

Horses of a Shared Colour: Interpreting Class and Identity in Tum-of-the-Century Vancouver

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REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Horses of a Shared Colour: Interpreting Class and Identity in Turn-of-the-Century Vancouver

H.V. Nelles

Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995).

Robert A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1996).

IT IS A RARE EVENT in Canadian historiography that two fine books should appear simultaneously dealing with the same city in the same time period. Rarer still is the fact that the two authors would subsequently debate the core concept of their books — the importance of class in history — in a regional journal. One is an urban historian, the other a historian of the working class. Reviewers of the two books are thus tempted to explore the “upstairs-downstairs” trope, emphasizing the differences the authors uncover in looking at Vancouver with different methods from different ends of the social spectrum. While it is obvious that the two authors differ ideologically, it is also quite apparent on my reading that they both have the same city in view, that they agree on many things, and that the triangulation of social phenomena from different observation points reinforces some of the conclusions of both. They rely on each others’ work and generously acknowledge each

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others' accomplishments. Despite the contrasting posture of the authors there is much shared understanding in these books, a fact reflected in the choice of fine teams of horses on the covers — grey for Leier, black for McDonald. Thus it seems to me more important for these unifying features to be identified in commentary if only to resist ideological relativism; Marxists and non-Marxists can agree on the truth of some things.

First it must be said that these uncommonly fine books are worthy representations of the Canadian historical profession in the 1990s. Both are solidly based in the traditional virtues of documentary analysis. McDonald and Leier have done their time in the archives, but their vision has not been narrowed in the process. These books both began as theses on different sides of the country; prolonged reflection in McDonald's case has resulted in a book that transcends the thesis. And while both books are solidly grounded in the lived historical experience, local situation, and specific case of Vancouver in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, both draw from a much broader literature and address a much wider set of issues. These are rich, stimulating books to be read by historians in all parts of the country for the light Vancouver's history might shed on parallel lives. In the same way that Michael Katz and his students made Hamilton the benchmark for quantitative social analysis in the 1970s, McDonald and Leier in their different ways have made Vancouver the standard for a more nuanced second-generation interpretation of urban social change in the late 1990s.

Mark Leier has the narrower focus — on the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council — but the broader theoretical ambition. Beginning with the old question "Why is there no socialism in North America?" Leier hopes that by closely interrogating the experience of organization within the labour movement in one city he might shed light upon the influence of "labour bureaucracy" on that movement throughout North America. In the book he seems less interested in socialist doctrine or politics than upon social revolution — the phrase pops up several times in the text. Why did the working class not rise up against its oppressors? Did material conditions preclude revolt? Were the workers betrayed? In *Red Flags and Red Tape* Leier proposes to test the possibility that labour bureaucrats themselves stood in the way.

Many years ago Robert McDonald departed on his study of Vancouver as a "new urban historian" interested in describing the social system of a rapidly growing North American "frontier" city. Debates over class and race subsequently tore the underlying intellectual fabric of that unconflicted structural-functionalist problematic apart. As he navigated these treacherous cross-currents McDonald repositioned himself to study the forces of what he calls "both cohesion and conflict" between the emerging social groupings in the city in the years before the Great War. Class and race, he discovered, were not sufficient explanators of expressed identities. Status consciousness (which involved a degree of individual choice) based upon other shared characteristics — religion, taste, ethnicity, educa-

tion, association — cut across these other descriptors sometimes amplifying and sometimes diminishing differences. Turning much recent social analysis on its head McDonald concludes: "class identities were most keenly felt at the summit of the social structure, where social status reinforced economic position to create a coherent, powerful, and self-conscious upper class." (xix) Middle and working-class identities were more complicated, compromised and conflicted.

These two paragraphs of prolegomena ought to set out fairly clearly the two differing ideological traditions to which the authors adhere and the common ground they set out to explore in these monographs. Leier looks out from the minute books, memoirs and documentary detritus of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council on the rest of the city. McDonald has painstakingly compiled a data-base of top businessmen, social leaders, civic politicians and activists in the Trades and Labour Council. In this optic labour is part of a larger whole, seen in relation both to the working class and other social groups in the city. Where their focus converges despite their differences the two authors tend to see much the same thing.

Leier's reason for looking is less important than what he finds. Ostensibly he wants to know how the bureaucratization of the labour movement affected its outlook and activities. After much rummaging through the literature and a good deal of crashing and banging of pots and pans in the kitchen, he concludes somewhat lamely: "This study provides few answers to the issues of bureaucracy in the labour movement, save to stress that it is a complex phenomenon that is not easily summed up in a few generalizations." (12) It is not the ideological difference between leaders and led that is important to him — at various times the leaders were more or less militant, more or less socialist — as the observation that verges upon tautology that the leadership had power and the rank-and-file didn't.

Fortunately Leier does more than examine the issue of the ideological and programmatic influence of labour bureaucratization. By examining the ideas and personnel of the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council over this period during which first labourist and then socialist leaders predominated, he tries "to understand the complex relationship between bureaucrats of the left and the right and ideologies." (4) Rather than ask why something is more or less than something else, he asks why in this case two ideologies "fit" their respective bearers so well.

It is just as well his inquiry moves away from its initial proposition because it is difficult to take the issue of bureaucracy seriously in this context. The Vancouver Trades and Labour Council during this period resembled a club or voluntary society more than a power-wielding, hierarchical, functionally differentiated organization worthy of the name bureaucracy. The municipal government was a bureaucracy; the British Columbia Electric Railway was a bureaucracy. Few labour organizations in Canada during this period achieved the scale and characteristics identified by the contemporary German sociologists. The Council's very lack of power over its constituent bodies and skill at evading such situations in which it might have to exercise its "power" is the subject of a quite illuminating chapter. As the book

proceeds the focus shifts away from bureaucracy towards labour aristocracy and factors beyond as explanatory variables. That seems to be the direction the evidence leads and to his credit Leier follows.

What Leier shows is that a relatively small group of men can be identified as persistent officeholders in this organization, that they can be divided into two groups — labourists and socialists — and that these two groups of people differed not only ideologically but also sociologically. The working class was divided, and not just by the politics of the labour movement. This is the real value of Leier's work and its point of convergence with that of McDonald.

Making Vancouver unfolds chronologically and topically. A chapter on the lumber society of the 1860s and 1870s is followed by chapters on the city builders drawn to the site by opportunities or sent by the CPR in the 1880s. The chapter on the 1890s focuses on the political divisions that opened up during that decade between what might be called in another context the patricians and the populists. It is only in the next chapter, dealing with the turn-of-the-century era, that the conflicts between capital and labour come most clearly into view. But in all of these chapters McDonald stresses the multiple identities of participants as he concentrates upon those forces that divide and those that hold people together in a commonly perceived social frame. McDonald's vision of the city's development is implicit in its earliest beginnings. Lumber society was, as he argues, "structured primarily by class." (31) But that was not the sole organizing principle, or the operative division that most marked the social landscape. Ethnic identities held groups together which were deeply divided by class. Moreover race created "rookeries" and "rancheries" that excluded Asians and Natives from the social system around them.

This sense that class was only one of several axes of social differentiation is carried through to the chapter on the formation of the Vancouver economy and society after 1900. The heavy emphasis upon lumbering, fishing and transportation and commercial activities relative to manufacturing imparted a particular shape to the occupational characteristics of the Vancouver working class. Beyond this structural bias McDonald argues that "conflicting identities within the wage earning population" (101) acted as a barrier to class formation in the classic sense. Income, occupational status and "the hardpan of racial prejudice" were in his view the forces that tended to confuse working-class identity.

But there was another force just as important, capitalism itself. The desire to "make it" linked with the apparent opportunity to do so cut across class boundaries. Vancouver continued to remain an open society throughout this period, McDonald argues, "a society in the making rather than a society made." (146) The social system remained to a certain degree fluid and the barriers permeable. All around people were moving up in the social scale, especially during the periodic booms. Mining promotions, real estate speculation, and commercial ventures exerted great power over the imagination of upper, middle and working-class citizens. Particu-

larly suggestive is McDonald's table on page 140 showing the occupations of applicants for Crown Land during one week in 1912. Nurses, stenographers, clerks, workers, mechanics and labourers accounted for 45 per cent of the total! To complete the irony, the bourgeoisie could also provide a perch as Leier shows, for the most militant socialists.

McDonald's exploration of the divisions within the Vancouver working class, the lines of connection through ethnicity, religion, voluntary associations, property ownership, and investments that crossed class boundaries, career paths that turned workers into businessmen, and worker leaders who were businessmen not workers, brings us back to Mark Leier and his brooding concern with the foregone revolutionary potential of the working class. In an excellent chapter entitled "Labourism, Bureaucracy, and the Labour Aristocracy," Leier shows how a producerist or labourist ideology "suited the experience" of the skilled craftsmen who were the first worker leaders. These ideologies "reflected their relative success under the developing capitalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Immigrants from other countries were much more likely to be factory hands, and this reinforced the labourist belief that ethnicity, skill and success were intimately connected." (98) These were people whose ideology provided them with a means of joining the society around them on more equitable terms; they imagined themselves to be on their way up. Some of them did move into the middle class by becoming property owners, proprietors, businessmen and even investors. Meliorist labourist ideologies which sought to reform not abolish capitalism did not get in the way when the doors to the middle class swung open. "To the degree that the VTLC leaders saw themselves as members of the community, rather than as members of a class," Leier concludes, "their culture, even their political culture, became more conservative and compromising." (123) The culprit then was not bureaucracy, but ambition.

On paper the most revolutionary leaders of the working class, it turns out, were not themselves technically members of that class. The younger socialist firebrands who eventually took over the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council were newspapermen, real estate agents, merchants, shopkeepers. A portion of the middle class, therefore, presented itself as the vanguard of the working class in opposition to older, labourist, skilled tradesmen. The new men were socialists on paper, symbolic manipulators from outside the class with an intellectual sympathy with the working class but with even less interest than the labourists in letting that class speak for itself.

When McDonald gets to the climax of Vancouver's social and economic development (roughly from the late 1890s to 1913) he divides Vancouver into three social groups for analysis following the example of a 1912 Methodist-Presbyterian social survey: *the wealthy business and professional class; the artisan or moderately well-to-do*, and the immigrant. Vancouver's labour leaders, labourist or socialist, fall into the middle category, being lumped together with the likes of H.H. Stevens, Louis D. Taylor and other populists on the make. Leier might not like the

interpretive schema, but on the basis of his book he would have to agree with the implicit fluidity of class lines in this part of the social scale. And he agrees too that issues of culture, status and other factors blurred class lines. (123)

Society, or a sub-group within society, is made both by the process of inclusion and exclusion. Both authors pay a good deal of attention to who is defined as "in" and "of" society, and who is not. Conceptions of race, ethnicity and gender divided the working class Leier readily acknowledges: "Racism was the ugly side to the populist critique." (13) He devotes an entire chapter to confronting the patriarchal and racist assumptions of both labourists and socialist in the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council. Ethnicity, masculinity, and notions of respectability separated workers from workers, even as opportunity, property ownership, religion and relative prosperity overlay notions of class with notions of community. Vancouver's workers were, as McDonald also shows, a class divided. Many workers in what he calls "The Immigrant Section" of the population were rendered socially invisible; they remained outsiders whose very existence "challenged the values and lifestyle of the respectable majority, especially on downtown streets." (224) And here at the bottom lines of social demarcation doors did not readily yield to the ambitious.

Vancouver, during this period, became a city of citizens, McDonald argues, and not necessarily classes. What he calls "the mainstream majority" contained representatives from the "respectable" members of all three status groups. "Residents of the upper and middling strata defined themselves in part through their rejection of people in the lower stratum, the two opposites bound together in 'a dialectic of representational inclusion and exclusion.'" (236) McDonald is interested in the ties that bound people together despite some of their differences as well as those differences that set some people temporarily or permanently apart.

Leier's nuanced treatment of class in *Red Flags and Red Tape* is perhaps the most convincing rejoinder to his call for an unreconstructed Marxism in his recent 1996 *BC Studies* article. Class, as McDonald and Leier show, is one of several identities. It can be more or less salient. Leier and McDonald do the historical profession a service by directing attention to the precise circumstances in which class and other identities can merge into a single conception of social reality that is acted upon. Sometimes class may be perceived as the big divide; but just as often other cleavages divide more deeply as both authors clearly demonstrate. The citizens of Vancouver, as McDonald shows so skilfully, also made themselves by their associations and exclusions. It is this intangible sense of community, sometimes a more powerful force than class, that binds disparate kinds of people together into a society despite their differences and casts others into the outer darkness. Leier is clearly impatient that the revolution did not come and has not come to blow the contradictions underlying this collective identity apart, but when he confronts the evidence he has a discriminating eye and sound judgement. The ideological bluster aside, his Vancouver with its "complex and fluid relationship between class,

ethnicity, race and gender" (McDonald, *BC Studies*, 92) looks a lot like McDonald's.



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