadership, Factions, and the Upcoming Fight Towards the National Convention," *Medium*, September 22, 2018, <https://medium.com/@NireBryce/on-beefs-dsa-leadership-factions-and-the-upcoming-fight-towards-the-national-convention-825530763d7>; *DSA: Fronting for the Democrats* (New York: Internationalist Group, 2018).

⁶ Note the discussion in Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Socialist Challenge Today: Syriza, Sanders, Corbyn* (London: Merlin, 2018); Colin Leys, "Corbyn and Brexit Britain: Is there a way forward for the left?" *Socialist Register 2019: A World Turned Upside Down*, 55 (2018): 347–372; Richard Seymour, *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* (London: Verso, 2017).

⁷ Much of the left reveled in the promise of Syriza in Greece, evident in the 2012 commentaries in the *Socialist Register*. See, for instance, Michalis Spourdalakis, “Left Strategy in the Greek Cauldron: Explaining Syriza’s Success,” and Hilary Wainright, “Transformative Power: Political Organization in Transition,” *Socialist Register 2013: The Question of Strategy* 49 (2012): 98–119, 137–158. Six years later the mood is understandably less upbeat and more sober. See, for different approaches, Panitch and Gindin, *The Socialist Challenge Today*, 49–59; Alex Steiner, Frank Brenner, and Savas Michael-Matsas, *OXI: Greece at the Crossroads* (New York: Permanent Revolution Press, 2016). On Brazil, see Sean Purdy, “The Rightward Shift in Brazil and the Prospects for the Left,” interview by Brian Kelley, *LaborOnline*, October 28, 2018, www.lawcha.org/2018/10/28/the-rightward-shift-in-brazil-and-prospects-for-the-left-an-interview-with-labor-historian-sean-purdy/.

⁸ Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Cbe* (London: Verso, 2002); Ernest Tate, *Revolutionary Activism in the 1950s and 1960s*, vol. 2, *Britain 1965–1970* (London: Resistance Books, 2014); Peter Graham with Ian McKay, *Radical Ambition: The New Left in Toronto* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019); Christopher Phelps, “The Closet in the Party: The Young Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Workers Party, and Homosexuality, 1962–1970,” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History*, 10, no. 4 (2013): 11–38; Gary Kinsman, “Workers of the World Caress,” interview by Deborah Brock, *Left History* (Online Edition), 9, no. 2 (2004), https://www.yorku.ca/lefthist/online/brock_kinsman.html. The recent dissolution of the International Socialist Organization occasioned much comment. For a variety of assessments, including the ISO’s statement, see “The ISO’s Vote to Dissolve and What Comes Next,” *Socialist Worker*, April 10, 2019, <http://socialistworker.org/2019/04/02/the-isos-vote-to-dissolve-and-what-comes-next>; “The Crisis and Collapse of the International Socialist Organization,” *New Militant*, April 7, 2019, <https://newmilitant.com/the-crisis-and-collapse-of-the-international-socialist-organization/>; “Factional Provocation, Middle-Class Hysteria, and the Collapse of the International Socialist Organization,” *World Socialist Web Site*, April 2, 2019, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/04/02/inte-a02.html>.

⁹ Canadian experience reflects the perhaps benign course of state repression. See Steve Hewitt, *Spying 101: The RCMP’s Secret Activities at Canadian Universities, 1917–1997* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 93–202; *In the Federal Appeal Court between Ross Dowson v. RCMP: A vivid episode in the ongoing struggle for freedom of thought and social justice in Canada* (Toronto: Forward Publishing, 1980). For the long history of Canadian state repression of labour and the left 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). In the United States repression could be more overtly deadly. See, among many studies, Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI’s Secret War Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press,

1988); Jeffrey Haas, *The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police Murdered a Black Panther* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Jodi Dean concluded, “Occupy Wall Street brought into being a new political subject. It gave the left courage to say ‘we’ again. Maintaining the political opening Occupy created won’t be easy, but it will be possible if and as the movement shapes itself as a new communist party.” Dean, “Occupy Wall Street: After the Anarchist Moment,” *Socialist Register 2019: A World Turned Upside Down*, 55 (2018): 61. The difficulty is how to get from episodic mobilizations such as *Occupy*, *Black Lives Matter*, or *Idle No More* to something akin to a “communist party.” In the case of *Occupy* the transition is astoundingly difficult for precisely the reason that Dean avoids: the eclectic and sometimes contradictory politics of *Occupy*, which contain significant currents of actual *opposition* to anything that might be considered either communist or a party. When dealing with mobilizations such as *Black Lives Matter* or *Idle No More*, all of this and more also comes into play.

¹¹ But see Mike Davis, “The Great God Trump and the White Working Class,” *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 151–172, as a corrective to reducing Trump’s appeal entirely to the discontents of the white working class.

¹² “Pink Toryism,” which might align 1960s figures like the conservative George Grant and the leftist Gad Horowitz, factors into texts like George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism, 40th Anniversary Edition* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005); Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968). Note the discussion in Bryan D. Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 290–291. On Kierans and Gordon see Jamie Swift, *Odd Man Out: The Life and Times of Eric Kierans* (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988); Stephen Azzi, *Walter Gordon and the Rise of Canadian Nationalism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999). For Watkins’ development see Mel Watkins, “Learning to Move Left,” *This Magazine Is About Schools*, 6 (Spring 1972): 68–92; Watkins, “A Personal Dimension,” *Canadian Dimension*, 40 (November–December 2006): 5–55.

¹³ Particularly debilitating was the experience of the Bob Rae-led New Democratic Party in power in Ontario in the early 1990s. See George Ehring and Wayne Roberts, *Giving Away a Miracle: Lost Dreams, Broken Promises, and the Ontario NDP* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1993); Tom Walkholm, *The Rise and Follies of the NDP* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1994); Stephen McBride, “The Continuing Crisis of Social Democracy: Ontario’s Social Contract in Perspective,” *Studies in Political Economy* 50, no. 1 (Summer 1996): 64–95; Sid Ryan, *A Grandier Vision: My Life in the Labour Movement* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2019), 119–154.

¹⁴ The literature on this anti-labour offensive is extensive. Key texts for Canada include Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From*

Wage Controls to the Social Contract (Toronto: Garamond, 1993); Yonatan Reshef and Sandra Rastin, *Unions in the Time of Revolution: Government Restructuring in Ontario and Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); Thom Workman, *If You're in My Way I'm Walking: The Assault on Working People Since 1970* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2009); Stephen McBride, *Working? Employment Policy in Canada* (Oakville, Ontario: Rock Mills Press, 2017), 210–220.

¹⁵ Jim Selby, “Labour in Need of Revolutionary Vision,” *Labour/La Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 233–234.

¹⁶ McBride’s data on legislation curbing organized labour is presented in *Working?* 210–214. I have drawn on Statistics Canada compilations for recent calculations of strike trends, but I also benefitted from 2017 Statistics Canada data that Canadian Labour Congress Research Director Chris Roberts assessed and synthesized in his comments on a panel at “Transcending Pessimism, Reimagining Democracy: A Conference in Honour of Leo Panitch,” York University, Toronto, October 6, 2017. See also Selby, “Labour in Need of Revolutionary Vision,” 233–246. My own discussion of 1960s strikes, in which one estimate is that approximately 575 *illegal wildcat strikes* occurred in a two-year period, 1965–1966, is in Palmer, *Canada’s 1960s*, 211–241.

¹⁷ On recent Unifor history see a number of online publications in the Socialist Project’s *The Bullet*, <https://socialistproject.ca/bullet/>, among them Herman Rosenfeld, “CAMI Strike: After Another Setback Can Unifor Move On?,” October 24, 2017; Socialist Project Steering Committee, “Taking on the GM Shutdown: Unifor, Oshawa, and Community Control,” December 7, 2018; Sam Gindin, “GM Oshawa: Lowered Expectations, Unexplored Opportunities,” March 29, 2019; Tony Leah, “Unifor Settlement with GM – Footprint or Tag?,” May 14, 2019. See also James McCarten, “Union Head Jerry Dias to Trudeau: Get Tough with GM, Trump Style,” *Huffpost*, November 28, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2018/11/28/jerry-dias-gm-canada-trudeau_a_23603786/. Sid Ryan, *A Grander Vision*, 274–281 criticizes unions such as Unifor with respect to their embrace of “strategic voting” for the Liberal Party, insisting that labour must politically support the New Democratic Party.

¹⁸ Note Perry Anderson’s comments on the aestheticization of Western Marxism in an earlier period in *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976).

¹⁹ Labour history never dominated discussions at the annual Canadian Historical Association (CHA) meetings, but there were times when it registered a significant impact. Recent meetings of the CHA have seen less interest in labour. At the 2015 meeting, for instance, working-class history was a factor in only five of 102 panels. See Christo Aivalis, Gregory S. Kealey, Jeremy Milloy, and Julia Smith, “Back to Work: Revitalizing Labour and Working-Class History,” *Active History*, September

21, 2015, <http://activehistory.ca/2015/09/back-to-work-revitalizing-labour-and-working-class-history-in-canada/>. For a range of essays that often confront the decline of labour history within particular countries, counterbalanced with the rise of transnational global labour histories, see Joan Allen, Alan Campbell, and John McIlroy, eds., *Histories of Labour: National and International Perspectives* (London: Merlin Press, 2010). For an instructive statement on global labour history see Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), which reveals the powerful strength of addressing labour transnationally in terms of the structured determinations of specific regimes of accumulation and their corresponding forms of labour organization. Less richly developed in such global histories are the active ways in which working people resist.

²⁰ Indicative of the kinds of valuable contributions being made in labour studies, notable for its comparative orientation and its historical approach, is Barry Eidlin, *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 71.

²² A model study, rich in insight, is Joan Sangster, “Making a Fur Coat: Women, the Labouring Body, and Working Class History,” *International Review of Social History* 52, no. 2 (2007): 241–270.

²³ See, for instance, Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016).

²⁴ Recent critiques of labour studies/labour history call practitioners in these fields to task for the failure to integrate the dispossession of native peoples in Canada into discussions of class formation and class struggle. See David Camfield, “Settler Colonialism and Labour Studies in Canada: A Preliminary Exploration,” *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 147–172; Fred Burrill, “The Settler Order Framework: Rethinking Canadian Working-Class History,” *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (Spring 2019): 173–197. Note, as well, Adele Perry, *Aqueduct: Colonialism, Resources, and the Histories We Remember* (Winnipeg: ARP, 2016); Owen Toews, *Stolen City: Racial Capitalism and the Making of Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: ARP, 2018).

²⁵ Contrast Glen Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), on the one hand, and, on the other, Paulette Reagan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010); David R. Newhouse, “Resistance is Futile: Aboriginal Peoples Meet the Borg of Capitalism,” in *Ethics and Capitalism*, ed. John Douglas Bishop (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 141–155.

²⁶ Environmental histories that have contributed in imaginative ways to left history would include Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991) and Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

²⁷ See Joshua B. Freeman, *Bebemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).

²⁸ Consider the rationalizing of the ways in which decisions in Walkerton, Ontario led to the contamination of the local water supply in Joy Parr, *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments and the Everyday, 1953–2003* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 163–188.

²⁹ Among a number of recent left contributions to disability studies are Dustin Galer, *Working Towards Equity: Disability Rights Activism and Employment in Late Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Ravi Malhotra and Benjamin Isitt, eds., *Disabling Barriers: Social Movements, Disability, History and the Law* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).

³⁰ See, for instance, Graphic History Collective with Paul Buhle, eds., *Drawn to Change: Graphic Histories of Working-Class Struggle* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016); Graphic History Collective with Althea Balmes et al., *Direct Action Gets the Goods: A History of the Strike in Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019); Graphic History Collective and David Lester, *1919: A Graphic History of the Winnipeg Strike* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2019). For a striking older example of the genre of graphic history see Patri Giacomo, *White Collar: A Novel in Linocuts* (San Francisco: Pisani Printing, 1940).

³¹ Joan Sangster, *Through Feminist Eyes: Essays on Canadian Women's History* (Athabasca, Alberta: AU Press, 2011), 30–35.

³² This is the approach adopted in one recent trade union memoir, Sid Ryan, *A Grandeur Vision*.

³³ See Bryan D. Palmer, “Historiographic Hassles: Class and Gender, Evidence and Interpretation,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* 33, no. 65 (May/mai 2000): 105–144.

³⁴ Note my response to the progressive critique of conservative historians’ understandings of the limitations of Canadian social history in Bryan D. Palmer, “Of Silences and Trenches: A Dissident’s View of Granatstein’s Meaning,” *Canadian Historical Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1999): 676–686. My sense, although it is highly impressionistic, is that other disciplines are more open to debates on the left. For political economy, for instance, see Paul Kellogg, *Escape from the Staple Trap: Canadian Political Economy After Left Nationalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). One measure of the lack of appetite for debate/criticism in Canadian left historical circles is the response to Ian McKay’s overarching framework for understanding Canadian history, posed in McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus

for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 616–645. McKay’s approach, which it can now be argued has led him away from Marxism and toward liberalism, cries out for sustained critique from the left, but a collection of essays engaging with this orientation to the Canadian past is largely celebratory, punctuated by critical commentary that seeks largely to refine the approach. See Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

³⁵ Consider the outlandish commentary on my own interventions into theoretical and research issues in Mariana Valverde, “Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis,” *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 33, no. 65 (May/mai 2000): 59–77.

³⁶ It is necessary, even within my fairly eclectic and catholic understanding of what constitutes left history, to stress that the field does exist within boundaries of delimitation. Much Canadian writing in the area of cultural history, for instance, bears little relation to left history. Studies of masculinity, addressing gender difference, are often structured as left histories but not all such writing can be considered as such. See Christopher Dummitt, *The Manly Modern: Masculinity in Postwar Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007). A study such as Craig Heron and Steven Penfold, *The Workers’ Festival: A History of Labour Day in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), might well be considered left history but Penfold’s subsequent books, *The Donut: A Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) and *A Mile of Make-Believe: A History of the Eaton’s Santa Claus Parade* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016) are not particularly left which, in and of itself, is not a substantial criticism, but rather a matter of designation.

³⁷ For left history and the commodity see the exemplary study, Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985).

³⁸ For a critique of recent histories of capitalism accenting their failure to address agencies of struggle and resistance see Bryan D. Palmer, “‘Mind-Forg’d Manacles’ and Recent Pathways to ‘New’ Labor Histories,” *International Review of Social History* 62, no. 2 (August 2017): 279–303.

³⁹ Quoted in Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin: A Biography* (New York and London: Verso, 1996), 262.

⁴⁰ A sense of continuities as well as shifts in my historical concerns can be gleaned from the two-volume collection of essays *Marxism and Historical Practice*, vol. 1, *Interpretive Essays on Class Formation* and vol. 2, *Interventions and Appreciations* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017).

⁴¹ Gregory S. Kealey’s shifting subjects of study are evident in comparing *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867–1892* (Toronto: University of Toronto

Press, 1980) and *Spying on Canadians: The Royal Canadian Mounted Police Security Service and the Origins of the Long Cold War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

⁴² Geoff Eley, "Writing in Opposition," *Left History* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 22.