

Towards Synthesis in Canadian Working-Class History Reflections on Bryan Palmer's Rethinking

Craig Heron

"What ever happened to the great Canadian labour-history debates of the early 1980s?" a well-informed Argentinian labour historian asked me recently. The gist of my rambling, uncertain response was "Things have become a lot more complex." Bryan Palmer must have had similar thoughts when he sat down to revise and update his nearly ten-year-old history of the Canadian working-class.¹ The publication of his self-styled "rethinking" of the field² gives us all an opportunity to reflect on how the writing of working-class history has evolved and changed since those heady days and what a synthesis of the huge volume of new work ought to look like. It seems appropriate to place Palmer at the centre of such a historiographical review since the 1983 version of his *Working-Class Experience* was widely seen as the first synthesis of the new working-class history and, indeed, in his long series of books and articles, and through his penchant for confrontation and debate, Palmer has played a major role in defining what the rest of the historical profession (and many others) thought Canadian labour historians were up to. With this new book, he has returned to centre stage.

The first edition of *Working-Class Experience* marked the culmination of a major formative phase in the development of working-class historiography in Canada that had begun ten years earlier. After decades of relative intellectual indifference to Canadian workers, a rising crescendo of working-class militancy and left-wing ferment in Canada as elsewhere had stimulated new research into workers's past by the early 1970s.³ The first monographs to appear had come in two forms: more careful studies of labour institutions, including a growing interest in American domination of the Canadian labour movement;⁴ and studies of working-class living standards in the past that echoed contemporary concern about continuing poverty in Canadian society.⁵ In the middle of that decade, however, a small group of younger academics began to formulate a new agenda for a more wide-ranging history of the working

1 *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto 1983).

2 *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992).

3 Before 1970 there were scattered popular and academic studies, but they would scarcely have filled a short library shelf, as Gregory S. Kealey makes clear in "Writing about Labour," in John Schultz, ed., *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History* (Scarborough 1990), 145-74.

4 Notably, Irving Martin Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956* (Toronto 1973); Robert Babcock, *Gompers in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism Before the First World War* (Toronto 1974); David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal 1974); Fernand Harvey, ed., *Aspects historiques du mouvement ouvrier au Quebec* (Montreal 1973); and Jacques Rouillard, *Les syndicats nationaux au Quebec de 1900 a 1930* (Quebec 1979).

5 Especially Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto 1974); and Michael Piva, *The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921* (Ottawa 1979).

class. Most of them were white male English-Canadian graduate students and junior academics who had roots in the youth radicalism of the preceding decade and who had found intellectual inspiration in the new neo-marxist working-class history being produced in Britain, France, and the United States, especially by E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman. In a series of provocative historiographical articles and in their own scholarship, these writers sharply criticized the narrower institutional and nationalist focus of other Canadian labour historians and called for a history of workers that moved beyond unions and labour parties to an appreciation of the full range of working-class experience (hence “working-class history,” rather than “labour history”).⁶ They put great emphasis on working-class *culture* (for which they won the unfortunate label of “culturalists”). By this, they meant the ideas, values, institutions, and practices produced by workers to confront and resist the capitalist society within which they lived and worked. They emphasized the active agency of workers in creating their own history, the radical potential and imaginative creativity of their culture, and the class conflict it engendered, especially on the job. In their own work they were drawn to finely textured community studies of the first generations of the Canadian working class in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the resistance to emergent industrial capitalism seemed most striking and powerful. They also employed a wide-ranging comparative perspective that looked outside Canada for international parallels in working-class history. Their critique actually reached out to the whole Canadian historical profession with a call for a completely new synthesis and periodization that would establish workers as important actors within the evolving class relationships of Canadian political economy. To accomplish this task would require more attention to theory, especially though not exclusively marxism, in Canadian historical writing.

The responses to this bold, sophisticated, and insightful attack on historiographical canons came quickly. The practitioners of the narrower institutional labour history, mostly social democrats highly suspicious of theory, especially marxism, lashed out in a series of harshly critical articles.⁷ Each of these writers took the younger working-class historians to task for their alleged “romanticism.” Workers, they insisted, did not share a unified, anti-capitalist, class-conscious culture, did not regularly confront the capitalist system with direct action, generally had simpler,

6 Their first stirring manifesto came in the introduction to Russell Hann, Gregory S. Kealey, Linda Kealey, and Peter Warrian, comps., *Primary Sources in Canadian Working Class History* (Kitchener 1973); which was followed by the introduction to Gregory S. Kealey and Peter Warrian, eds., *Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto 1976); Bryan D. Palmer, “Working-Class Canada: Recent Historical Writing,” *Queen’s Quarterly*, 86 (Winter 1979/80), 594-616; and Gregory S. Kealey, “Labour and Working-Class History: Prospects in the 1980s,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 7 (Spring 1981), 67-94. The seminal monographs were Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal; McGill-Queen’s University Press 1979); Gregory S. Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto 1980); and their jointly authored *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880-1900* (New York 1982).

7 David J. Bercuson, “Through the Looking Glass of Culture: An Essay on the New Labour History and Working-Class Culture in Recent Canadian Historical Writing,” *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 95-112; Kenneth McNaught, “E.P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing About Labour and the Left in the 1970s,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 62, no. 2 (June 1981), 141-68; and Desmond Morton, “E.P. Thompson dans les aspents de neiges: les historiens canadiens anglais et la classe ouvriere,” *Revue d’histoire de l’Amerique francaise*, 37, no. 2 (septembre 1983), 165-84.

more realistic goals, and took their lead from more moderate labour leaders. Ironically most of the leading labour historians who shared this perspective abandoned the field in the early 1980s, although the study of labour institutions has continued to flourish.⁸ On the left, a much quieter, more sympathetic, and more indirect critique emerged from some labour historians who wanted to try to explain working-class defeat and accommodation as well as conflict and resistance. Ian McKay gave most effective voice to a concern about the slippery concept of “culture” and its relationship to the structural constraints of industrial capitalism.⁹ A parallel line of criticism was emerging among some left-nationalist political economists, whose class analysis was heavily structuralist and often grossly simplistic (unfortunately Daniel Drache’s attempt to put this skepticism about the new labour history on paper was embarrassingly weak and riddled with gross distortions and factual errors¹⁰). These disagreements with Palmer and Co. amounted to no more than a faint Canadian echo of the debates raging in Britain at the same time between E.P. Thompson and various marxist structuralists, many of them of the Althusserian persuasion,¹¹ but the first version of *Working-Class Experience* absorbed some of the materialist critique and made a perceptible shift away from the “culturalism” that Palmer had espoused in his earlier study of Hamilton craft workers.¹² (Highlighting the term “experience” was nonetheless directly inspired by E.P. Thompson’s analytical response to structuralism.) In the preface to his synthesis, Palmer put new emphasis on the limitations of material structures in working-class formation and action, and each major chapter in the book began with a section on “Social Formation.” In many ways, it seemed that, like many of us male labour historians at the time, Palmer had come around to a fairly conventional marxist perspective on working-class history, albeit with much more emphasis on working-class agency in the shaping of their experience. Within a few years, in fact, he would be defending a position that he labelled explicitly “historical materialism.”¹³

Working-Class Experience, then, was intended as a kind of pulling together and summing up of the first burst of new working-class history, which by that point included a staggering amount of new research and writing to be assimilated. As Palmer now admits, it was written hastily under the considerable disadvantages of an untenured junior faculty position. It was not an easy book to read, as many of us who

8 See, for example, Laurel Sefton McDowell, *Remember Kirkland Lake: The Gold Miners’ Strike of 1941-42* (Toronto 1983); and William Kaplan, *Everything That Floats: Pat Sullivan, Hal Banks, and the Seamen’s Unions of Canada* (Toronto 1987).

9 Ian McKay, “Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture,” *Labour*, 8-9 (Autumn 1981/Spring 1982), 185-241.

10 Daniel Drache, “The Formation and Fragmentation of the Canadian Working Class: 1820-1920,” *Studies in Political Economy*, 1984.

11 The literature produced in those debates reached large proportions, but the two poles were probably best represented by E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978); and Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*.

12 “It is class struggle and culture, not class itself, as an analytical category, that are the primary concepts upon which classes themselves arise and assume importance,” Palmer had written in *A Culture in Conflict*, xvi.

13 See “Listening to History Rather Than Historians: Reflection on Working-Class History,” *Studies in Political Economy*, 1986; “Introduction,” *The Character of Class Struggle: Essays in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto 1986); and, especially, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia 1990).

tried to use it in classrooms discovered. The long chapters were pastiches of loosely connected thematic sections that often sent the reader plodding through mountains of half-digested detail summarized from secondary sources and his own primary research. Conceptually it swayed between the models of textbook and book-length essay. Perhaps most surprisingly given the debates with the social democrats over the importance of broadening out beyond institutional history, Palmer filled much of the book with discussions of various wage-earners' organizations and their political allies, although he provided much more context for these movements than such writers as Desmond Morton (who produced the only other full-length history of Canadian labour)¹⁴ and showed much more sympathy to more radical and militant groups. He created probably the greatest controversy with his claim that the Knights of Labor represented the pinnacle of working-class unity and hegemonic potential in the 1880s and that thereafter Canadian working-class history was a story of fragmentation and dissolution into mainstream mass culture. It was nonetheless an extremely useful and widely read book.

Such an intellectually vibrant field would never stand still, however, and well before the 1983 edition appeared on the bookstore shelves, the perspective that Palmer and others had staked was under challenge from various directions, some of which forced him into the "rethinking" that is represented in the new version. He now offers a perspective on Canadian working-class history that is, as he plainly admits from the outset, both the same and different. Although the new book cannot be said to be much easier to tackle than its predecessor — excessive wordiness and detail remain problems — Palmer has polished several passages and nuanced many of the more baldly stated arguments. He has incorporated new information drawn from the rich research output of the past decade and has added a daunting 75-page chapter on the post-1975 period. Perhaps most important, he has recognized the complications of an overly simple class analysis. In this new, more pessimistic account, Canadian workers end up with a more troubled experience in confronting their subordination than the original "culturalism" might have suggested. Yet, as we will see, the central thrust of Palmer's perspective has not changed.

Inevitably, critics will seize on his overt backing away from culture as a category of analysis. In the preface, he announces his new caution about the term, and the word itself has been dropped from many passages and headings in the text, along with all references to the late British cultural marxist Raymond Williams. Yet he has not jettisoned the concept completely. We are left with considerable confusion about just what he now means. First, he seems to be talking only about time off the job — "the actual activities of men and women as they lived out their lives beyond the exactions of the workplace and the public campaigns of conventional politics" — certainly a narrower view of culture than we might have expected from a leading scholar of craft culture within the nineteenth-century workplace. But, as he quickly moves to admit the fragmentation of these limited activities along lines of "religious affiliation, ethnic identification, political cross-class party, skill distinction, regional context or gender gulf," he draws both the workplace and conventional politics back into his framework. In any case, he wants us to understand that all the fragments have an underlying unity — they are "coloured and framed by the dependence of workers and their

14 *Working People: An Illustrated History of Canadian Labour* (Ottawa 1980).

families on the wage.” Most often this culture was no more than “an inarticulate way of life,” an “inert culture,” but occasionally “this cultural ensemble took on a more overtly political, indeed mobilizing character.” Thus working-class culture would become “the connective tissues of an ambiguous realm of everyday life that bridged the chasm separating class as a silent structure and class as a potential force for revolutionary change” — that is, a politicized working-class culture could turn class-in-itself into class-for-itself.¹⁵

As in the first version of his book, Palmer again seems most interested in these cultures of resistance created by organized workers’ movements and the explanation of their successes and failures in mobilizing the class-for-itself. After the “social-formation” section in each chapter, we are immediately confronted with lengthy sections on unions. In fact, at least two-thirds of the post-1850 chapters in the book focus on labour institutions and the left — a lopsided discussion that privileges the experience of a minority of Canadian workers in most of the period before World War II.¹⁶ This time, however, Palmer takes some of the emphasis off the Knights of Labor as “an exemplary class organization”¹⁷ (although it is still the only organization in Canadian labour history that gets a full chapter to itself) and presents a more balanced picture of the phases of working-class organizing that recognizes the episodic ebb and flow class-conscious movements. As he proceeds through the twentieth-century material, he seems increasingly driven by a leninist concern to identify appropriate leadership for the working class (as well as social-democratic and stalinist “misleaders”), which reaches a crescendo in his denunciation of the current leadership of the Canadian labour movement in the last chapter — a set of comments that will be familiar to readers of his 1987 study of the Solidarity movement in British Columbia,¹⁸ but that contrast sharply with his more tolerant assessment of cautious nineteenth-century labour leaders. Without disagreeing with much of his critique, we can raise a question about imposing the search for simon-pure class-consciousness as the central organizing framework of a working-class history, as so many of us have done in this field. Some labour historians are becoming uneasy with this implicit assumption since it sets a standard of perfection in class behaviour that has never been met anywhere outside theoretical texts, and since it inherently depreciates workers’ ability to determine rational courses of action within situations of relative powerlessness.

Palmer’s explanations for the failure or containment of Canadian workers’ struggles, however, are not limited to this theme of failed leadership. His materialist analysis encourages us to take seriously the severe restraints of what he calls the “social formation,” which can seriously impede resistance of any kind. Again, however, we face a problem of definition. Traditional marxists and modern political economists might well expect that analytical category to include as a minimum the means of production, labour and product markets, social structure, and the state that predominate in a period. Some might want to integrate the spacial structuring that has accompanied capitalist industrialization. Others might want to include the forces

15 *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 13, 20, 21.

16 As the author of *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Short History* (Toronto 1989), I would be the last to deny the legitimacy of a history of workers’ organizations. The problem here is presenting that history as the core of the Canadian “working-class experience.”

17 *Working-Class Experience*, 16.

18 *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1987).

that structure sexual and racial or ethnic divisions into the working class. And still others might perhaps see cultural hegemony as a force closely linked to “social formation.” In Palmer’s book, the introductory sections of each chapter with this label incorporate only a few of these structuring forces in working-class experience — most often heaps of detail about the growth and expansion of the capitalist market economy and, only in the twentieth-century chapters, some discussion of state activities and culture — while other analytical components of “social formation” (notably gender and the law) are simply tacked on to the end of chapters. How could the analysis have looked different?

First, it would have been necessary to take seriously the evolving nature of the means of production. As the new working-class history took shape in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of us thought that it was extremely important to look closely at the dynamics of the workplace. We undertook intensive studies of particular industries and drew on extensive international theoretical literature on labour markets and the labour process to try to appreciate what the term “industrial revolution” could actually mean for Canadian workers.¹⁹ It seemed critical to discern the impact of managerial and technological innovations, capitalist recruitment processes, and wage-earners’ evolving position of skill and power within the world of work, if we wanted to explain such features of working-class life as their living standards, mobility patterns, inter-ethnic relations, and, above all, leverage for resistance to capitalist control of their lives on the job and off. Those of us who produced the first articles and books on the labour process never claimed that this was the only part of working-class life worth studying, but we did argue that without this careful attention to workers’ wage-earning experience the dynamics of Canadian labour history would not be fully intelligible. Palmer disagrees. Neither the 1983 nor the 1992 books have much to say about the workplace. The first working class is discussed at great length without any clear assessment of the impact of the industrial revolution they were living through. The turn-of-the-century shift to more systematic or “scientific” management is introduced briefly, but its impact is largely ignored, beyond the divisiveness of new ethnic recruitment. The late-twentieth-century technological change involving microtechnology gets only passing mention. Only “Fordism” gets much attention, and like Taylorism its consequences are assumed rather than proven. This neglect of the labour process is purposeful. Palmer does not believe it is a useful line of analysis. “Labour historians and sociologists with a keen eye on the labour process draw the map of class relations in ways that leave no room for a topography of politics, let alone an acknowledgement of the subterranean maze of cultural activity,” he writes in his new preface.²⁰ Few serious students of Canadian working-class history would agree that recent work on the labour process has been guilty of any such crimes. Moreover, drawing the map of class politics and cultural activity

19 For example, Kealey, *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism*; Craig Heron and Robert Storey, eds., *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada* (Kingston and Montreal 1986); Ian Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses: Logging in Northern Ontario, 1900-1980* (Toronto 1987); Craig Heron, *Working in Steel: The Early Years in Canada, 1883-1935* (Toronto 1988); Eric Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Kingston and Montreal 1989).

20 *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 15.

without attention to class relations in production would certainly be just as regrettably myopic. This remains one of the most glaring curiosities of the book.

Second, a study of any class requires some contextualization in a social structure. Classes take shape in a dynamic relationship with each other, as Thompson taught us. Yet, in this book, there are only a few details about emerging ruling classes of each period, and little or no discussion of their collective behaviour beyond union-busting campaigns. The various middle classes and their efforts to create a class culture distinct from (and often at war with) the working class get even less attention. But perhaps most telling is the failure to confront the continuing importance of the largest single class in the Canadian social structure well into the twentieth century — the independent commodity producers. The first chapter has been revised, with Allan Greer's advice, to address these people more directly, but they drop out of the story thereafter. The relationship between farm and urban wage labour remained extremely important, as the work of Quebec, Maritime, and northern-Ontario historians continue to make clear²¹ — not simply in a story of rural recruitment of wage-earners, but also the flow back to farms on a seasonal or more irregular basis in a pattern of occupational pluralism. James Struthers has made the intriguing suggestion that the existence of this rural safety valve helped delay the arrival of the welfare state in Canada until World War II.²² In writing Canadian working-class history, we have to avoid overemphasis on permanent residents of big cities.

Third, while the urban-rural relationship was important, we also need to become more sensitive to the spatial ordering of the industrial cities in which wage-earners and their families settled for varying lengths of time. The neighbourhoods they inhabited were first physical spaces — houses, streets, stores, halls, parks, waterfronts — controlled by petit-bourgeois interests, corporate capitalists, and municipal authorities that set up sharp constraints on individual workers, their households, and their neighbourhood associations. Palmer is not alone in his relative silence on this urban context — few other Canadian labour historians have touched the important issue of urban space either, and we have to look elsewhere for inspiration. Historical geographers have begun to explore working-class neighbourhoods more thoroughly and insightfully.²³ But so far it has been the historians of immigration and ethnicity who have studied the complexities of these communities with most care, especially the non-Anglo-Celtic “foreign colonies.”²⁴ Too often they have ignored or minimized

21 See, for example, Bruno Ramirez, *On the Move: French-Canadians and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1860-1914* (Toronto 1991); L.D. McCann, “‘Living a Double Life’: Town and Country in the Industrialization of the Maritimes,” in Douglas Day, ed., *Geographical Perspectives on the Maritime Provinces* (Halifax 1988); Radforth, *Bushworkers and Bosses*.

22 James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto 1983).

23 See, for example, Deryck W. Holdsworth's two articles, “House and Home in Vancouver: Images of West-Coast Urbanism, 1886-1929,” in Gilbert A. Stelter and Alan F.J. Artibise, eds., *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History* (Toronto 1977), 186-211; and “Cottages and Castles for Vancouver Home-Seekers,” *BC Studies*, 1986; Donna McCririck and Graeme Wynn, “Building ‘Self-Respect and Hopefulness’: The Development of Blue-Collar Suburbs in Early Vancouver,” in Wynn, ed., *People, Places, Patterns, Processes: Geographical Perspectives on the Canadian Past* (Toronto 1990); and Richard Harris, “A Working-Class Suburb for Immigrants, Toronto, 1909-1913,” *Geographical Review*, 81, no. 3 (July 1991), 318-32.

24 For example, Robert F. Harney, ed., *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945* (Toronto 1985); and Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in*

the connections between this community life and wage-labour, but labour historians can draw fruitful lessons from the students of ethnicity in attempting to synthesize the working-class experience. Some feminist historians have also provided fruitful analyses of neighbourhood.²⁵ It is here that networks of association and mutuality took root (no doubt, alongside cruel gossip and petty squabbles) as working-class families set up house in larger numbers. Palmer focuses on a few activities within these local communities, notably taverns, sports, and movie houses, but never tackles the role of these neighbourhoods in the formation and nurturing of class identity and their evolution through the major urban transformations that eventually brought suburbs and high-rise apartment buildings.

Fourth, as Palmer readily admits, it is impossible to write the history of working people without integrating the central role of the state into the analysis.²⁶ He has made great efforts in the new version to expand his discussion of the state, especially the law, but there are nonetheless three lingering problems. First, he is inconsistent in situating state activity; in the nineteenth-century chapters it is literally tacked on to the end of chapters, while in the twentieth it is partially integrated into the identification of “social formations,” where it properly belongs, and partially tacked on. This may be connected to a second difficulty — an apparent confusion about what the state has actually been in Canada. The pre-industrial state is misleadingly labelled “little more than a style of rule” and is contrasted with “state-building” that was supposed to have begun in the 1840s. In fact, there had always been a state in British North America (as in New France) and it underwent a transformation, not a creation from scratch. The confusion deepens in his final assessment of the Knights of Labor, where we learn that, “born only in 1867, the Canadian state was actually obscured throughout the 1880s by its essential unfamiliarity....”²⁷ Overall in this discussion, the state remains a shadowy force, without the clear delineation of its various parts that would make it more intelligible. Most often, we meet a largely hostile state with judicial and executive arms ready to crush working-class resistance (not a word of it exaggerated, I should add), but not the liberal dynamic of the state that gradually brought white male workers (and, much later, females and people of colour) into full citizenship with electoral rights unencumbered by many property qualifications. It was the extension of the franchise in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that compelled political parties to undertake their blandishments to working-class constituencies and that gave labour leaders the political space to assert more independence in mobilizing the same vote and in pressing for reforms. This political terrain was roughly comparable to Britain and the United States, but not to much of continental Europe, where the working-class emerged with far more severe political handicaps. Henceforth, in Canada the rights of citizenship and the potential to use

Postwar Toronto (Kingston and Montreal 1992).

25 The Canadian literature is still much more limited than elsewhere; see Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990); Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People*; Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto 1980).

26 It is ironic that North Americans have fixated on the cultural dimensions of E.P. Thompson's famous *Making of the English Working Class*, when in that book the most important force responsible for forging a working-class identity was the repressive English state of the early nineteenth century.

27 *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 81, 86, 153.

electoral power independently would continue to prompt sympathetic legislative action from the state in moments of apparent working-class strength — shorter hours laws, occupational health and safety measures, collective-bargaining legislation, and so on. Yet in the twentieth century this democratic impulse was not only in regular conflict with the repressive actions of the courts, but also was restrained by the expansion of the administrative arm of the state — the workers' compensation boards, the minimum wage boards, the labour relations boards, and the like, which operated out of the direct reach of working-class pressure in the legislative branch. These parts of the state deserved to be more carefully distinguished and integrated into the structure of working-class life than Palmer achieves in his book.²⁸ A third problem is the narrow scope of state intervention into working-class life that he discusses. The state intervened in a host of ways to shape the experience of workers' family relations, household, and neighbourhood — marriage and divorce law, child-custody legislation, immigration acts, housing legislation, zoning by-laws, public-health acts, among many others, few of which are dealt with here. Constraining the actions of militant and radical wage-earners was only part of the story.

Fifth, Palmer has had to admit that no one can any longer write social history that ignores gender. His new book has much more to say about the role of women in the working class and labour organizations and about the often violent sexism of their male counterparts, much of it unfortunately merely tacked on towards the end of chapters. We get a relatively full discussion of the nineteenth-century working-class family economy that the work of Bettina Bradbury, John Bullen, and others have opened up to us,²⁹ but demography, domestic labour, and family survival strategies in the twentieth century are only touched on fleetingly. Palmer argues, moreover, that there has been too much historiographical emphasis on co-operation and mutuality within these family units.³⁰ Ironically, he leaps from a relative silence on women's experience in the 1983 version to an almost sordid preoccupation with the conflict and oppression within the working-class family that has animated much recent feminist writing. Yet to emphasize quite rightly that all was not peace and harmony at home, it is not necessary to minimize the fundamental structural importance of the domestic sphere and of reproduction in all workers' lives, especially the sexual division of labour between women who stayed home without wages and men (and some women) who went out to earn wages. That arrangement and all the ideological and legal defence of it was a crucial part of the "social formation" for working-class women and, to a great extent, for their menfolk, whose "masculinity" was rooted in large part in their breadwinning roles and their privileges over females in the labour market.

28 I have fleshed out this argument a bit more fully in "Male Wage-Earners and the Canadian State," in Michael Earle, ed., *Workers and the State in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Fredericton 1989). For European comparisons, see Dick Geary, ed., *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe Before 1914* (Oxford 1992).

29 Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto 1993); John Bullen, "Hidden Workers: Child Labour and the Family Economy in Late Nineteenth-Century Urban Ontario," *Labour/Le Travail*, 18 (Fall 1986), 163-88; Chad Gaffield, "Children, Schooling, and Family Reproduction in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review*, 72, no. 2 (June 1991), 157-91.

30 *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 24.

In this light, Palmer might also have recognized that the working-class household was also an arena of contestation with external forces, not simply among family members. One front, as he notes, was the relentless struggle of the unwaged female family members to maintain living standards in the face of chronic economic security — battles with corner-store profiteers, sanctimonious charity officers, tight-fisted relief administrators, or pushy social workers. He does not make clear that these women tended to build networks of solidarity and support among themselves to make these struggles possible, but also to help sustain wage-earners in their strikes, often as the shock troops of working-class crowds. The small victories eventually won by the introduction of some measure of social security in Canada's minimal welfare state after 1940 are also scarcely mentioned in the book.³¹ The other major battle zone Palmer ignores is the prolonged confrontation with bourgeois authority, eventually armed with state power, over working-class behaviour in households and neighbourhoods — child-rearing practices, public education, household living arrangements, health standards, and much more. There is now a large, useful literature on these issues produced for the most part by social historians and social scientists less interested in the working-class families themselves than in the social engineers that unleashed their programs on the working class. Labour historians can no longer ignore these aspects of working-class life in attempting to synthesize the total experience.³²

Sixth, there is the perplexing problem of how to integrate ethnicity and race into this analysis. In large part, the problem for many of us is to break free of older usages that suggested inherent attitudes and behaviour and to recognize that, like class and gender, ethnicity and race are fluid terms covering processes, not fixed attributes. People constitute themselves as ethnic or racial groups at the same time as they are so constituted by the larger social structures within which they live and work, including segmented labour markets and discriminatory legislation but also racist ideologies. This is the experience of *all* people in a society, not just the newcomers and the minorities. Apart from some exploration of nineteenth-century Irish culture, Palmer has relatively little to say about how workers might integrate class and ethnic identities. In this edition of his book, he puts much more emphasis on how the recruitment of so many different ethnic groups from the late nineteenth century onward introduced division and conflict into the Canadian working-class experience — an undeniably important theme but one that dodges the hard questions of living and working as both a worker and a member of an ethnic group. Aside from the radical organizations in these non-Anglo-Celtic communities (and the Scottish coal miners of Cape Breton), we learn little about their community life and about the potential for the more positive use of ethnicity in working-class community building. It is the Quebecois workers who suffer the most neglect in a discussion preoccupied with ethnicity and race as primarily divisive forces. Relatively little of the recent francophone writing on Quebec social history seems to have been drawn into this analysis

31 See, for example, Dominique Jean, "Family Allowances and Family Autonomy: Quebec Families Encounter the Welfare State, 1945-1955," in Bettina Bradbury, ed., *Canadian Family History: Selected Readings* (Toronto 1992).

32 See, for example, Jane Ussel, *Private Lives and Public Policy: One Hundred Years of State Intervention in the Family* (Toronto 1991).

— a perennial problem among so many of us in the English-Canadian historical profession.³³

Finally, some concept of cultural hegemony now seems appropriate in writing Canadian working-class history.³⁴ Palmer agrees, though he is inconsistent in his approach. He chooses not to engage here with those he has challenged elsewhere who argue that working-class culture could only be given shape by a “discourse,”³⁵ but he does attempt some consideration of the impact of dominant cultures and their “discourses.” Much of his preliminary discussion of this kind of cultural experience is sensitive and sensible, but as the book progresses he seems to lose control of his subject. In much of the period before the 1880s, he quite rightly emphasizes the ideological (as well as material) power of patriarchal paternalism. In the mid nineteenth century he notes the “cross-class cultural alliance” that could result from the working-class search for respectability. Even in retelling the story of a “movement culture” in the Knights of Labor, he admits that some mainstream Victorian notions of respectability (notably the cult of domesticity and evangelical Protestantism) were woven into the Order’s program for working-class salvation. The rewriting of his nineteenth-century chapters has wisely conceded far more ground to the possibility that Canadian workers participated at least to some extent in the dominant cultures, without denying the possibility that those workers could recast that cultural experience to their own ends, whether as members of fraternal societies, church congregations, or labour organizations.

In his twentieth-century chapters, however, Palmer largely abandons that dynamic view of cultural participation and places great weight on the opiate of mass culture — movies, professional sports, cars, televisions, and general consumerism — whose origins he dates in the 1920s. This new culture, he claims, involved “the conscious structuring by capital of labour into the republic of consumption”³⁶. It deflected class antagonisms and dissolved class identities into the “society of the spectacle.” This argument is sustained much more by assertion than by solid research. As it stands it seems like a giant conspiracy theory, especially when he links it to the managerial manipulation of “Fordism.” Palmer never considers the great divide between industrial capitalists and cultural capitalists, which survived until quite recently and created what has often been called the “cultural contradictions” of modern capitalist society — between the productivist need for discipline and low labour costs and the consumerist interest in self-indulgence and self-expression. Furthermore, in contrast to Palmer’s unsubstantiated suggestion that “the possibility of resistance growing out of this initial cultural ‘revolution’ and the chances of renegotiating its many and contradictory meanings were rather limited,”³⁷ American scholars such as Roy Rosenzweig and Kathy Peiss have carefully studied the ways in which workers

33 Joanne Burgess quite rightly criticizes English-Canadian labour historians for this myopia; see “Exploring the Limited Identities of Canadian Labour: Recent Trends in English-Canada and in Quebec,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, 1-2 (Spring-Fall 1990), 149-74.

34 One of the most impressive statements of this approach is Leon Fink, “The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor,” *Journal of American History*, 75, no. 1 (June 1988), 115-36.

35 See his *Descent into Discourse*.

36 *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 231.

37 *Ibid.*

actively incorporated aspects of the new mass culture into their distinctive class experience in the early decades of the twentieth century.³⁸ Palmer is more cynical: “Its first act of appropriating whole realms of class experience and restructuring them as commodities quite possibly forced class allegiances and identities into the background as it promoted pluralistic consumption.”³⁹ And he rejects any argument that, on the contrary, the new cultural entrepreneurs had to appropriate working-class values and traditions into their products (films, radio programs, commercial music, or whatever) in order to sell them and thereby actually injected huge chunks of working-class culture into the mainstream, albeit usually in a tamer, more watered-down form. Charlie Chaplin’s “Little Tramp” was surely one example, but the commercial success of jazz created in black urban ghettos was even more striking. In a modest way, this involved a victory over the widely institutionalized prudery and moral restraint that had for so long been directed at the ribald, earthy, and sensuous strains of working-class life.

Palmer introduces an equally odd twist by suggesting that the new culture replaced “the experience of collectivity” with “individualized or family-centred behaviour.”⁴⁰ There are several false assumptions here. Certainly the family had previously existed as a setting of some leisure-time activity, especially for women, but, perhaps more importantly, some parts of the new culture actually drew family members out of the household, especially young women, who, as Peiss demonstrates, appreciated the opportunity to join the public life of movie theatres and dance halls that had never been as accessible to them before. Fragmentation of working-class families along generational lines, rather than closer familial clustering, was actually one of the most important consequences of this new mass culture, which would continue to feed the fantasies and yearnings of the young most powerfully. Moreover, it is a serious distortion to contrast this new mass cultural experience with an unspecified time in the past when “working-class institutions like the union, the labour church, and the radical club” had been “central in social and cultural life”⁴¹; as I have suggested, aside from the rare moments of class confrontation and widening solidarities, most notably 1886 and 1919, these organizations had been marginal to the lives of the great bulk of Canadian workers and would remain so until the 1940s. In fact, Palmer underestimates how the new media could promote new solidarities — Canadian workers watched newsreels of sit-down strikes in movie houses across the country in the 1930s, and unions later broadcast their own radio shows, for example. My argument is not to see mass culture as firmly under the control of workers, but to present its impact as a more negotiated experience that could amplify as well as stifle class identity and that did not have uniform results for all Canadian working people at all ages in all parts of the country at all times. Ironically, Palmer returns to this possibility late in the book in his discussion of the cultural rebelliousness of the 1960s, before descending once again into the cultural gloom of the “numbing spectacle.”⁴² This

38 Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York 1983); and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia 1986).

39 *Working-Class Experience* (1992), 269.

40 *Ibid.*, 235.

41 *Ibid.*, 236.

42 *Ibid.*, 387.

pessimism is increasingly trendy, but to be convincing needs fuller development and grounding in Canadian experience than it gets here. Who exactly is generating this culture and why? What precisely its connection to other forces of domination?

When all these structural variables in the “social formation” are put in motion, a set of constraints and opportunities emerges that is particular to a region and, to a degree, to a nation-state. Palmer draws in several important regional contrasts (including an acceptance of the controversial “western exceptionalism,” which so many eastern-Canadian labour historians have been trying to chip away at), but he has less to say about international comparisons. The Canadian working-class experience is not the same as the British, French, Australian, or even the American. Palmer rarely introduces such a comparative perspective to make clear overall what was unique to Canada as a colony-turned-dominion within the British Empire, governed by a decentralized federal system with powerful executive branches, with a relatively powerful economic structure split between export-oriented resource industries and domestic manufacturing, a population incorporating two conquered peoples (natives and French) and a growing multitude of non-Anglo-Celtic immigrants, and a fascination with North-American popular culture. Most of these pieces are all in the book, but they are not assembled in a way that makes the “peculiarities of the Canadians” immediately evident.

It would be unfair and misleading to conclude on a purely negative note. There is much to like in Bryan Palmer’s stimulating, challenging, and wide-ranging book. My criticisms do not dislodge my fundamental agreement with much of what he has to say — especially his emphasis on the remarkable power of capital and the repressive authoritarianism of the Canadian state as key features of the Canadian working-class experience. And his writing has forced me to do some hard thinking about the issues he raises. Yet, like the earlier version, the book remains somewhat less than the sum of its parts. As I have tried to explain, I was bothered both by the failure to develop the concept of social formation adequately to embrace well-established marxist concerns and new theoretical challenges and also by the lingering preference for studying male wage-earners’s organizations and their political allies. Like so many male labour historians — and I don’t excuse myself — Palmer is preoccupied with the failure of Canadian workers to find their way toward a socialist rejection of capitalism. That concern seems inevitably to slide us so quickly and easily toward a focus on heavy-handed repression, divide-and-conquer strategies of fragmentation, ideological blandishments, and stifled dissent from left-wing voices. These are valid and important issues for the left to assess, but that framework can be an analytical trap in writing the social history of the working class. Most workers did not constitute their lives that way over the past 150 years, however rudimentarily class-conscious they have quite often been. We need to get beyond the polarity of acceptance or rejection of capitalism to a subtler understanding of how they struggled to survive, to express themselves, to assert individual and class pride and power. That is an analytical project that never abandons the inherent sources of conflict within patriarchal capitalist society, but also keeps judgments about ideal working-class behaviour under control. If the past can teach us anything, it is that the avenues of fundamental change for workers can open up unexpectedly in a multiplicity of contexts and forms, not simply through a centralized leadership. In this sense, while he has listened and pondered a good deal, Palmer has not moved far from 1983. For my taste, he could have done more “rethinking.”