

Article

"Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History: A Dialectical View"

Bryan D. Palmer

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada, vol. 17, n° 2, 2006, p. 33-60.

Pour citer cet article, utiliser l'information suivante :

URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/016589ar>

DOI: 10.7202/016589ar

Note : les règles d'écriture des références bibliographiques peuvent varier selon les différents domaines du savoir.

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter à l'URI <https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. Érudit offre des services d'édition numérique de documents scientifiques depuis 1998.

Pour communiquer avec les responsables d'Érudit : info@erudit.org

Historical Materialism and the Writing of Canadian History: A Dialectical View

BRYAN D. PALMER

Abstract

Surveying the historical writing in Canada that has adopted the approach of historical materialism, this paper presents a new perspective on Marxist theory and its relevance to the study of the past. It both links Canadian historical materialist texts to a series of important international debates and suggests the significance of dialectics in the development of Marxism's approach to the past.

Résumé

Cet article examine l'écriture historique au Canada teintée de l'approche du matérialisme historique et présente un nouveau point de vue sur la théorie marxiste et sa pertinence quant à l'étude du passé. Il relie non seulement les textes matérialistes historiques canadiens à une série d'importants débats internationaux, mais il évoque aussi l'importance de la dialectique dans le développement de l'approche marxiste par rapport au passé.

Some time ago, with a couple of hours to kill in London, I wandered into a pub, pulled out a copy of Paul Buhle's *Marxism in the USA: From 1870 to the Present Day* (1987),¹ and proceeded quietly and unobtrusively to turn its pages. As the bartender plopped down a pint, he glanced at the title, raised his eyebrows, looked at me with a jaundiced air of superiority, and commented, "I'd have thought that would be a rather short book, mate." The traditional class dichotomy of British society — 'them' and 'us' — took on new meaning as an Old World understanding of materially-embedded division posed itself against the exceptionalism of the New World order. In this commonsensical appreciation of difference, historical antagonisms bred of exploitation and struggle, as well as the ideas of liberatory possibility that accompany such deep structures of being, tend to be stripped away from the English-speaking experience of North America. I offered something in the way of rejoinder, went back to my beer and my book, and the caustic server sauntered to his perch at the end of

1 Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the USA: From 1870 to the Present Day* (London: Verso, 1987).

the bar, trading quips with customers of more familiarity than me, offering a running commentary on a televised soccer match.

The debate that periodically rises and falls over American exceptionalism is an old one, reaching back to Werner Sombart and, in Canada, echoing in the first sustained scholarly attack on the potential realization of a proletarian state in O.D. Skelton's *Socialism: A Critical Analysis* (1911).² For Skelton, Canada was perhaps the original site of exceptionalism's foothold, a primitive accumulation of conditions anything but conducive to socialism's emergence. In the view of the Sir John A. Macdonald Professor of Political Science at Queen's University, socialism in the British Dominion was both 'sporadic' (being materially inhibited by the lack of concentrated industrial development, except in the Pacific mining sector) and 'exotic' (restricted to the immigrant workforces of locales like Winnipeg, where "the motley foreign quarter" exercised undue influence).³

The irony of Skelton's immediate pre-World War I statement, of course, is that Canada would, in the interwar period and into the 1960s, come to be conceived by some social scientists as an oppositional rejoinder to a solitary United States exceptionalism. With its Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and New Democratic Party (CCF/NDP) party formations, its agrarian populism that challenged liberal individualism, its Hartzian fragment socio-political culture, characterized by Tory and socialist 'touches' of bourgeois imperfection that could unite the conservative (George Grant) and the radical (Gad Horowitz) in

2 For contemporary discussions see Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 26 (1984): 1-24; Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in the United States," *History Workshop Journal*, 17 (Spring 1984): 57-80; Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Jean Heffer and Jeanine Rovet, eds., *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (Paris: École des hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1988); Gerald Friedman, *State-Making and Labor Movements: The United States and France, 1876-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Neville Kirk, "'Exceptionalism' Revisited: The Case of Samuel Gompers," *Socialist History*, 16 (2000): 1-26; and "The American Worker" special issue of *Historical Materialism*, 11 (December 2003). For two classic statements see Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* (White Plains, NY: ME Sharpe, 1976), reprinting the original 1907 German publication, and O.D. Skelton, *Socialism: A Critical Analysis* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911).

3 Skelton, *Socialism*, 309-310. Ian McKay suggests that Skelton regarded "the Quebec population" (seemingly in its essentialized entirety) as "one of the great barriers that would shield a fortunate Canada from the waves of socialism sweeping the world," but this is an exaggerated claim. Skelton wrote that "[t]he power of the Catholic Church in Quebec erects a solid barrier in the path of socialism," a statement rather different in its meanings than the blanket generalization attributed to Skelton by McKay. See McKay, *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2005), 192.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY: A DIALECTICAL VIEW

a traditionalist collectivism that seeded the Canadian ground with socialist possibility, Canada confirmed the United States as the last exceptionalist stand of a pristine capitalist society. Whereas Skelton, in 1911, saw Canada as insulated from socialism, Lipset, Hartz, Grant, and Horowitz — all in different ways — saw Canadian identity as intricately related to socialist possibility and, in its essence, differentiated from the political culture and nation-state formation of the United States.⁴ So, too, would a revived and increasingly left-nationalist radical political economy that emerged in the late 1960s, and built on the uniquely Canadian insights of Harold Adams Innis.⁵ From this quarter would come calls for an ‘independent socialist Canada’⁶ as well as an ongoing radicalization of Canadian political economy that would encompass not only a sophisticated Marxist body of writing on the state, but also a resolutely historical materialist

-
- 4 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan – A Study in Political Sociology* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1971, original 1950); Dean E. McHenry, *The Third Force in Canada: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, 1932-1948* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1950); Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964); Gad Horowitz, *Canadian Labour in Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968), 3-57; George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005, original 1965).
 - 5 As an introduction only see Mel Watkins, “Learning to Move Left,” *This Magazine Is About Schools*, 6 (Spring 1972): 68-92; Daniel Drache, “Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 11 (August 1976): 3-18; and for a stimulating recent introduction to Harold Adams Innis, Alexander John Watson, *Marginal Man: The Dark Vision of Harold Innis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), reviewed with insight by Mel Watkins, “Harold Innis: An Intellectual at the Edge of Empire,” *Canadian Dimension*, 40 (July-August 2006): 45-47.
 - 6 Among the pivotal texts that appeared out of a late 1960s ferment that grew out of the New Democratic Party’s Waffle, the Movement for an Independent Socialist Canada, and other critical left nationalist spheres would be: Kari Levitt, *Silent Surrender: The Multinational Corporation in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970); Ian Lumsden, ed., *Close the 49th Parallel, Etc: The Americanization of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970); Gary Teeple, ed., *Capitalism and the National Question in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); Robert M. Laxer, *Canada, Ltd: The Political Economy of Dependency* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973). One of the best statements of this trajectory was Glen Williams, “Canada – The Case of the Wealthiest Colony,” *This Magazine*, 10 (February-March 1976), which grew into Williams, *Not For Export: Toward a Political Economy of Canada’s Arrested Industrialization* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983). The significance of left nationalism in Canadian radical political economy into the 1980s and 1990s, as well, perhaps, as its displacement in the current focus on identity, gender, social movements, and globalization, can be gleaned from three texts: Wallace Clement and Glen Williams, eds., *The New Canadian Political Economy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989); Wallace Clement, ed., *Understanding Canada: Building on the New Canadian Political Economy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997); Wallace Clement and Leah F. Vosko, eds., *Changing Canada: Political Economy as Transformation* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003).

critique of the Innisian origins of the field.⁷ All of this belatedly makes a point already obvious in the 1940s: it would have been incongruous for Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club to publish a volume in its mass-circulation, orange-covered, British series, entitled *Left Turn, United States*, but this was indeed how M.J. Coldwell titled his Canadian social-democratic statement of 1945.⁸

This has the feel of the dialectic about it, as historical process culminates in new creations emerging out of older processes that seemed destined to produce something quite different than what actually surfaces in the give and take of development. In all of this, socialism has, sadly, been locatable more in the shadows than in the substance of Canada, discernible here and there in utopian idealism and, on occasion, as a practical politics. Its conceptions, categories of analysis, and ways of thinking, seeing, and doing have been chimerical rather than central to Canadian experience, yet they have left their mark nonetheless, largely as a force mediating liberalism's electoral agendas in the era of welfare state attainment. But that, after all, was a relatively abbreviated moment in the *longue durée* of Canada's historical evolution, developing in the 1940s with the first regional achievements of provincial social-democratic legislative power, attaining its programmatic zenith in the 1960s of Trudeau's "Just Society", and

7 I do not address seriously in this essay the important Canadian Marxist political economy that has developed over the course of the last three-and-a-half decades, often in opposition to more nationalist strains of the new political economy. Suffice it to say, however, that it is an analytically differentiated field. On the one hand, the influential state theorist, Leo Panitch, played a significant role in the development of the journal *Studies in Political Economy* and has taken over the co-editorship of *Socialist Register* from Ralph Miliband and John Saville, as well as developing connections with the United States radical publication, *Monthly Review* and its press. Panitch has worked with a broad array of younger radical political economists influenced by the traditions of historical materialism, many of whom address issues of Canadian class formation and comparative labour studies as they intersect with international political economy. The contribution of Panitch and a subsequent cohort of Marxist political economists has been considerable. But it remains somewhat distinct from another, if smaller and less influential, analytic school of Marxist political economy, one in which the laws of motion of capitalist accumulation are granted central interpretive place. To the extent that both of these Marxist strains of political economy challenge dependency theory and radical nationalist schools of political economy, they are similar, but the sharpness of critique and the interpretive accents nevertheless differ. For Panitch see Leo Panitch, ed., *The Canadian State: Political Economy and Political Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); "Dependency and Class in Canadian Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy*, 6 (Autumn 1981): 7-33; and for political economies of capitalist accumulation and harder-edged critiques of radical nationalist thought see Murray E.G. Smith, *Invisible Leviathan: The Marxist Critique of Market Despotism Beyond Postmodernism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Smith, "Political Economy and the Canadian Working Class: Marxism or Nationalist Reformism?" *Labour/Le Travail*, 46 (Fall 2000): 343-68; David McNally, "Staples Theory as Commodity Fetishism: Marx, Innis, and Canadian Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy*, 6 (Autumn 1981): 35-63.

8 M.J. Coldwell, *Left Turn, Canada* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1945).

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY: A DIALECTICAL VIEW

beginning the slow march of demise in the mid-1970s with a globally-induced fiscal crisis of the state that reverberated throughout Canadian political economic relations in the 1980s and 1990s.⁹

Curiously enough, or perhaps predictably, the actual *history* of historical materialism in Canada, a historiography that remains to be written, and that is as brief as it is (to use a word advisedly) *tragic*, is not unrelated to this context of political economy, and the centrality of left-leaning publications in the post-1945 years. For it can be argued that the 1960s represented the first serious stirrings of historical materialism in Canadian historical writing, and that this bore some fruit in the 1970s and early 1980s, only to succumb to pressures of conceptual and political hostility and material setbacks to the cause of Marxism on a global scale that unfolded over the course of the 1980s. These gathered momentum with the implosion of actually existing Soviet socialism in 1989; socialism's (and Marxism's) fortunes have been on a downward trajectory ever since.¹⁰

Prior to the 1960s, there is barely a hint of historical materialism present in Canadian historical writing. There were, of course, historical materialists such as the so-called revolutionary impossibilist E.T. Kingsley, whose agitational tracts were didactic efforts to cultivate within the working class a sense of historical materialism's capacity to serve as a key for unlocking it from

9 See as an introduction only James Struthers, *The Limits of Affluence: Welfare in Ontario, 1920-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *From Consent to Coercion: The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms* (Aurora, Ontario: Garamond, 2003). The overly elastic terminology of 'liberal order' animating McKay's *Rebels, Reds, and Radicals* is thus, to my way of thinking, problematic precisely because it is insufficiently historically materialist in its conceptualization. I can appreciate McKay's point that Marx is read differently by new generations of leftists. It is nevertheless troubling to see McKay embrace Marx as "a dynamic and changing cultural code" (15). This licences much that is conceptually vague and, in McKay's reading of historical developments, not a little that is idiosyncratic. Few historians of the Canadian left, for instance, will accept McKay's unsubstantiated assertions that virtually the entirety of all past writing is compromised by a sectarianism that he alone has transcended. Moreover, this transcendence is often achieved by a bypassing of acute differences on the left, such as those separating communists and social democrats in the 1940s. It does historical materialism no service to marshal it against a rigorous reading of such differences, however much the aim is to create a unified left in our time.

10 Discussions of this global context can be found in various articles in Ralph Miliband and Leo Panitch, eds., *Socialist Register, 1990: The Retreat of the Intellectuals* (London: Merlin Press, 1990); Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds., *Socialist Register, 2006: Telling the Truth* (London: Merlin Press, 2005); Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster, eds., *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review, 1997); John Sanbonmatsu, *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject* (New York: Monthly Review, 2004).

incarceration.¹¹ But even when a topic such as labour was broached, it was more often examined and written about in ways anything but historical materialist, as Gregory S. Kealey's overview of "writing about labour" from the 1880s through the 1950s suggests.¹² There were inevitably iconoclastic commentators on Canadian historical development, such as H.C. Pentland, whose materialist inclinations and refusal to take up conventional anti-Marxist shibboleths lulled many into thinking of themselves as Marxists when in fact they were not,¹³ and others, like the political theorist, C.B. Macpherson, whose ambiguously rich writings promised to open out into a historical materialist analysis of Canada only to find their final outlet in non-Canadian argument.¹⁴

There is no denying, then, that prior to the 1960s Marxist ideas and, in particular, a theoretical elaboration of what constituted historical materialism, were largely the stuff of communist study groups and the Party press and journals, not university classrooms.¹⁵ For all of the homage now paid to Stanley Ryerson, he was read seriously only on the fringes of Canadian scholarship, which did not so much marginalize Marxism as method as ignore it until vilification seemed necessary, which was not all that often.¹⁶ Moreover, even

- 11 E.T. Kingsley, *The Genesis and Evolution of Slavery: Showing How the Chattel Slaves of Pagan Times Have Been Transformed Into the Capitalist Property of Today* (Vancouver 1916). Unfortunately, our knowledge of Kingsley's importance has not been advanced substantively since the publication of A.R. McCormack, *Rebels, Reformers, and Revolutionaries: The Western Canadian Radical Movement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
- 12 Gregory S. Kealey, "Writing about Labour," in Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995): 3-31.
- 13 Precisely because Pentland refused to be anti-Marxist, he was often regarded as Marxist, which may explain why he was largely ignored among economists and read partially and idiosyncratically among left nationalist political economists. His most enthusiastic readers were working-class historians. For the complexity of Pentland see the posthumously published H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada, 1650-1860* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1981), edited and introduced by Paul Phillips; Pentland, "Marx and the Canadian Question," *Canadian Forum*, 54 (January 1974): 26-28; and for a somewhat simplified assimilation of Pentland to Marxism, Mel Watkins, "The Staple Theory Revisited," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12 (Winter 1977), esp. 95, n. 49. See as well Gregory S. Kealey, "H.C. Pentland and Working-Class Studies," in Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History*, 32-47; Drache, "Rediscovering Canadian Political Economy."
- 14 C.B. Macpherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953); Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
- 15 See as examples only Stanley B. Ryerson, "Marxism and the Writing of Canadian History," *National Affairs*, 4 (1947): 46-51; Ryerson, *A World To Win: An Introduction to the Science of Socialism* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1946); Catherine Vance, "Early Trade Unionism in Quebec: The Carpenters and Joiners General Strike of 1833-1834," *Marxist Quarterly*, 3 (1962): 26-42.
- 16 Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 125; Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing: 1900-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976),

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY: A DIALECTICAL VIEW

acknowledging Ryerson's accomplishments and appreciating his philosophical training and inclination, it is apparent that the steeply uphill battle of conveying a sense of Canadian historical development in terms of class antagonism and national oppression was enough of a difficult climb that the patrician communist rarely elaborated on the theoretical foundations of his labours of interpretation and recovery. Like many historians he wore his conceptual clothing loosely, and undoubtedly thought that its daring and dash would be evident in the fit and flair of his moving narrative, rather than in a stationary, ostentatious display of theoretical erudition. Ryerson's first historical studies of popular revolt and French Canadian democracy offered little in the way of overt comment on historical materialism, not a surprising omission given their gestation in the problematic suppressions of the *Popular Front*.¹⁷ Later, in books first published in the 1960s and reprinted into the 1970s, Ryerson's self-conscious articulation of historical materialism was more pronounced, but it developed within these texts largely as quotes from Marx and Engels on the significance of material forces and class relations, and as polemical postscripts in which the substance of broad interpretive overview was posed against the narrowing empiricist, conventional wisdoms of the professional historical mainstream.¹⁸

Within this intellectual stratum few had a sophisticated understanding of historical materialism. Undoubtedly many thought that to be an historian and to be concerned with the material or the economic was to flirt with being a historical materialist. This could well explain a part of the reception accorded D.G.

183-184, 217. For discussions of Ryerson from commentators of the left see the favorable Gregory S. Kealey, "Stanley Brehaut Ryerson: Canadian Revolutionary and Marxist Historian," in Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History*: 48-100 and the more critical Brian McDougall, "Stanley Ryerson and the Materialist Conception of History: A Study in the Stalinist Distortion of Marxism," MA thesis, Carleton University, 1981. For one of the few positive gestures towards Ryerson's early historical writing see Edwin C. Guillet, *The Lives and Times of the Patriots: An Account of the Rebellion in Upper Canada, 1837-1838 and of the Patriot Agitation in the United States, 1837-1842* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1938), 242, but Guillet was hardly at the centre of the Canadian professional historical milieu. Regarded more as an 'amateur' and an 'archivist' than a historian, Guillet's marginalization has continued; studies of professional historical writing by Berger and Wright bypass him. See, as well, Allan Greer, "1837-38: Rebellion Reconsidered," *Canadian Historical Review*, 76 (March 1995): 1-18.

17 Stanley B. Ryerson, *1837: The Birth of Canadian Democracy* (Toronto: Francis White, 1937); Ryerson, *French Canada: A Study in Canadian Democracy* (Toronto: Progress, 1943).

18 See especially Ryerson, "Postscript: A Note On Marxism and Canadian Historiography," *The Founding of Canada: Beginnings to 1815* (Toronto: Progress, 1963): 326-329; Ryerson, "Postscript – Polemical," in *Unequal Union: Roots of Crisis in the Canadas, 1815-1873* (Toronto: Progress, 1973): 424-435. See also Ryerson, "Marxism and the Writing of Canadian History": Ryerson, "Conflicting Approaches to the Social Sciences," *Marxist Quarterly*, 1 (1962): 46-64.

Creighton's *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850* (1937). Reviewing the book in the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, Herbert Heaton was reminded of Frederick Engels, Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, and what he indiscriminately referred to as "the economic interpretation of history." He thought Creighton's text would be well recommended to the Left Book Club! More than 25 years later, Stanley Mealing saw Harold Innis and Creighton as inspiring interpretations of Lower Canada from the Conquest to Confederation that seriously entertained the idea that class was a motive force in Canadian history.¹⁹

Historical materialism, of course, involves more than the historical approach, more than the appreciation of the economic factor, more than an accent on class as a significant component of everyday life, social relations, and change. Historians in Canada have split few hairs in understanding what constitutes a Marxist historical materialist approach. Little effort has gone into either the explication of the categories of historical materialist analysis and their meaning or a defence of these conceptual building blocks when they have come under attack.²⁰ The fundamental question that animates this essay is a relatively straightforward one: how did historical materialism come to be such a non-entity in contemporary Canadian historical practice when, for some of us, it was a touchstone of our identity in the 1970s and early 1980s?²¹ To answer these queries it is necessary to begin at the beginning.

19 Donald G. Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence, 1760-1850* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937); Herbert Heaton, untitled review, *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 4 (November 1938), 565-570; Berger, *Writing of Canadian History*, 216; Stanley Mealing, "The Concept of Social Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, 46 (September 1965): 211.

20 As a beginning only see the varied positions in G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); E.P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory : or an Orrery of Errors," in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978): 193-398.

21 It is critical to recall that the international renaissance of social history that grew out of the 1960s and that bloomed in its political aftermath was, if not always Marxist, almost always engaged with Marxism in ways that meant Marxism was never easily caricatured and dismissed. This seems an eternity away from the current politico-intellectual moment. Thus many social historians of the 1990s who have come to be associated with critiques of Marxism and in particular Marxist social history were themselves advocates of Marxism and of Marxist social history, of a sort, in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. This is evident, for instance, in the personal trajectory of the highly influential feminist historian and theorist Joan Scott, although it has never been discussed by her in anything resembling an *autocritique*. Compare, for instance, Joan Wallach Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY:
A DIALECTICAL VIEW

Marxism is often seen, somewhat mechanically, as a fusion of German philosophy, French socialism, and British political economy.²² In terms of historical materialism these influences were co-joined in various ways. And in their intermingling, of course, all were altered from what they had been as developments of bourgeois thought or specific, often utopian, struggles against it. British political economy *and* the history of class struggle in France, culminating in socialist developments in the nineteenth century, were by definition historicized subject realms. But it was as a springboard into the analytic richness of historical materialism that Marx made them more than studied episodes of the past.²³

As Isaiah Berlin (certainly a critical reader of Marx not given to acceptance of Marxist premises) noted in 1963, the theory of history and society propounded by Marx was “wholly original; the combination of elements does not in this case lead to syncretism, but forms a bold, clear, coherent system, with the wide range and the massive architectonic quality that” marked it as decisively Hegelian. If historical materialism could not be reduced to a merely empirical undertaking, it was nonetheless “not guilty of Hegel’s reckless and contemptuous attitude towards the results of the scientific research of his time,” but rather “attempts to follow the direction indicated by the empirical sciences, and to incorporate their general results.” Yet, for all of this attraction to scientific method and empirical research, historical materialism refused to confine itself to mere description of phenomenon, rejected mechanical understandings of what constituted adequate ‘proof’ in the search for and appreciation of causality in accounts of the past, and instead proposed a doctrine of “movement in dialectical collisions.” As such, it “turned into truisms, what had previously been paradoxes,” and as its originator, Berlin claimed, Marx achieved a kind of genius.²⁴

As Berlin’s comments suggest, the development of historical materialism drew productively on Marx’s encounter with German philosophy, and his engagement with Hegelian idealism, in which he took Hegel at his best, in

22 Among the legion of texts that address this three-tiered nature of Marxism’s origins see Lenin’s 1913 biographical statement on Marx in *Lenin: Selected Works*, Volume I (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 33; Perry Anderson, *In The Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 86; and for more elaboration, George Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study* (New York: Praeger, 1965); or, Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

23 For a classic statement see Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France (1848-1850)* (New York: International, 1941). But note as well Frederick Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1943); Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1968): 97-180; and of course Marx, *Capital*, 3 Volumes (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1959).

24 Berlin, *Karl Marx*, 127-130.

order, as he said, to stand him on his head, a project that also centrally involved his co-thinker Frederick Engels.²⁵ The resulting materialism developed in Marx's first stage of intellectual explorations, the philosophical studies of his youth, in contradiction to thinkers such as Feuerbach, who sought to understand the essence of humanity through a conventional materialism governed by the insights of the ruling ideas of his epoch, featuring individualism, abstract conceptualization, and, consequently, of thought divorced from practical human activity. In his brief theses on Feuerbach Marx indicated that a revolutionary materialism, whose point was not just to interpret the world, but to change it, was inherently historicized. The eighth, ninth, and tenth theses provide something of a guide to Marx's and Engels's method:²⁶

Social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

The highest point attained by contemplative materialism, i.e., materialism which does not understand sensuousness as practical activity, is the outlook of single individuals in 'civil society'.

The standpoint of the old materialism is 'civil society'; the standpoint of the new is *human society* or socialized humanity.²⁷

These passages illuminate what was critical for Marx and Engels: that humanity is understood as a collective historicized social undertaking, with a past, governed by sensuous practical activity, in which figures prominently, of course, labour. Labour and human beings' relationship to it is for Marx one of the quintessential experiences of collective humanity, and for this reason Marx's historical materialism is embedded in his understanding of class. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," he would write with Engels in the 1848 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.²⁸

25 Central texts are Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1947); Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International, 1941); Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956); Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International, 1980).

26 I use the term method in this paper to denote something more than merely a way of doing research. Rather as Marx noted, "Now metaphysics – indeed all philosophy – can be summed up, according to Hegel, in method." Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International, no date), 87. See, for fuller elaboration, Gregor McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* (London: Verso, 1981).

27 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach And the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International, 1941), 84. This text contains a number of important statements on dialectical materialism, French materialism, etc.

28 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress, 1968), 35.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY: A DIALECTICAL VIEW

Class is thus central to Marx's understanding of historical materialism because it is the pivotal driving force of sensuous practical human activity at its highest level, the revolutionary remaking of social possibility. And in this we see how Marx's historical materialism was decidedly different than a mere pairing of historical method and materialist understanding would suggest. There are, after all, legions of bourgeois thinkers who embrace an historical approach. To be historical may be a necessary condition of being a Marxist — "Always historicize!" is perhaps Frederic Jameson's favoured maxim.²⁹ But to be historical, in and of itself, shorn of other premises of Marx's method, means little in terms of revolutionary thought. Nor, of course, is materialism *per se*, in and of itself radical, Marxist or transformative. The bourgeoisie is an eminently materialist class; the right-wing of our times, ensconced in positions of global, imperialist authority, is a thoroughly materialist ideological and political force; my cats are materialist beings to their core, demanding their morning and early evening feedings with the regularity of the sun's rise and set.

What made historical materialism Marxist was the formative fusion of the systematic and critical approaches/meanings of political economy, philosophy, and socialism. If Marx's method was rooted in the bourgeois thought of the Enlightenment, in the dialectical analytic approach, which, building on Hegel, posits "the grasping of opposites in their unity or of the positive in the negative,"³⁰ it moved beyond origins to occupy entirely new, disruptive and revolutionary terrain. It was itself a confirmation of dialectics. As Marx stressed in *The German Ideology*, "Proletariat and Wealth are opposites. As such they form a whole. They are both formations of the world of private property. What concerns us here is to define the particular position they take within the opposition. It is not enough to state that they are two sides of a whole."³¹ In Hegel, dialectical insight truncates at the level of the idea, seeing in history only the animating authority of the spirit, of essentialized categories, of civil society's supremacy as an ordered formation, rather than of struggle and practical, sensuous human endeavour as it is lived in the messy conflictual relations of class and its hierarchicalization of power. Marx's dialectic differed from Hegel's in that historicized political economy placed a practical and analytic emphasis on the great contending class confrontations — the unity of opposites — bounded by the determinations of productive life. As Marx wrote to J.B. Schweizer, 24 January 1865, the secret of scientific dialectics lies in comprehending economic categories as "the theoretical expression of historic relations of production, corresponding to a particular stage of development in material

29 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 9.

30 For the broader discussion see *Hegel's Science of Logic*, translated by W.H. Johnston and L.G. Struthers (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961), Volume II, 63-70.

31 Marx, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1947), xii-xiii.

production.”³² Class is, for Marx, not an inert social structure, but a movement of clashing social antagonists embedded in irreconcilable difference, a structure of oppositions that deforms civil society’s potential and curbs humanities realization. Only through the ultimate negation, the transcendence of class that is the final, necessary possibility of socialism, can capitalism’s inevitable limits be revealed and redefined, not as actualities of exploitation and oppression, but as histories superseded by struggle and overcome by the present. “No antagonism, no progress,” as Marx succinctly summed it up in *The Poverty of Philosophy*.³³

It is thus the contribution of Marxism to revolutionize bourgeois thought, to transform the dialectics of Hegel into something other than what it was and, in the process, to transcend the historicism and materialism central to the Enlightenment’s ideological project. The outcome was historical materialism, a weapon of analysis that owed its origins to the class struggles it would argue advanced industrialized humanity’s ongoing social change. Thus Marxism as idea and method, as well as practice, was itself a confirmation of the ever present dance of the dialectic. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.”³⁴ But with the ascent of capitalist property forms and the inevitability of class struggle, ideas of opposition were in gestation: their triumph would register as class struggle culminated in a new social order.

Like most of Marx’s maxims, this one appears, on the surface, to be impossible to sustain. There are always ideas of dissent and opposition, and especially in academic life we like to believe that they matter, because they are the stuff of our lives. But how, if Marx is right, does historical change happen? How do ideas of one epoch become the discarded and antiquated thought of another phase of human development?

The answer lies in the insights of historical materialism. Ideas do not, contrary to Hegel, and much of the sensibility of our times, make history, although they often greatly influence its development. In the relational clash of forces that is historical change, material being (which is always in a state of dialectical dependency on the past and disruptive destabilization of the future) shifts the ground on which men and women sensuously walk. Neither change nor the foundations of human existence that move with it are *individual*, and these historicized phenomena are rarely pre-eminently governed by grand *ideas*, however much such ermine-gowned thought bows in humbly proclaiming its high influence over human kind: “Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way

32 Marx and Engels, *Correspondence, 1846-1895: A Selection with Commentary and Notes* (New York: International, 1935), 172.

33 Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International, no date), 53.

34 Marx, *German Ideology*, 39.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY:
A DIALECTICAL VIEW

of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalism." As Marx insisted, ideas emerged in conformity with their social relations and were necessarily transitory: "the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement."³⁵

Ideas change like the social structures in which they are embedded. And in the clash of change, the ruling ideas of one epoch are challenged by ideas of opposition. Historical materialism is an analytic approach that highlights change, that sees ideas as critically important in making history, but always within boundaries of determination.³⁶ The analytic insight of Marxism's development of historical materialism was, I am suggesting, the infusion of dialectical thinking into understandings of determination. This opened out into a conceptual richness that was able to grasp historical process in motion, in ways that mainstream empiricist historical study could never quite appreciate. With his elaboration of historical materialism, for instance, Marx shattered forever the settled complacencies of nineteenth-century empiricist notions of historical interpretation, in which historical practice was a descriptive exercise of accumulating and ordering the factual progression of events that were themselves the final articulation of history's often linear march. Historical materialism demanded new interrogations — which facts, outcomes, and developments? — and insisted on posing in more complex ways questions of why the past happened as it did, and how it came to culminate in the present. It is for exactly this reason that historical materialism was in some senses a prefatory analytic movement into postmodern thought (which is precisely why most of the major theorists of critical theory have their origins in relations with Marxism), for it opened important chapters in destabilizing conventional intellectual wisdoms.³⁷

The destabilizing contribution of historical materialism registered forcefully

35 Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, 92-93.

36 On determination see, for instance, the once highly influential writings of Raymond Williams, especially "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," originally appearing in *New Left Review*, but reprinted in Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980): 31-49; Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976): 98-102.

37 It is of course an irony that some of the best writing cognizant of Marxism's intuitive grasp of modernity's eventual inevitable foundering on the shoals of its own immutable destabilization fed into conceptualizations of postmodernity as a condition of late capitalism, when an ideology of that cultural logic, postmodernism, would then often assail historical materialism as yet another discarded remnant of outmoded modernist thought. See, for instance, Marshall Berman, *All That is Sold Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (New York: Blackwell, 1989); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). On critical theory's debt to historical materialism see Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

in the Anglo-American academic world in the immediate post-World War II years.³⁸ Perhaps no set of wide-ranging discussions from the 1950s to the 1980s illuminated this reach of historical materialism more than the richly productive debate over the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In this scholarship, which saw Marxist creative historical argument at its best trump liberal and conservative writers, the analytic sweep of historical materialism prodded the founding of the journal *Past & Present* and revived a discipline — economic history — that was brought out of the interpretive doldrums of its retreat into the mind-numbing cul-de-sac of cliometrics by the Brenner Debate.³⁹ Animated by feminist concerns and insights, a Canadian Marxist sociologist, Wally Secombe, made a major contribution to both historical materialism *and* the transition debate in his brilliantly original insistence that the dynamics of population — the unexplored ‘science’ of demography — demanded consideration as an important stimulus in the transition to capitalism.⁴⁰

Nothing so momentous happened in reconfiguring the history of Canada. Yet regardless of how one views Stanley Ryerson’s understandings of the meaning of Confederation, outlined in his *Unequal Union*, there is no denying that his approach to a central event in Canadian historical development differs dramatically when compared to the empiricist accounts that had prevailed in mainstream historiographic circles up to the 1960s. In the place of a rhetoric of regional debate, articulating specific essentialized geo-economic interests, and the manoeuvres and manipulations of particular individuals (‘Fathers of Confederation’), we have an accounting that accents the material determinations of colonialism and capitalism, confounded by the tensions that proliferated in the midst of class formation and the exercise of state building. Along the way we are treated to accounts of the growing impact of ideas of democracy and self-determination; appreciations of land and labour and their place in circumscribing the possibilities of the period; understandings of developing thought in the natural and social sciences; and appreciations of

38 For a brief introduction only see Bryan D. Palmer, “Marxism and Radical History,” in Peter Stearns, ed., *Encyclopedia of European Social History from 1350 to 2000*, Volume I (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2001): 49-60.

39 As introduction only see H.R. Trevor-Roper, ed., *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1978); T.H. Ashton and C.H.E. Philpin, eds., *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

40 Secombe’s original brief statement appeared as “Marxism and Demography,” *New Left Review*, 137 (January-February 1983): 22-47, and for an appreciative tribute see Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, 88. See, for a fuller elaboration, Secombe, *A Millenium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe* (London: Verso, 1992); Secombe, *Weathering the Storm: Working-Class Families From the Industrial Revolution to the Fertility Decline* (London: Verso, 1993).

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY:
A DIALECTICAL VIEW

regionally-based movements of protest. Old debates over whether Confederation was an 'Act' or a 'Pact' could indeed be situated within an historical materialist reading of a cornerstone in the making of Canadian nationhood, but never in the same routinized ways as had been common in conventional scholarship.⁴¹

As a New Left historiography of nineteenth-century Canadian class formation emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the publication of my study of Hamilton workers, *A Culture in Conflict*, Gregory S. Kealey's *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism*, and our co-authored treatment of the Knights of Labor and the Great Upheaval, the possibilities of a historical materialist labour history now became apparent. These studies shifted analytic sensibilities to working-class life. They did this because of their research as well as their conceptualization which, in the words of the major non-Marxist historiographic commentator, Carl Berger, constituted "significant achievements" contributing markedly to "the ultimate clarification of class – and class in history ..."⁴²

In retrospect, the accomplishments of historical materialist writing in Canada, viewed through a reading of, on the one hand, Ryerson on the national question and nineteenth-century state building and, on the other, Kealey and Palmer on nineteenth-century class formation, were both considerable *and* limited. In both cases, significant forces of opposition and containment constrained the development of historical materialism's possibilities. This was a matter of

41 Ryerson, *Unequal Union*. For a stimulating recent non-Marxist discussion of the Act vs. Pact debate over Confederation see Paul Romeny, *Getting It Wrong: How Canadians Forgot Their Past and Imperiled Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

42 Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (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). Note, as well as Berger's assessment, Ramsay Cook, "The Making of Canadian Working Class History," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 10 (Spring 1983): 115-126. For Berger's comment see Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing Since 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 307, which also stressed what he saw as the confusing and capricious polemical debates surrounding 1970s and early 1980s writing in the field of working-class history. No doubt Berger simply did not understand polemic, which as Perry Anderson has pointed out "is a literary form whose history has yet to be written. ... Polemic is a discourse of conflict, whose effect depends on a delicate balance between the requirements of truth and the enticements of anger, the duty to argue and the zest to inflame." Canadian historians of Berger's generation had no sense of such enticements, duties, and zests. Indeed, it can be argued that very few academics in Canada, at any time, up to and including the present, embrace these sensibilities which, of course, have often been central to historical materialism's making, from Marx to the current period. On polemic see Perry Anderson, "In Memoriam: Edward Thompson," *Spectrum* (London: Verso, 2005), esp. 178-179.

influences embraced and accepted willingly, as well as forces of constraint that challenged and cajoled both overtly and tacitly. To understand this context, it is important to appreciate something of the history of historical materialism's making in the period reaching from the late nineteenth century into the second and third quarters of the twentieth century and beyond, culminating in a series of exchanges and debates that erupted in the 1970s.

The complicated relations of dialectics, historical materialism, and Marxist writing from the Second International through the degeneration of the Russian Revolution in the 1920s had raised innumerable issues about science, nature, economism, and humanism. They take us from Engels' *Dialectics of Nature* and *Anti-Duhring* through Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* and into a troubled attempt to address Stalinism in the revival of Hegelianism by theorists such as Lukacs and Korsch. Strains of this intellectual history echo in Gramsci, are certainly central to Marcuse's stature as a leading analytic voice in the emergence of a 1960s New Left, and are unmistakable in the E.P. Thompson versus Louis Althusser debate of the 1970s, in which historical materialism figured centrally. As Western Marxism, its Hegelianizing influences given free rein by the defeats of the revolutionary left in the interwar period, came to be counter-posed to a Soviet Marxism increasingly reduced to more wooden and mechanical conceptualization under the pressures of Stalinization, historical materialism bifurcated. As Perry Anderson has suggested, it divided into camps of increasingly abstract philosophical textualism, on the one hand, and, on the other, rote repetitions of 'last instance', economistic shorthand for dialectical materialism. The quintessential statement of what came to be known in 'Party' circles as *diamat* was presented under the ultimate authority of Stalin's widely diffused and elementary primer, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, first published in English in 1940. This impasse pressured the 1948 reflections of C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin*, but by the 1960s and 1970s it was perhaps more starkly evident in the forceful attacks on Hegelianism by theorists such as Louis Althusser, Galvano Della Volpe and, with more subtlety, Sebastiano Timpanaro and Lucio Colletti.⁴³

43 This complicated intellectual history of Marxism is best introduced by the brilliant exposition in Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976), and, at its end-note, in the robust polemic of E. P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," or in a subsequent Anderson summary *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, 9-31. But along the way it generated an immense output of philosophically-inclined commentary of relevance to historical materialism in general and of central importance in the formation of a New Left historiography emerging out of the 1960s. For some of the most pivotal texts see Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), and the at the time unknown Lukacs, *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2000); C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London: Allison and Busby, 1980, original 1948); Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960); Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism:*

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY: A DIALECTICAL VIEW

The complexity of this divide within historical materialism in the 1920-1970 period never registered forcefully in Canada, largely because the notion of Marxist historical practice, of Marxism as method, was almost entirely translated, prior to the 1960s, through a Party functionary such as Stanley Ryerson. His truncated theoretical and polemical passages tended, for all their strengths, to be summaries of Soviet Marxist diamat. As the opportunity to transcend this limitation appeared, it proved stillborn. Kealey, myself, and other New Left historians emerged out of the 1960s and early 1970s in Canada, embracing historical materialism in our studies of labour, but the resulting scrutiny of Marxism, and our capacity to elaborate on its applicability to the study of the past, was to prove quite limited. One cause of this, certainly, was that in the uphill battle to secure for Marxist ideas some measure of acceptance in the academy, a kind of 'popular front' of all seemingly Marxist scholars was encouraged, to the point that differences *within* Marxism were, with small exceptions, suppressed and silenced. Without a doubt the peculiarly vehement reaction of certain liberal-social democratic historians, who were stridently vocal in their opposition to Marxism, reinforced this tendency to keep dissent among Marxists bottled up. The development of historical materialism as method was thus constrained by the peculiarly Canadian boundaries of an *ideological* debate that pitted old guard, empiricist *and* mildly left historians against a seemingly coherent *nouvelle vague* of Marxist historical practitioners.⁴⁴

A Critical Analysis (New York: Vintage, 1961); Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and introduced by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971). For the anti-Hegelianism of Timpanaro and Colletti see Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism* (London: NLB, 1975); Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin: Studies in Ideology and Society* (London: NLB, 1972); Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* (London: NLB, 1973). Timpanaro, whose Marxism and materialism were resolute and above concession to fashion, remained steadfast in his politics, while Colletti failed to stay the course. As the 1970s wound down, he lapsed into what Anderson (*Tracks of Historical Materialism*, 28-29) designated "a shrill enemy of Marxism and staunch defender of a more or less conventional liberalism." Anderson's affectionate recollection of Timpanaro appears in *Spectrum* (London: Veso, 2005), 188-209. The primary document of diamat is Joseph Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism: A Succinct Presentation of the Philosophic Foundations of Marxism* (New York: International, 1940).

- 44 For a taste of the anti-Marxism of the liberal and social-democratic critique of the so-called new working-class history see, for instance, Kenneth McNaught, "E.P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing About Labour and the Left in the 1970s," *Canadian Historical Review*, 62 (1981): 141-168, a knock-about polemic commissioned by the *CHR* and awarded its annual prize for the best essay appearing in the journal's pages; David 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; H.V. Nelles, "Creighton's Seminar," *Canadian Forum* (September 1980): 6; review of Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be* by David J. Bercuson, *Business History Review*, 57 (1983): 589-591. Attacks on Marxists as vituperative appeared in J.L. Granatstein, "No Hostages Taken in War Between Historians," *Toronto Star*, Saturday

Moreover, because the most rigorously promoted innovations in historical methodology of this period turned in class directions and embraced materialist premises, but did so in ways that shied away from culture and the concerns of many so-called 'new' working class historians, further divisions unfolded in complex ways. Michael B. Katz and his students turned tantalizingly in the direction of historical materialism as their Hamilton Social History Project shifted gears from its focus on mobility to an accent on class formation. But this interesting movement always twisted in the winds of a reification of quantitative methodology, as Katz et al. explored important questions of social structure and the emergence of industrial capitalism that too often restricted analysis according to the accessibility of certain kinds of evidence. Class struggle, workplace relations, the cultural intricacies of everyday life — these seemed distant from what Katz insisted was important in historical process, which was invariably what could be measured out in the records of a methodologically privileged discernment: manuscript census tracts and tax assessment rolls.⁴⁵

Magazine, June 24, 1989, repeated later in his *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998), 61. The response of established Canadian historians to a New Left, class-based historiography was harsher than in other national settings. See, for a brief discussion of this, Bryan D. Palmer, "Historiographic Hassles: Class and Gender, Evidence and Interpretation," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 33 (May 2000):107-117. Ironically, as McNaught's intervention indicates, it was perhaps the strength of a social democratic presence in Canadian intellectual life during the 1960s and 1970s that explains the vehemence with which the mainstream reacted to Marxist initiatives. McNaught, but also even Bercuson and Granatstein, had liberal/social democratic roots in the 1960s, and if this is difficult to grasp in 2006, after years of their movement to the right, it is nevertheless crucial to keep in mind as we historicize the development of historiographic difference. For it was only *because* some of these people could be perceived as left or understood to be experts in the study of labour that they had something of a platform from which to address the nascent development of historical materialism in Canada.

- 45 Katz's 1970s Canadian sojourn produced much of value, but in terms of the relationship of this work to historical materialism it must be said that the accomplishment was limited. It also unconsciously helped to isolate historical materialist study of the working class by elaborating and justifying quantitative *methodology* as opposed to developing Marxist method. See Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Michael B. Katz, Michael J. Doucet, and Mark J. Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), with the most explicit attempt to develop a Marxist analysis in Katz, "Origins of the Institutional State," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 (1978): 6-23. Early critique appeared in two review essays: Bryan D. Palmer, "Modernizing History," *Bulletin of the Committee on Labour History* (1976): 16-25; "Emperor Katz's New Clothes; or with the Wizard in Oz," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984): 190-197. The project of quantitative historical method in Canada has been carried on, often in quite stimulating ways, by Peter Baskerville and Eric W. Sager. See Peter Baskerville and Eric W. Sager, *Unwilling Idlers: The Urban Unemployed and Their Families in Late Victorian Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY: A DIALECTICAL VIEW

From within historical materialism more properly, a sophisticated, but quite solitary, critique by Ian McKay gravitated in similar directions in its useful, if somewhat caricatured, insistence that culture was a problematic category of analysis. McKay, who recognized that the intellectual-political impasse of 'old' versus 'new' working-class history was in actuality a complicated morass of positions and debates, nevertheless sided resolutely with anti-Hegelian theorists such as Colletti, insisting that, "We close the logical and political circles only by a return to the concrete: to the determinate abstractions of *Capital* and to a logical political practice." Written in some ways as a rejoinder to E.P. Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*, as well as a riposte against the far more nascent analytics of the Canadian so-called new working-class history, McKay's embrace of Colletti reduced the possibility of exploring historical materialism to a dichotomous challenge: 'for or against culture'. In retrospect, what this opposition misses is the shifting nature and meaning of culture within Marxist scholarship, which in turn illuminates well the differences between the 1960s and 1970s, and the 1990s and the opening decade of the twenty-first century. For those historical materialists, in Canada as well as in England and the United States, who were assailed as 'culturalists' in 1979-1980 were of course anything but advocates of the determining influence of culture. That Richard Johnson labelled them as such did not necessarily mean that writers like E.P. Thompson were guilty of taking historical materialism in the problematic directions some theorists identified. A quarter of a century later, it is obvious that those historical materialists of the 1970s who utilized the study of culture to recover lost aspects of class formation and re-situate class struggle did so in ways that developed Marxism and class analysis, unlike much of the study of culture in the post-1990 years. If cultural study has proliferated in our times, it has done so in ways increasingly wrenched from anything akin to material moorings, concerning itself only obliquely and idiosyncratically with historical materialism.⁴⁶

46 For McKay's Colletti-inspired critique see Ian McKay, "History, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (1981-1982): 185-241. This essay sits uneasily with McKay's later writing, starting with *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994) and extending into "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, 81 (December 2000): 617-645 and even *Rebels, Reds, Radicals*. Little in these later texts addresses the determinative abstractions of *Capital*, but then the intellectual and political climate of McKay's original critique was decidedly different than the current moment. (Compare, for instance, Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988) and Heron, *Booze: A Distilled History* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003).) Moreover, if we take a text that was congruent with McKay's hostility to culture (McKay, "Capital and Labour in the Halifax Baking and Confectionary Industry in the Last Half of the Nineteenth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978): 63-108) it is apparent that it is richest in its elaboration of business history. Its conception of working-class history and formation

As Terry Eagleton notes, the shift that has taken place in the last three decades around cultural questions has been both monumental and decisively debilitating for radical thought. "Culture had been among other things a way of keeping radical politics warm," he writes with colloquial insight, "a continuation of it by other means. Increasingly, however, it was to become a substitute for it. In some ways, the 1980s were like the 1880s or the 1960s without the politics. As leftist political hopes faded, cultural studies came to the fore."⁴⁷

On reflection, those of us who struggled to develop historical materialism in Canada made some advances, but also missed some opportunities. We thought we were all historical materialists in the small circles of left historians that debated various questions, and in retrospect we probably let slip away a much needed sharpening of our theoretical swords. We possibly lost the conceptual momentum of a moment when we could have both sustained our historical projects of recovery and reinterpretation *and* developed and deepened our sense of historical materialism. Little did we know, in the 1970s, that the implosion of actually existing socialism and the fall of the Soviet Union would unfold over the course of the 1980s, and that this about-face in the world of global *realpolitik* would unleash the ideological hounds, turning the tables decisively on the loosely Marxist analytics that seemed hegemonic among social historians as historical materialism was struggling to secure a place in Canadian historiography. Even less predictable would be the related explosion of 'critical theory', in which the cultural logic of late capitalism, labelled postmodernism, would soon come to be understood as the interpretive canon of our time, its ideas of discursiveness and what Perry Anderson has designated the "*exorbitation of language*" and the "*randomization of history*" striking repeated blows at the edifice of historical materialism. That these blows came, not from the hands of conservatives, but often from quarters that had been linked to Marxist historians of the 1970s, such as erstwhile socialist-feminists, progressives in gay and

was both unduly schematic and given to interpretive extremism, evident in the assertion that, "at no time during 'the making of the Canadian working class' (1850-1914) was there a serious possibility of generalized class conflict and that this is the central problem of labour history that must be explored. Such an absence of national class conflict made Canada unusual among the industrializing countries." (66) For the Richard Johnson-led critique of culturalism, which influenced much discussion in the late 1970s and early 1980s see Richard Johnson, "Thompson, Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History," *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist Historians*, 6 (Autumn 1978): 79-100; John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson, eds., *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London: Hutchinson, 1979). Thompson's brief rejoinder and refusal of the label of culturalism is in E.P. Thompson, "The Politics of Theory," in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981): 396-408.

- 47 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 45. Note as well the comments of Perry Anderson on arguably the most important Marxist cultural theorist of the late twentieth century, Fredric Jameson, in Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 134-137.

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY:
A DIALECTICAL VIEW

lesbian studies, and those demanding that the special oppression of race be addressed frontally, only complicated matters further.⁴⁸

Historical materialism thus proved insufficiently rooted among a layer of radical Canadian historians. As a collectivity, the Canadian Marxist cohort that emerged within the discipline of history in the 1970s proved ill-prepared to confront a new, and aggressively self-confident, theoretical challenge that, in effect, denied that there was all that much of analytic interest in the historical materialist tradition, and that was soon given to caricature of Marx and Engels, on the one hand, as architects of "vulgar economism" or, on the other, as little more than another radical voice of mainstream, conservative thought incarcerated in the prison house of a language of class. Many were no doubt numbed by the cavalier repudiation of historical materialism as somehow an Anti-Theory, and when statements of an extreme sort challenged them directly they simply wilted in silence, or claimed that the arguments were too ill-considered to merit response. Others clearly moved on to cultural terrain that was now judged more attractive and avant-garde than the materialist subjects of another seemingly rather spent and tired era.⁴⁹

The immediate post-1960s cohort of radical Canadian historians thus spent a youthful decade of decisive productivity in the 1970s and early 1980s developing Marxism in Canada. The accomplishments, to be sure, were impressive. Yet there is no doubt that this work placed the necessity of elaborating a sophisticated conceptualization of historical materialism on the lower shelf of priorities. This may well have been inevitable, the first task being to recover important dimensions of the Canadian historical past. So little had been written on class formation in the 19th century, on family history and the importance of the household, on cultural rituals that revealed the shared relations of private life, age, and community, on major upheavals of working-class opposition other than the Winnipeg General Strike, on sexuality, market society, and social mores, on women and the left or, indeed, on the history of communism, social-

48 See Jameson, *Postmodernism*; Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, 40, 48.

49 I am struggling to be fair-minded here, and to appreciate the shortcomings of a collectivity, of which I was myself a part. That remains my belief. Nevertheless, it is of course true that some of us made efforts to turn the tide. See Palmer, *Descent Into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Mark Leier, "W[h]ither Labour History: Regionalism, Class, and the Writing of BC Labour History," *BC Studies*, 111 (Autumn 1996): 61-75. It will be argued that the belief that the tide had to be turned was itself mistaken, especially by those who were either swept along or who stood on the sidelines enjoying the view. Such arguments are generally being made, I contend, by those who have taken a detour away from the historical materialist sensibilities and political edge of the 1970s. For a disturbing statement on Canadian historiography that contained much that anyone embracing historical materialism could have responded to see Mariana Valverde, "Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 33 (May 2000): 59-78.

ism, or anarchism, that it is not surprising that historical materialists sunk their research teeth into the project of recreating a past largely lost.⁵⁰ Canadian historians, sociologists, and political economists of the Marxist left made their mark in refining and developing important analytic points with respect to the Braverman thesis on the degradation of work⁵¹ or, in the case of socialist feminists, in charting a particularly important gendered appreciation of *both* paid work and household productions. The role of the Women's Press in sustaining a socialist-feminist politics in Toronto and Canada in the years from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s is underappreciated; the unique contribution made by this publishing house enlivened historical materialism by infusing it with appreciations of women's experience and gender struggles, securing international reputations for its writers.⁵² But in the main, these invaluable statements

50 The above is only a partial list of what could be considered. For review essays that highlight such accomplishments of historical materialist scholarship, consider, for instance: Kealey, "Labour and Working-Class History in Canada"; Bettina Bradbury, "Women's History and Working-Class History," *Labour/Le Travail*, 19 (Spring 1987): 23-44. Among countless studies that could be cited see Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993); Bryan D. Palmer, "Discordant Music: Charivaris and Whitecapping in Nineteenth-Century North America," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 3 (1978): 5-62; Palmer, "Social Formation and Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century North America," in David Levine, ed., *Proletarianization and Family History* (New York: Academic Press, 1984): 229-308; Andrée Lévesque, *La norme et les déviantes: les femmes au Québec pendant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Montréal: Éditions Remue-ménage, 1989); Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1987). On the history of the Canadian Left consider the following fundamental works of significant recovery: Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal: Vanguard, 1981); Andrée Lévesque, *Virage à gauche interdit: les communistes, les socialistes, et leur ennemi au Québec, 1929-1939* (Montréal: Boreal Express, 1984); Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989); David Frank, *J.B. McLachlan: A Biography* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1999); Margaret Hobbs and Joan Sangster, eds., *The Woman Worker, 1926-1929* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 1999).

51 See, for instance, Craig Heron and Robert H. Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1986); Bryan D. Palmer, "Class, Conception, and Conflict: The Thrust for Efficiency, Managerial Views of Labor, and Working-Class Rebellion, 1903-1922," *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 7 (Summer 1975): 31-49; Craig Heron and Bryan D. Palmer, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-1914," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58 (December 1977): 423-458. Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974) had a significant impact among Canadian working-class historians in the 1970s.

52 Among the works that could be cited, Joan Sangster, *Earning Respect: The Lives of Working Women in Small-Town Ontario, 1920-1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Mercedes Steedman, *Angels of the Workplace: Women and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Canadian Clothing Industry, 1890-1940* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1974); Bonnie Fox, ed., *Hidden in the Household: Women's Domestic Labour Under Capitalism*

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY: A DIALECTICAL VIEW

were for all their importance insufficiently rigorous in premising and elaborating their findings on the *theory* of historical materialism. Then, too, some of us were involved in the actual class struggles of the time, and bent our pens to produce critical histories of moments of dissent that were channelled toward defeat through leaderships animated by anything but historical materialist premises. Such writing, an engagement with the political setbacks of our times meant to be read by a broad audience and tip the balance of class forces in new directions, did not necessarily easily lend itself to articulations of theoretical refinement.⁵³

By the early 1990s, then, the 1960s and 1970s seemed a long way away. The deluge of change registered in the obliteration of an epoch in which radical, even revolutionary, thought was both exhilaratingly appreciated in specific niche-sectors of Canadian academic life, and valued as contributing to the political possibilities of social transformation that seemed vibrant and very much of the times. Marxism and historical materialism flourished and captured the hearts and minds of so many precisely because, in the 1960s and into the 1970s, capitalism appeared to have lost its authority to govern. Major struggles erupted.

Quebec seemed on the precipitous edge of revolution, and not only because of the activities of the Front de Libération du Québec from 1963-1970: in the aftermath of the October Crisis, an explosion of the francophone dispossessed culminated in the galvanizing La Presse Strike of 1971 and the Common Front 'Crise Sociale' of March-May 1972, which saw 210,000 public sector workers take to the streets, union leaders jailed, and defiant occupations of workplaces and such information conduits as radio stations. "La Belle Province" had become notorious as North America's centre of revolutionary syndicalist upheaval. Within the Canadian working class as a whole developments were less momentous, but nonetheless quite noteworthy. Violent wildcat strikes rocked the

(Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1980); Meg Luxton, *More than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1980); Linda Briskin and Lynda Yanz, eds., *Union Sisters: Women in the Labour Movement* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1983). This feminist project was never defined within the disciplinary niche of historical studies. Rather, it was interdisciplinary in nature and often developed out of the political economy tradition, but it was nonetheless often usefully framed within a historical and a Marxist perspective. See, for instance, Meg Luxton and Heather Jon Maroney, eds., *Feminism and Political Economy: Women's Work, Women's Struggles* (Toronto: Methuen, 1987); Charlotte B. Yates, *From Plant to Politics: The Autoworkers Union in Postwar Canada* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

53 See, for instance, Bryan D. Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver: New Star, 1988); and for a historical study related to such developments, Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). For a similar kind of study written by Marxists in the political economy tradition see the highly influential Leo Panitch and Donald Swartz, *The Assault on Trade Union Freedoms: From Consent to Coercion Revisited* (Toronto: Garamond, 1988).

settled relations of rank-and-file workers, their trade union officialdoms, Canadian employers, and the state during the 1965-1966 years. Pitched battles continued into the mid-1970s, with threatened general strikes and massive militant work stoppages throwing provincial governments into disarray and assailing the Liberal state's containment strategy of wage and price controls. A revival of Canadian feminism snake-danced its way across the country in abortion caravans and women's consciousness-raising groups, marching into Royal Commissions, out of university classrooms, and on to picket lines and trade union executives. Campus revolts shook the pillars of university administrations from George Williams and McGill to Simon Fraser, while anti-racist actions, peace mobilizations, and the drum beats of Aboriginal dissent echoed throughout the 1970s. As late as 1983, when British Columbia was faced with one of the first and most decisive all-out cut-back assaults of a New Right government, the forces of opposition could still summon something of the spirit of the 1960s, orchestrating a massive protest movement that threatened to culminate in the shutting down of the entire province had not the timid trade union tops folded up the tent of protest before it filled to the bursting point with angry militants howling their derision of the Social Credit dismantling of the welfare state.⁵⁴

By this late date, however, capitalism's rising ascendancy, now a decade strong, and actually existing socialism's ongoing demise, had swept the scholarly desk of old positions, reducing historical materialism's attractiveness decisively. Students in undergraduate programs in the 1990s barely got to engage Marx, in part because in some quarters he was being reduced to a merely radical appendage to Eurocentric thought.⁵⁵ Left organizations that had

54 This history is both too detailed and too complex to reference adequately in an article of this nature. I explore some of the 1960s events in a forthcoming study: *Canada in the 1960s: The Ironies of Identity*. For a sense of the tumultuous events in Quebec, and the attendant transformation of consciousness, see Pierre Vallières, *White Niggers of America: The Precocious Autobiography of a Quebec 'Terrorist'* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971); Louis Fournier, *F.L.Q.: The Anatomy of an Underground Movement* (Toronto: New Press, 1984); Daniel Drache, ed., *Quebec – Only the Beginning: The Manifestoes of the Common Front* (Toronto: New Press, 1972). For an abbreviated overview of the labour scene in this period see Bryan D. Palmer, "40 Years of Class Struggle," *Canadian Dimension*, 37 (November-December 2003): 37-39, and for feminism, class, and the women's movement, Meg Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail*, 48 (Fall 2001): 63-88; Nancy Adamson, Linda Briskin, and Margaret McPhail, *Feminist Organizing for Change: The Contemporary Women's Movement in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988); Judy Rebick, *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* (Toronto: Penguin, 2005).

55 See Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990). For a counter to this reductionism see the critically important defence of historical materialism in Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992) and the important essays in Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus, eds., *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY:
A DIALECTICAL VIEW

been strong and vibrant in the 1970s, and that provided an alternative education in basic principles of Marxist analysis, were now largely defunct, torn asunder by campaigns of disinformation orchestrated by the Canadian security apparatus, bitter internal wars of factional position, and the general cooling of the climate of dissent.⁵⁶ The social movements of postmodern times are not galvanized so much by Marxist theory as they are moved by other critical traditions, most of which have their origins in an engagement with, but ultimately a break from, historical materialism and socialist principles.⁵⁷

There are of course developments of considerable importance, including ones with much promise for the left and for historical materialist analysis. In Latin America, for instance, popular mobilizations are opening new doors many thought closed. Nevertheless, in Canadian historical circles, defence of basic tenets of historical materialism is not exactly resolute. A recent polling of the editorial board members of the Canadian journal, *Left History*, in which they were asked to answer the question, "What is left history," revealed little concern with the theoretical issues posed in the development of historical materialism.⁵⁸ Trotsky's maxim, "Those who cannot defend old positions will never conquer new ones," is judged little more than a traditionalist albatross weighing down the creativity of contemporary scholarship.⁵⁹ Sebastiano Timpanaro's closing 1979 postscript to *On Materialism* falls largely, it seems to me, on deaf ears: "the renovation of socialism, however much it may diverge, even in important respects, from the vision of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky will not be able to ignore some of their teachings that remain fundamental. Whoever

56 See, for instance, Ross Dowson V. *RCMP: A Vivid Episode of the Ongoing Struggle for Freedom of Thought and Social Justice in Canada* (Toronto: Forward Publications, 1980); Bryan D. Palmer, "They ride horses don't they? Historical Musings on the Canadian State and Its Agents," *Our Generation*, 14 (1981): 28-41; Bryan D. Palmer, ed., *A Communist Life: Jack Scott and the Canadian Workers Movement* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Canadian Committee of Labour History, 1989); Steve Hewitt, *Spying 101: The RCMP's Secret Activities at Canadian Universities, 1917-1997* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); and the not entirely reliable Roger O'Toole, *The Precipitous Path: Studies in Political Sects* (Toronto: P. Martin Associates, 1977).

57 See William K. Carroll, ed., *Organizing Dissent: Contemporary Social Movements in Theory and Practice* (Toronto: Garamond, 1997), especially Barry D. Adam, "Post-Marxism and the New Social Movements," 39-56, which commences with the statement, "Much of the recent social theory generated around understanding the 1990s has turned from political economy to culture in identifying the forces for social change."

58 See the Symposium, "What is Left History?" *Left History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Historical Enquiry & Debate*, 11 (Spring 2006): 12-68.

59 Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 178. For an elaboration of the price paid for jettisoning tradition, an all too common occurrence among contemporary labour and social historians, see Bryan D. Palmer, "Fin-de-Siècle Labour History in Canada and the United States: A Case for Tradition," in Jan Lucassen, ed., *Global Labour History: A State of the Art* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006): 195-226.

speaks of socialism that must be 'reinvented wholly anew' winds up inventing something very old: capitalism."⁶⁰

If those who want to radically reinterpret the world as well as change it are to avoid reinventing this wheel of capitalism, which threatens to roll over the entire world in its destructive march to accumulate more and more for fewer and fewer, we will need the analytic insights and practical political engagements historical materialism has always offered and encouraged. For a century-and-a-half, this historical materialism has enriched the politics of the left and the analysis of society. It has opened into new interpretive vistas, engaging productively with understandings of feminism,⁶¹ language, productive life and all manner of critically important subjects. It does not so much centre class and the dominant relations of production as *the* categories of analysis, as it insists that they be related, with due consideration given to their significant place in the complexities of determination, to a host of other developments, increasingly important in the shifting gears of modernity's movement: gender, race, empire and imperialism, social movements, identity and subjectivity, national states, and the collectivities of struggles localized and generalized.

Even before the epoch of identity's acute fragmentation under the conditions of late capitalism, Marx understood that "unequal individuals" made up

60 Timpanaro, *On Materialism*, 261. Ellen Wood makes a congruent point in some of her commentary on the 'retreat from class' and other developments of the 1980s and 1990s, as does Terry Eagleton in a range of writings including *After Theory*. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism* (London: Verso, 1986); Wood, "What is the Postmodern Agenda?" in Wood and Foster, eds., *In Defense of History*, 1-16.

61 Feminist socialists made significant contributions to historical materialism as theory and as the practice of expanding the subject of inquiry of historical reinterpretation in the period I have been addressing. But as is evident in the contrasting subtitles of Michele Barrett's 1980 and 1988 editions of her pivotally important text, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: NLB, 1980) vs. *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter* (London: Verso, 1988), the toll taken on the linked projects of Marxism and feminism over the 1980s was considerable. Still, in Canada advances in historical materialism that developed out of the productive engagement of feminist theory and research with Marxist analysis included important contributions to debates over productive/reproductive labour, significant expansion of the terrain of inquiry in critical disciplines such as political economy, the transformation of fields such as working-class history, and decisive interventions in the area of critical race studies. On these general developments, as an introduction only, see Roberta Hamilton and Michele Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity: Feminism, Marxism, and Nationalism* (Montreal: Book Centre, 1986); Luxton and Maroney, eds., *Feminism and Political Economy*; Meg Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada"; Clement and Vosko, eds., *Changing Canada*; Joan Sangster, "Feminism and the Making of Canadian Working-Class History: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future," *Labour/Le Travail*, 46 (Fall 2000): 127-166; Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism, and Gender* (Toronto: Scholar's Press, 2000).

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND THE WRITING OF CANADIAN HISTORY:
A DIALECTICAL VIEW

the entirety of the working class, just as they composed the differentiated nature of society. In 1875, he chastised those in the workers movement who insisted that the proletarian material of class society could be “measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view ... regarded *only as workers* and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored.” Central to this insight, however, was the *materialist* boundary of determination that hemmed in the differentiation of class individuals: the realization of humanity could “never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby.” As a consequence, only with society’s attainment of a higher plane, in which communist relations finally abolish “the antithesis between mental and physical labour,” making of work “life’s prime want” and freeing the flow of “co-operative wealth ... more abundantly,” could “the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”⁶²

In a famous letter of 1877 Marx answered those who saw his method as overly deterministic and narrowly reductionist. He denied propounding “any historico-philosophical theory of the *marche general* imposed by fate upon every people.”⁶³ But in elaborating, through his development of historical materialism, the general analytic framework of how historical change takes place through the development of the productive forces, how class antagonisms and the logic of specific modes of production and their regimes of accumulation drive historical transformation, situating the men and women and children who make history, but never quite as they please, within materialized ensembles of relations, Marx provided a theory *and* a politics capable of realizing humanity’s ultimate movement into a new stage of development in which antagonism is not the structured premise of social being. “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” Marx wrote in his most resolutely historical materialist work, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. He ended that historical discussion of bourgeois power corrupted with this historical materialist insight:

Driven by the contradictory demands of the situation and being at the same time, like a conjurer, under the necessity of keeping the gaze fixed on himself ... by springing constant surprises, that is to say, under the necessity of executing a *coup d’état en miniature* every day, Bonaparte throws the entire bourgeois economy into confusion, violates everything that seemed inviolable

62 Karl Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works in Two Volumes* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), 24. See also the different but highly important discussions in Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Ahmad, *In Theory*.

63 Marx and Engels, *Correspondence*, 354.

... makes some tolerant of revolution, others desirous of revolution, and produces actual anarchy in the name of order, while at the same time stripping its halo from the entire state machine, profanes it and makes it at once loathsome and ridiculous.⁶⁴

How timely such a statement appears today!

From Bonaparte to George Bush, history is indeed understandable through the lens of historical materialism, a lens in which the dialectical view focuses, clarifies, and magnifies the intricate process of change. Neither the final denouement of Stalinism nor the related rise of 'post' critical theory changes this actuality, especially for those times past that predate the arrival of a post-modern cultural logic associated with late capitalism. To keep to this interpretive course, associated with 150 years of historical materialist theory, insight, and research, reminds us that the present is not humanity's jail cell, but rather only a confining construction, the walls of which are a specific set of historically-conditioned determinations that demand transcendence.

* * *

BRYAN D. PALMER is the Canada Research Chair, Canadian Studies, Trent University, the editor of *Labour/Le Travail*, and the author of numerous publications on working-class history and social theory. His latest books are a Greek translation of *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (2006) and *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (2007).

BRYAN D. PALMER est titulaire d'une chaire de recherche du Canada en études canadiennes, à l'Université Trent; il est également le rédacteur en chef de la revue *Labour/Le Travail*, ainsi que l'auteur de nombreux ouvrages sur l'histoire de la classe ouvrière et sur la théorie sociologique. Parmi ses plus récentes publications mentionnons une traduction du grec du livre *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (2006), et *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928* (2007).

64 Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire," 97, 180.