

The Workingmen's Protective Association, Victoria, B.C., 1878: Racism, Intersectionality and Status Politics

Rennie Warburton

Volume 43, 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/ilt43rr01>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Warburton, R. (1999). The Workingmen's Protective Association, Victoria, B.C., 1878: Racism, Intersectionality and Status Politics. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 43, 105–120.

RESEARCH REPORT / NOTES DE RECHERCHE

The Workingmen's Protective Association, Victoria, B.C., 1878: Racism, Intersectionality and Status Politics

Rennie Warburton

THE WORKINGMEN'S PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION (WPA) was formed in Victoria early in September, 1878. Its stated purposes were:

... the mutual protection of the working classes of British Columbia against the great influx of Chinese; to use all legitimate means for the suppression of their immigration; to assist each other in the obtaining of employment; and to devise means for the amelioration of the condition of the working classes of the Province in general...¹

Encouraging the employment of Euro-Canadian workers through a boycott of firms employing Chinese, the WPA established an employment agency and several laundry businesses, and had ambitions to start vegetable-growing and a newspaper.² Members included miners, labourers, clerks, policemen and skilled craftsmen.³ The

¹ Workingmen's Protective Association, *Constitution, By-Laws and Rules of Order* (Victoria 1878).

² *Daily British Colonist* (hereafter *Colonist*) 2 August, 1878.

³ From tracing the names of speakers at WPA meetings in *Guide to the Province of British Columbia, 1877-78* (Victoria 1878) (Hereafter *Guide*) and P.Baskerville et al., eds., *1881 Canadian Census: Vancouver Island* (Victoria 1990).

Rennie Warburton, "The Workingmen's Protective Association, Victoria, B.C., 1878: Racism, Intersectionality and Status Politics," *Labour/Le Travail*, 43 (Spring 1999), 105-20.

organization compiled statistics on the numbers of Chinese in the province and on how many were employed in Victoria, persuaded prison authorities to cut the queue of Chinese inmates as well as those of other male prisoners, and established a committee to determine if the Vice-President employed Chinese to chop his firewood! Members were particularly anxious about the anticipated use of Chinese labour in construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Their concerns led them to draw up a petition to the House of Commons, supported by over 1500 signatures from Victoria and elsewhere in the Province.

Over 200 people attended the Association's meetings at one point, but the organization folded in the spring of 1879, nine months after its formation. Throughout its brief existence it was a somewhat fragile body beset by conflicts over its political identity, particularly those surrounding allegations that it had been formed by friends of ambitious politicians to give them a platform and an organized source of electoral support.

The WPA has been variously described as an anti-Chinese organization, a form of anti-Orientalism, the first labour union in the province, and a political pressure group.⁴ Each of these observations describes a particular feature of the Association. However, existing analyses of the WPA by prominent historians of British Columbia have neglected the significance of gendered racism and the influence of capitalist social relations at both the local and international levels, as well as incipient nationalist sentiments and the inferior political status of the Chinese. The two major examples are Roy, who described the WPA as "essentially" a political pressure group with minor interests in encouraging employment of white men, and Ward who, despite acknowledging its "professed concern for working-class conditions in general," concluded that the WPA was "essentially a vehicle for anti-Chinese agitation".⁵

Roy's interpretation is correct to the extent that the WPA was formed for the political purpose of pressuring governments into implementing various exclusionary measures against the Chinese. One observer claimed it was used by politicians like Noah Shakespeare and Amor De Cosmos as a vote-catching strategy in a deliberate deception of working men.⁶ Evidence for such a position was, however, equivocal. The Association was indeed used opportunistically by ambitious politicians for their own electoral ends. It provided a platform for candidates who, like their counterparts in California, exploited anti-Chinese sentiments in their efforts to win votes.⁷ However, the initial leadership was clearly working class and, given

⁴Patricia E. Roy, *A White Man's Province* (Vancouver 1989), 48; W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Towards Orientals in British Columbia* 2nd ed. (Montréal 1992), 33; John L. Martin, "Early Labour Organizations in Victoria," *Victoria Labour Annual*, 1948, 41-2.

⁵Roy, *A White Man's Province*, 48; Ward, *White Canada Forever*, 33.

⁶Martin, "Early Labour Organizations," 41-2.

⁷Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley 1971), 261-2.

the prevailing split labour market and the fears of its members about future employment prospects in a time of economic recession, it is difficult to conclude that it was simply a sham organization catering to the interests of politicians.

Creese examines the WPA as an example of competition between Chinese and Euro-Canadian workers created by the docility and willingness of the Chinese to work for less pay.⁸ She also notes how the inferior, disenfranchised, political status of the Chinese was used to justify organizing Chinese immigrants into the lowest sections of the working class. According to Creese, anti-Asian agitation on the part of labour groups was evidence of a developing working-class consciousness which confronted racist, capitalist social relations. The work of Tan on the marginalized and subordinated status of the Chinese in early BC also emphasizes the coalescence of racism and capitalism in the fashioning of a segmented labour market.⁹

The insights of Creese and Tan are compatible with recent scholarship on racism which looks beyond the prejudices of racist individuals to processes of racialization and intersectionality which arise within economic, political and ideological contexts.¹⁰ Racist practices frequently coincide, intersect or overlap with class relations which are based on the distribution of economic resources, and with statuses which are assigned according to norms, significations, and constructions of personhood.¹¹ A typical formal type of status derives from legislation which grants a particular social position conferring or denying advantages or privileges, such as citizenship.¹² Racialized statuses, whether formalized in law or not, are

⁸Gillian Creese, "Class, Ethnicity and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880-1923" in Rennie Warburton and David Coburn, eds., *Workers, Capital and the State in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1988), 68.

⁹Jin Tan, "Chinese Labour and the Reconstituted Social Order of British Columbia," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 19 (1987), 68-88.

¹⁰E. Lawrence, "Just Plain Common Sense: The 'Roots' of Racism", in *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London 1982), 84-5; S. Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10 (1986); Robert Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labour* (London 1982), 96-7 and 102-3; Miles, *Racism*, (London 1989); Frances Abele and Daiva Stasiulis, "Canada as a 'White Settler Colony': What about Natives and Immigrants?," in Wallace Clement and Glen Williams, eds., *The New Canadian Political Economy* (Montréal 1989), 269; Floya Anthias, "Rethinking social divisions: some notes towards a theoretical framework," *The Sociological Review*, 46 (1998), 505-35; Michael Wieviorka, *The Arena of Racism* (London 1995), 99; Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race* (London 1996); Michel Omi and Howard Winant, "Racial Formations," in P. Rothenberg, ed., *Race, Class and Gender in the United States* (New York 1998), 18; Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class in the Anti-Racist Struggle" in the *Anti-Racist Struggle* (New York 1992).

¹¹Nancy Fraser, "Heterosexism, Misrecognition and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler," *New Left Review*, 228 (1998), 144.

¹²J.M. Barbalet, "Limitations of Class Theory and the Disappearance of Status: The Problem of the New Middle Class," *Sociology*, 20 (1986), 557-76.

cultural constructions and social expressions of entitlement and personhood which are markers for the granting or denial of economic, cultural, legal, and political rights and privileges.¹³ When groups that feel disadvantaged by such processes attempt to persuade the state to grant them their entitlements they engage in what are called status politics.¹⁴

On the one hand, intersecting of class with racialized statuses occurs in situations where members of status groups (such as ethnic communities) occupy a range of class positions. On the other hand, status divisions frequently arise within classes.¹⁵ The position of Canadian Aboriginal peoples provides an example of the overlap between class and racialized status. Many were given a specific legal status conferred by the Indian Act, and placed in subordinate class positions by being denied access to capital and resources.¹⁶ A growing number of Aboriginal women are now becoming politicized around their experience of the intersection of class with gender and racialized forms of status.

Racist hostility within the working class is typically found in split labour markets where cheap priced labour consists of racialized immigrants or indigenous peoples who are used by employers to maintain profit levels and undermine resistance at the workplace through their deployment as strikebreakers. Conscious of their own class position as vulnerable to competition from racialized out-groups, workers may advocate, for example, the deportation of their racialized rivals or the cessation of further immigration from their rivals' country or region of origin. Workers from ex-colonies and other less developed regions, guest workers, illegal immigrants and refugees, many of whom perform unpleasant or menial, unskilled work for very low wages, are frequently assigned a negatively racialized status to justify denying them legal and political rights. Other instances of status divisions within a class are racist antagonism between owners of small businesses or gender-based resistance by female workers to the lower pay they receive compared to their male counterparts in similar jobs. Analyzing racism in context therefore implies viewing those who are objects of racism and their racist oppressors as frequently occupying both status and class positions from which they launch actions against each other.

In many parts of the world during the 19th century racism became a central element in the economic, social and political practices of European colonialism and imperialist rivalry which accompanied the development of capitalism and the

¹³B.S. Turner, *Status* (Minneapolis 1988), 57-8.

¹⁴Turner, *Status*, 13.

¹⁵Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Vol. 2, trans. Ephraim et al. (New York 1968), 306; Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London 1973), 112; Parkin, *The Marxist Theory of Class*, 98; Turner, *Status*, 14, 26, 51.

¹⁶Rennie Warburton, "Status, Class and the Politics of Canadian Aboriginal Peoples," *Studies in Political Economy*, 54 (1997), 119-41.

formation of nation states.¹⁷ The discourse of racism was often articulated through nationalism and sexism.¹⁸ Chinese immigrants to early British Columbia faced various reactions from social classes and the state.¹⁹ The initial racialization of Chinese labourers by employers was positive, in line with employers' demand for cheap labour, in contrast to their subsequent negative evaluation by Euro-Canadian workers who saw them as taking away their jobs. By 1920 retail business owners who felt the brunt of Chinese competition engaged in racist attacks on their rivals. Meanwhile the state, beginning in 1885 after the completion of the CPR, racialized Chinese labourers as incapable of assimilation and unworthy as future citizens while viewing Chinese merchants as honourable, capable, and good for trade with China.²⁰

The above observations point to the importance of studying the economic, political, and ideological contexts in which the WPA arose. In a recent discussion of intersectionality, Anthias describes "race", gender, ethnos, and class as "cross-cutting and mutually interacting ontological spaces" which coalesce and articulate at particular conjunctures. In those spaces or domains struggles around the allocation of material and symbolic resources result in criteria such as "race," gender, or ethnicity being used to differentiate people into various categories on the basis of which they are excluded or inferiorized.²¹ Adopting Anthias's perspective, extending it by including status, and applying insights from Miles, Creese, and Satzewich, the following discussion examines the WPA as an example of intersectionality and status politics within local, national, and international settings. It begins with a brief contextual overview of Victoria in 1878.

Victoria in 1878

Following the two decades after the Gold Rush which had transformed it from a Hudson's Bay Company Fort into a bustling small town, the population of the City of Victoria grew from 2,842, including 211 Chinese, in 1870 to 5,295, including 592 Chinese and 4,066 British inhabitants, in 1881.²² The 1878 City Directory listed

¹⁷Michael Banton and Jonathan Harwood, *The Race Concept* (London 1975); George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York 1978); Miles, *Racism*; Malik, *The Meaning of Race*.

¹⁸Miles, *Racism*; Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries*; P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York 1990).

¹⁹Vil Satzewich, "Racisms: Reactions to Chinese Migrants in Canada at the turn of the Century," *International Sociology*, 4 (1989), 311-27.

²⁰On reactions to Chinese immigrants in BC see: Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown* (Montreal 1991); Gillian Creese, "Class, Ethnicity and Conflict"; Peter Li, *The Chinese in Canada* (Toronto 1988); Alicja Muszinski, "Class Formation and Class Consciousness: The Making of Shoreworkers in the BC Fishing Industry," *Studies in Political Economy*, 20 (1986), 85-116.

²¹Anthias, "Rethinking social divisions," 511.

²²Roy, *White Man's Province*, 8; *Census of Canada. Vol. I* (Ottawa, 1880-81), 298-9, 406.

1,680 persons of whom 44, judging by their names, appear to have been Chinese. All but 40 others had British names. The most common occupation cited for the Chinese was "washerman" of which there were 16. In 1881 the most common occupations among the Chinese were general labourer, launderer, and cook.²³ It has been estimated that the Chinese population of 2,370 in Victoria in 1879-80 included only 70 women.²⁴

The economy was shifting from independent commodity production to wage labour, mainly in industries supplying local needs.²⁵ According to a Guide produced in 1877, there were 21 farmers in the district surrounding Victoria. In the town itself there were six breweries, six machine shops and boiler makers, three waggon makers, two iron foundries, and factories making sashes and doors, cigars, leather, soap, matches, boots and shoes, and bricks. There were also printing offices, lumber yards, shipyards, and a planing mill.²⁶

Depressed economic conditions prevailed in Canada in the 1870s. A correspondent in November 1878 observed a decline in prosperity throughout the country during the previous five years; industries were in a state of decay, commerce was languishing, progress arrested, and enterprise crippled.²⁷ Unemployed workers were forced to emigrate. In British Columbia, according to Howay, the economic downturn was deeply affected by the decline of the Cariboo and Cassiar gold mining areas.²⁸ One author describes 1873 to 1880 as, apart from the 1930s depression years, the most dismal period in Victoria's economic history.²⁹ At the end of 1878, although the iron foundries were considered to be "prosperous," Victoria's economic situation was described as "dull" and business "not as bright as it might be."³⁰ The city was affected by "hard times," although not disastrously.³¹ However, civil servants and schoolteachers had not been paid for several months.³² A Public Works programme introduced by the provincial government in 1875 aimed to prevent the recurrence of the earlier economic conditions. Hopes for economic growth rested on the expected arrival of the transcontinental railway into the province, the construction of the Graving Dock at Esquimalt, and the opening up of quartz mining.

²³Baskerville, *Canadian Census*, 1-122.

²⁴Edgar Wickberg et al., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada* (Toronto 1982), Table 12.

²⁵Harry Gregson, *A History of Victoria, 1842-1970* (Victoria 1970), 70.

²⁶*Guide*, 282.

²⁷*Victoria Daily Standard* (Hereafter *Standard*), 6 November 1878.

²⁸Frederic Howay, "The Settlement and Progress of British Columbia, 1871-1914," in John Friesen and Harry K. Ralston, eds., *Historical Essays on British Columbia* (Toronto, 1976), 25.

²⁹Gregson, *A History of Victoria*, 70.

³⁰*Standard*, Editorial, 20 December 1878.

³¹*Standard*, 17 and 20 December 1878.

³²*Standard*, 14 September 1878.

Earlier in the year the low pay of the Chinese was the subject of several debates in the provincial legislature and was discussed in editorials in the Victoria newspapers. At the beginning of August the Provincial Legislature passed a resolution prohibiting the employment of Chinese on public works.³³ Later in the month it imposed an annual head tax of \$60 on Chinese residents in the province, provoking a petition from ten Chinese merchants to the Governor General requesting him to disallow the legislation. It was subsequently declared *ultra vires* by a judge of the BC Supreme Court and later disallowed by the Federal Government on the grounds that it would interfere with trade and commerce between China and Canada. Attempts were made, however, to collect the tax which the Chinese community in Victoria, including workers, stores, and other businesses, resisted with a two-week-long strike. The Chinese community therefore did not just passively accept interference in its activities. A few days after the formation of the WPA, some Chinese suggested that the tax be collected from the Belmont Boot and Shoe Factory, a well-known employer of Chinese labour.³⁴ In response to a challenge to the legislation from a member of the Chinese community, the Supreme Court of BC ruled that it encroached upon federal jurisdiction over aliens, trade and commerce, and treaty-making.³⁵ Chinese labourers were members of the Cheekung Tong, a secret society which grew from 30 to 300 members between 1877 and 1879 and was an early Chinese organization which addressed external threats and dangers to the Chinese community.³⁶

Intersectionality and the WPA

The petition to Ottawa, the most significant action taken by the WPA, stated:

That your petitioners, experiencing the injurious effects from the competition of Chinese labour, so largely prevailing in the Province, to the detriment of the general welfare, and which your petitioners, more especially the working class, feel most oppressively, respectfully ask that your Honourable Body, with the view of affording relief, will be pleased, in the present session of the Legislature, to pass a measure similar to that of the Queensland Act of Australia, placing restriction on further immigration of Chinamen; and further, that in the construction of the Intercolonial Railway, the employment of Chinese labor shall be prohibited; and, also that you will see fit to ratify the Act of this Provincial Government in placing the local tax they have upon the Chinese in this country.³⁷

The references to Chinese labour, the working class and Chinamen and the call for selective anti-Chinese discrimination in employment practices and taxation point

³³*Colonist*, 4 December 1878.

³⁴*Colonist*, 11 September 1878.

³⁵Tai Sing v. Maguire (1878), 1 *British Columbia Reports*, Pt. I 101 (SC).

³⁶David Lai, *Chinatowns* (Vancouver 1988), 192; Wickberg et. al., *From China to Canada*, 30-41.

³⁷House of Commons, *Journal*, Vol. XIII, 1879, Appendix No. 4, 62.

to the intersection of class, status, gender, and racism in the self-conception of the WPA. All elements are found in comments made within and without the organization about its purposes and practices.

There is evidence of class consciousness and class conflict in the discourse used by participants in the Association and by both its supporters and its opponents.³⁸ Reports of its meetings in the two daily newspapers in Victoria, the *Standard* and the *Colonist*, were peppered with references to workers and the working class. Only once were Chinese in non-labouring occupations mentioned.³⁹ Feature articles, some reprinted from newspapers in San Francisco and other American cities, and editorials in those two Victoria dailies focused on cheap, competitive Chinese labour and portrayed the Association's activities in class terms. Both newspapers eventually expressed public support for the WPA. The *Colonist* observed that the "white" working classes were pursuing their "necessities" successfully in their agitation against the Chinese.⁴⁰

Although hostility was primarily and specifically directed at Chinese workers, WPA members were also hostile toward Euro-Canadian employers of the Chinese. Speakers at meetings condemned those employers and the governments which supported them. One pointed out that certain employers who could not get work done for nothing resorted to employing Chinese. Another accused the BC government of being a tool of large employers of Chinese labour when it pretended to be serious about dealing with the Chinese by passing a tax bill in the summer of 1878 that it knew would be disallowed.⁴¹ The Association identified the names and numbers of employers of Chinese in the city whom members were urged not to patronize. At one point a member expressed concern that an employer of Chinese labour was about to be admitted to membership.⁴² Chinese merchants or business-owners were not targeted even though the Victoria City Directory for 1877-78 listed fifteen Chinese as store or restaurant owners or merchants.⁴³ Employers of Chinese domestic workers and proprietors of hotels, laundries, tailoring establishments, and boot and shoe factories were the objects of hostility.

Elements of class conflict were also evidenced in the response of prominent members of the local Victoria community to the Association's activities. Opposition to the WPA and support for continuing Chinese immigration came mainly from landowners or employers of Chinese or their supporters. For example, a Councillor Dalby, who was foreman at the Belmont Tannery where 50 Chinese workers were employed, claimed that Chinese employment was unavoidable because the firm

³⁸Fifteen of the twenty-four WPA executive members and speakers at its meetings who can be identified in both the Victoria City Directory for 1877-78 and in the Census of 1881 were employees or skilled craftsmen.

³⁹*Colonist*, 4 February 1879.

⁴⁰*Colonist*, 22 November 1878.

⁴¹*Colonist*, 2 October 1878.

⁴²*Colonist*, 10 October 1878; *Standard*, 10 and 15 October 1878.

⁴³*Guide*.

was in competition with San Francisco shoe manufacturers who exclusively employed Chinese at very low wages.⁴⁴ Dalby also rented accommodation to Chinese workers.⁴⁵ In another instance, when the Mayor of Victoria, Roderick Finlayson, wrote to the WPA deploring interference with the Chinese and advocating that all kinds of labour should be admitted to the province, the Association's Vice-President claimed that Mayor Finlayson headed a large element in town that encouraged Chinese labour, asserting that they were the "same class" that had encouraged slavery in the southern United States.⁴⁶ Finlayson was an agent for Lloyds and a member of the California Board of Marine Underwriters. These interventions by employers and their representatives confirmed the beliefs of those members who perceived that a split labour market was working to the advantage of both the employer class and Chinese workers.⁴⁷

Usually, however, class issues and status concerns were articulated together at meetings. Thus one speaker called for measures aimed at elevating "the status of the workingman and his children."⁴⁸ Chinese workers were disparagingly represented as "slave" labour and criticized for not paying taxes and for sending their earnings out of the country. The prohibition of their employment on public works and the inferior political status already assigned to the Chinese through disenfranchisement were often referred to, the latter confirming a statement by the mining baron, Robert Dunsmuir, that the economic and political isolation of the Chinese facilitated further agitation against them.⁴⁹ There were proposals that Chinese workers be prohibited from employment in the private sector and on the railroad, that they not be allowed to work on Sundays, and that licence fees for trades dominated by them should be increased.⁵⁰ There were also efforts to establish homes for the destitute Euro-Canadian men and their families and a suggestion that the WPA become a beneficial society to assist disabled and sick workingmen. These measures aimed at imposing forms of closure to enable Euro-Canadian workers to

⁴⁴ *Colonist*, 4 December, 1878.

⁴⁵ *Colonist*, 13 September, 1878.

⁴⁶ *Standard*, 2 December, 1878.

⁴⁷ It is of interest to note that there were contradictory elements in class responses to the Chinese at that time. For example, Dr. J.S. Helmcken, a prominent member of the Victoria elite, praised the industry and enterprise of the Chinese and opposed their exclusion. See *Helmcken Papers*, British Columbia Archives, Vol. 10.6. ms0505. Several Justices of the BC Supreme Court included in their reasons for disallowing anti-Chinese legislation its discriminatory effect on certain classes of persons which contravened the equality of all residents before and under the law. However, their main objections were that such legislation interfered with the freedom of capital to exploit available sources of labour. See J.P.S. McLaren, "The Early British Columbia Supreme Court and the 'Chinese Question': Echoes of the Rule of Law," *Manitoba Law Journal*, 20 (1991), 107-47.

⁴⁸ *Colonist*, 1 October 1878.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown*, 47.

⁵⁰ *Colonist*, various issues in May and June 1878.

enjoy their rights to employment or to privilege them at the expense of Chinese workers who they believed were already, or would be in the future, depriving them of employment.

The different reactions by the federal and provincial governments to anti-Chinese organizations like the WPA also show evidence of the intersection of class and status. The federal government, reluctant to alienate employers of Chinese labour, refrained from taking restrictive action against Chinese immigrants until the completion of the railway. The Government of British Columbia, in contrast, faced with resentful, anti-Chinese working class voters and organizations like the WPA, did pass exclusionary legislation, although much of it was disallowed.

Gender aspects intersected with racialization and with several of the above class and status concerns. Not only did the Association's very name focus on one gender, but much of the racist discourse used to describe the object of its activities was gendered in referring to "Chinamen," "Chinaman," "John Chinaman," or sometimes just "John."⁵¹ Chinese women were absent from the discourse in the Association, probably due in part to the small number of Chinese women in the population. Most Chinese were bonded male labourers which produced the criticism that they did not bring their families with them and would not make Canada their home. In one case, a speaker said "Our civilization has taught us to hire like men, and now the leaders of society ask us to live like Chinamen."⁵²

Although men organized and operated the WPA, at an early meeting the president stated that working women had "suffered more than working men" and were invited to become members with a voice and a vote.⁵³ However, there is no record of any woman having spoken at meetings. There was also recognition that the WPA was to protect the working man and his wife and children. One speaker advised members as follows: "if you can't get a white woman to wash your shirts, wash them yourselves," a statement implying both that these men viewed their womenfolk as domestic labourers and that they should not pay a Chinese to do their washing.⁵⁴ Another suggested that "the ladies appear to be very fond of Chinamen," presumably with reference to certain better-off women's preference for Chinese domestic workers.⁵⁵ One speaker at the first meeting of the WPA referred to "white girls being prohibited from getting employment on account of Mongolians."⁵⁶ There were other calls for the employment of girls in factories in place of Chinese.

Male dominance was therefore a characteristic of the WPA and the men who ran it represented their wives and children as dependent on them. Although data on how these men perceived Chinese women are not available, Premier Walkem, who

⁵¹ *Standard*, 2 December 1878; April 1 1879.

⁵² *Colonist*, 4 December 1878. Emphasis added.

⁵³ *Colonist*, 1 October 1878.

⁵⁴ *Standard*, 3 September 1878.

⁵⁵ *Standard*, 5 November 1878.

⁵⁶ *Colonist*, 3 September 1878.

had addressed the WPA the previous fall, referred in the latter weeks of the organization to all Chinese women as prostitutes, adding that a state of marriage was unknown among the Chinese in Victoria.⁵⁷ This particular gendered racist stereotype was widespread at that time even though most Chinese women in the early days of British Columbia did unpaid work at home.⁵⁸

A primary component of the discourse within the WPA which justified many of its activities was racist, imperialist, and nationalist. Class and "race" were frequently combined in representational statements. For example, references to Chinese labour or to labour competition from the Chinese referred in almost every case to "an alien race," as "Mongolian," "Celestial," "Heathen," "pagan," "parasitical," and "an evil in a European community." At an early meeting of the WPA a leading politician referred to the magnitude of the Chinese Empire, a huge country with an immense population, characterized by tyrannical Mongolian rule and supplied by armaments made by Krupp in Germany! He said the Chinese were an "imperialistic threat."⁵⁹ At later meetings they were described as a "united people," a "weakness to the nation," and "undesirable settlers".⁶⁰ They were contrasted with the "permanent population" and "the free community of Anglo-Saxons" who were "masters of the Continent."⁶¹ Such statements indicate a kind of incipient national consciousness, a feeling of belonging to a community (an ethnos or nation, in Anthias's words) within a superior civilization, for most a national community of Britons throughout the Empire, for some an emerging Canadian nation.⁶² Discourses justifying inclusion or exclusion in those terms are typical of efforts to build what a celebrated student of nationalism has called an imagined community.⁶³

The intersection of class, status, gender, and ethnos (or nationality) occurred as WPA members experienced the Chinese as a menacing presence. Conscious of belonging to a working class, they identified themselves as being different, politically privileged, and members of a civilization and culture superior to that of the Chinese whom they represented in gendered, racist, and proto-nationalist or imperialist terms.

⁵⁷*Standard*, 23 April 1879.

⁵⁸Tamara Adilman, "A Preliminary Sketch of Chinese Women and Work in British Columbia, 1858-1950," in Barbara Latham and Roberta Pazdro, eds., *Not Just Pin Money: Selected Essays on the History of Women's Work in British Columbia* (Victoria 1984), 53-79.

⁵⁹*Standard*, 1 October 1878.

⁶⁰*Colonist*, 4 December 1878; 27 February 1879; 23 April 1879.

⁶¹*Colonist*, 5 December, 1878; 27 February 1879; 23 April 1879.

⁶²Anthias, "Rethinking social divisions," 524-6.

⁶³Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983).

The International Context

Capitalist development and the emergence of national identities were key features of the international context which influenced the WPA's emergence. Legislation had already been passed against Chinese immigrants by other governments in Australia and the United States. At the first meeting of the Association, one speaker referred to the "painful experience" with the Chinese in California and the provincial premier spoke about "young countries like California, Australia and British Columbia being obliged to stop migration of this class."⁶⁴ Subsequently a local politician cited American and English measures taken against alien labour.⁶⁵ On one occasion a report was read from Australia about a member of the Parliament of New South Wales petitioning for restrictions on Chinese immigration.⁶⁶ British Columbians worried that growing support south of the border for immigration restrictions on the Chinese would lead many of them to migrate to Canada.⁶⁷ Articles on the Chinese in California frequently appeared in Victoria newspapers during the life of the WPA, some of them describing the Chinese as a threat to Anglo-Saxon civilization.

The Workingmen's Party of California which promised to rid America of cheap Chinese labour had been formally established in San Francisco in 1877.⁶⁸ The similarity of name, aims, and purposes between the two organizations and the information and transportation channels which connected California to Victoria at that time all point to that party's likely influence on the formation of the organization in BC.

Conclusion

Ward was correct to suggest that the racism found in the WPA was part of a broader anti-Asian process which marginalized the Chinese as outsiders and was underway before the WPA emerged.⁶⁹ That process included sporadic racist outbursts against Chinese gold miners and coal miners, as well as anti-Chinese organizations. Ward also claimed that the significance of early anti-Chinese organizations like the WPA lay in their constant rebirth which he attributed to British Columbia's obsession with "race." However, the above discussion leads to the conclusion that efforts to explain the existence of the WPA in terms of the dominance of one type of inequality, such as racial discrimination, are suspect. Analysis of the Association in intersectional terms problematizes notions of singular identity: neither the Chinese nor the

⁶⁴ *Standard*, 3 September 1878.

⁶⁵ *Colonist*, 2 October 1878.

⁶⁶ *Colonist*, 18 December 1878.

⁶⁷ Roy, *White Man's Province*, 47.

⁶⁸ J.R. Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, Vol. 2 (New York 1921), 255; R. Kauer, "The Workingmen's Party of California," *Pacific Historical Review*, 13 (1944), 278-91; Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 116.

⁶⁹ Ward, *White Canada Forever*, 34-5.

Euro-Canadians in the WPA were simply members of different "races." For example, the former were subject to mutually reinforcing relations of subordination, while the latter acted primarily on what Anthias would call their contradictory location as members of a subordinate class who saw themselves as more worthy workers than the Chinese "Other."⁷⁰

Although it was used by politicians for their own electoral ends, the Association was an organized reaction to prevailing conditions which its leaders and followers interpreted in terms of several intersecting ontological domains. Those conditions included the local and international conjunctures of developing industrial capitalism and national state formation, a male-dominated culture and society, as well as an appreciable increase in Chinese immigration, and a context in which leading members of the WPA had political aspirations. The Association's response to those conditions was a form of status politics that sought employment privileges for Euro-Canadian workers, articulated around imperialistic and gendered racism, emergent nationalism, and class consciousness. In other words, the Association was a site in which not only "race," class, gender, and ethnos (or nation), but also status, coalesced and to a degree became constitutive of each other.⁷¹

The name of the WPA and its self-conception as working on behalf of wage-earning men and their families drew on the domain of gender according to the patriarchal culture of Euro-Canadians. Its members expressed elements of an embryonic, imperialist nationalism in their anti-Chinese rhetoric, describing themselves as belonging to an Anglo-Saxon race, a superior civilization, and the British Empire. With regard to the latter that rhetoric contained pro-British sentiments found in the Canada First movement.⁷² Although the province of British Columbia was too young in 1878 to have developed strong attachments to Canada as a nation, citizen expectations about the coming of the Canadian Pacific Railway, a component of Macdonald's National Policy and a significant element in the emergence of Canadian nationalism, probably reinforced imperialist in-group sentiments.⁷³

In the Association's practical objectives class and status were more central than gender and nation. The politics of the WPA expressed what Barbalet, discussing status, calls expectations and aspirations for entitlement based on norms which arise through interested action and resistance to dominant class power.⁷⁴ In that respect, therefore, the WPA exemplified the immature, developing working-class consciousness which Creese finds to have been characteristic of racism in the early labour

⁷⁰Anthias, "Rethinking Social Divisions," 532.

⁷¹Anthias, "Rethinking Social Divisions," 527, 531.

⁷²Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism* (Toronto 1970), 48-77.

⁷³Donald Swainson, *Sir John A. Macdonald: the Man and the Politician* (Kingston 1989), 109.

⁷⁴Barbalet, "Limitations of Class Theory," 566-7.

movement in British Columbia.⁷⁵ But she also recognized that working-class opposition to the Chinese was influenced by the latter's inferior political status.

These types of intersection between class and status in the WPA occurred at a particular historical conjuncture, a formative period in the development of British Columbian society. Reserve lands were being assigned as a means of dealing with the presence and demands of Aboriginal peoples.⁷⁶ The economy was undergoing a transition from mercantile capitalism and independent commodity production, as found respectively in the activities of the Hudson's Bay Company and in gold mining, to industrial capitalism, represented by coal mining, shipbuilding, and small manufacturing. During this social and economic transformation new patterns of social and economic organization were emerging. Faced with economic and ideological uncertainty, members of the WPA used racism as a resource by mobilizing against a readily available "Other" that was easily targeted.⁷⁷ Former gold miners who found it necessary to pursue opportunities for wage labour joined other workers who became unemployed due to the depression of the 1870s.⁷⁸ Both groups were compelled by the emerging industrial capitalist order to sell their labour power in order to obtain a livelihood for themselves and their families. They were desperate for employment in a year of economic recession. Of 30 miners listed in the Victoria City Directory for 1878, several were speakers at WPA meetings or members of the Association's executive. Those adherents of the WPA who lost gainful employment or who were having to shift from being independent commodity producers to doing waged labour were coping with the experience of downward social mobility, a process found to be a major factor behind outbursts of xenophobia and racism.⁷⁹

In various sites of capitalist development racialized statuses have been ideologically and strategically significant as a medium and a product of class relations and class conflict. Like the anti-Chinese demands of Vancouver Island coalminers and the organized racism of the shoreworkers in the BC salmon fishery, the racist discourse of the WPA intersected with and skewed the content of class conflict as the organization sought to create what Poulantzas called class strata.⁸⁰ For the more

⁷⁵Creese, "Class, Ethnicity and Conflict," 73.

⁷⁶Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver 1977), 175.

⁷⁷John Solomos and Les Back, *Racism and Society* (London 1996), 100.

⁷⁸Roy, *White Man's Province*, 48; F.J. Barnard, MP described Victoria labourers as those who had been mining for a number of years and "have to fall back on the ranks of labour ... men who are labourers of necessity." *House of Commons Journal*, XIII (1879), 38.

⁷⁹Adolf Wimmer, "Explaining xenophobia and racism: a critical review of current research approaches," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 20 (1997).

⁸⁰A. Muszinski, "Class Formation and Class Consciousness: The Making of Shoreworkers in the BC Fishing Industry," *Studies in Political Economy*, 20 (1986), 85-116; Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London 1979); Christopher McAll, *Class, Ethnicity and Social Inequality* (Montreal 1990); Bryan Palmer, "Listening to History Rather

class conscious WPA members, racism was a medium through which a certain working-class fraction came to live its relations to another fraction, and through it to capital itself, since the achievement of the goals of the WPA would have weakened the position of capitalist employers by denying them access to a particular type of cheap labour.⁸¹

On the issue of whether or not the competition from Chinese workers was actual or merely anticipated, clearly it was real in the case of the boot and shoe factory and imminent with regard to the forthcoming construction of the railroad. The absence of other evidence on the matter suggests that to a large degree the Chinese workers were being scapegoated for the lack of available employment. Whether or not the competition to which the WPA was reacting was actual or anticipated, Olzak and her colleagues would see it as another case of ethnic conflict attributable to competition, particularly during periods of economic contraction.⁸²

The rise and fall of the WPA occurred during a particular period in the development of class relations in the province. Although a Miners's Mutual Protective Association had been formed in 1877 during a strike by coal miners on Vancouver Island, capital-labour relations had not yet produced a developed trade unionism and the overt class antagonisms which subsequently characterized the province's political culture. Like other short-lived anti-Chinese organizations within the province during the late 19th century, the Association arose in a frontier setting where shifting economic and political trends beset life with uncertainty, particularly for labourers. Transient workers moved around in search of employment, making it difficult to sustain active involvement in organizations. The brief existence of the WPA was doubtless due in part to labourers' transience. But other factors were that the Association lacked a specific objective after the petition to Ottawa had been submitted and was no longer useful to opportunist politicians in search of electoral support.

In the last quarter of the 19th century in British Columbia organized opposition to the Chinese came primarily from wage-earners. A different situation arose after World War I when small business owners joined labour organizations in campaigns for exclusion. The difference between 1878 and that subsequent period recalls Boswell's findings on anti-Chinese activity in the United States in the late 19th century where, at different historical conjunctures, different classes engaged in

than Historians: Reflections on Working Class History," *Studies in Political Economy*, 20 (1986), 77. On racism as skewing the content of class conflict, see Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour 1800-1990* (Toronto 1992), 125.

⁸¹ S. Hall, "Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance" in UNESCO, *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* (Paris 1980), 341.

⁸² S. Olzak, "Causes of Ethnic Conflict and Protest in Urban America, 1877-1889," *Social Science Research*, 16 (1987), 190-1, 207; Susan Olzak and Joane Nagel (eds.), *Competitive Ethnic Relations* (New York 1986), 6.

status politics against the Chinese.⁸³ The US was one of several countries, including the United Kingdom and Australia, where exclusionary laws were instituted against the Chinese before 1878. Leaders and followers of the WPA were encouraged in their efforts by those measures which were themselves in part responses to the threat of cheap Chinese labour.⁸⁴

For several decades after 1878 relations between the mainstream population of British Columbia and the Chinese became increasingly hostile, resulting in various forms of status assignment, notably the notorious head tax, and legislated exclusion, which eventually reduced Chinese immigration to a trickle. Those measures also contained intersectional aspects. For example, both the first head tax in 1885 and the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act provided for the admission of wealthier Chinese merchants on the grounds that they would be good for trading relations between Canada and China. Because they created different statuses for Chinese immigrants by privileging those among them whose activities were in the interests of the business classes, these measures were not mere examples of racist discrimination against the Chinese in general. Like the WPA, they too suggest that analyses of racist movements, organizations and policies which consider intersectionality can avoid reaching oversimplified conclusions. An intersectional perspective can also inform a politics of multiple identifications when it fosters dialogue and collaboration between groups organizing around particular struggles.⁸⁵

Thanks are due to Georgia Hamilton for research assistance and to William Carroll, John Lutz and Patricia Roy for constructive comments on an earlier draft.

⁸³T.E. Boswell, "A Split Labour Market Analysis of Discrimination Against Chinese Immigrants, 1850-1882," *American Sociological Review*, 51 (1986), 352-70.

⁸⁴*Passim*; Fong and W. Markham, "Immigration, Ethnicity and Conflict: The California Chinese, 1849-1882," *Sociological Inquiry*, 61 (1991), 471-90; Miles, *Racism and Migrant Labour*.

⁸⁵*Anthias*, "Rethinking social divisions," 532.