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*Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du
Canada*, vol. 20, n° 1, 2009, p. 1-56.

To cite this article, use the following information :

URI: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/039780ar>

DOI: 10.7202/039780ar

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2009 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS OF THE CHA

Harold, Marg, and the Boys: The Relevance of Class in Canadian History

CRAIG HERON

Abstract

Class has been a controversial category of historical analysis. Historians and social theorists have often attacked its relevance, but even those who find it a helpful way of understanding the past (and present) have had to deal with challenges from new theoretical perspectives, especially from those sensitive to gender and race. They have also had to recognize that there is no direct link between the material situation of members of a social class and their consciousness of their social situation. Diverse discourses emerge to give meaning to social experience, and are adopted, adapted, or rejected to varying degrees. This paper suggests that, after three decades of debate, we should now consider class formation as a fluid, dynamic process of social differentiation through which people's lives are shaped by the pressures, constraints, and opportunities of their situation in relation to the means of production, the divisions of labour within patriarchy, and the racial distinctions in particular societies; but also one in which people negotiate their own understandings of the world and act on them. To illustrate this process at work, the paper discusses the lives of one working-class family in suburban Toronto from the 1940s to the 1970s and their engagement with new postwar social developments. They not only shaped distinctively working-class forms of gender, suburbanism, religion, ethnicity, citizenship, popular culture, meritocracy, and consumerism; but also wove all of those into a distinctively working-class identity.

In May 1945, a young Canadian couple exchanged wedding vows and began a half-century of life together. Harold, age 23, was still in his Royal Canadian Air Force uniform, but would soon be donning the work clothes of a manual worker in a series of relatively low-skill jobs. Marg, age 21, gave up her position as a telephone operator and started to set up the family household before Harold was finally released from the Air Force. Over the next few years they

helped launch the Baby Boom by having two sons, whom they raised in a small house perched on the outer edge of suburban Toronto. Once the boys were both in school in the late 1950s, Marg returned to the paid workforce, and spent some 20 years as a secretary. Like a declining majority of Canadians in the postwar period, Harold, Marg, and the boys were anglo-Canadian, English-speaking, Canadian-born, and white. They were also working class.

That last label is undoubtedly the most controversial. It has slipped out of common usage in the writing of a good deal of history in recent years. Using class as a category of historical analysis has faced either outright hostility or, more often, benign neglect among those more preoccupied with gender and race as social, cultural, and political identities. The purpose of the following discussion is to use the lives of these four Canadians as a small window on how class worked historically in Canada and to establish its relentless relevance for the writing of our history.

To begin, we need to step out onto a minefield of theoretical contention that Harold, Marg, and at least one of the boys would have found mystifying and probably pointless. Class as a category of historical analysis defies easy definition.¹ In the 1950s and again in the 1980s and 1990s, it was intellectually fashionable to deny that it existed in any significant way, but, even between those points, there was a great deal of intellectual and political contestation over how we would know class when we stumbled over it in the past or present. In the 1970s and 1980s many Canadian social historians kept their ears attuned to the raging debates over the concept that blew up in other parts of the English-speaking world, particularly in Britain.² At that point, for most scholars, there was a broadly shared assumption that the starting point was the world of waged work within capitalist society, that is, the “material” or the “economic.” When, for example, a number of capitalists opened factories, mines, or fast-food outlets and set out to recruit a workforce, and when large numbers of people made themselves available as wage-earners in those enterprises, they collectively began the process of creating class experiences — on both sides of the divide and in relation to other more independent middling social groups. Their interactions — both contestations and accommodations — regularly destabilized and reconstituted material situations. These processes became

1 There has, of course, been a much longer history to the term than I am acknowledging here. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana 1986), 57–9.

2 For example, see Gregory S. Kealey, “Labour and Working-Class History in Canada: Prospects for the 1980s,” *Labour/Le Travail* 7 (1981): 67–94. This marked a departure from Canadian historians’ general indifference to the concept. See S.R. Meeling, “The Concept of Social Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 46, no. 3 (September 1965): 201–18. For a review of the British debates, see Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What’s Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2007).

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known as the “structural” component of class identity, the part that many post-structuralist thinkers have so decisively rejected as “crude reductionism” or “economism.”³

Harold and Marg might not have been so dismissive. They could easily have explained to sceptics exactly what the pressures and constraints of material structures meant. Leaving the family farm with only a Grade Nine education and no marketable skills, Harold’s job prospects and earning ability were restricted. Marg’s background in a shopkeeping family and a Grade Eleven education constrained her employment opportunities to lower-end clerical work at best. These were limited jobs, not expanding careers. What they earned restricted the family’s living standards. They lived most of their married lives in a small, five-room frame house, rarely bought new furniture, ate simple meals, rarely went out to restaurants or movies, relied on older, used cars, had no money for expensive dental work, limited their summer vacations to a visit to Marg’s mother’s cottage and later to short, inexpensive family camping expeditions, and worried constantly about debt. By the end of the 1950s, in fact, they found they could not survive on Harold’s wages alone, and, like thousands of other Canadian working-class housewives at that point, Marg went out to work full time (as employers finally rejected the longstanding taboo on hiring married women). Even with two pay cheques coming in, penny-pinching was a way of life. Only in the 1970s, when both boys had moved out and established independent households, did Harold and Marg’s living standards begin to improve to any great extent.⁴

Indeed, Marg could also have explained how, in the face of ever-present economic vulnerability, she managed the family household as effectively as possible to sustain what historians have come to call a family economy. Economical shopping to stretch wages, along with family labour to avoid cash outlays, were still crucial in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ As a small investment strategy, Harold and Marg also bought two acres of land with no water or sewer

3 The three most influential books in critiquing “materialism” were Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983); Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press 1988); and Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991). See also Patrick Joyce, ed., *Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995); John R. Hall, ed., *Reworking Class* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1997).

4 Marg was on the leading edge of married women returning to full-time employment. Between 1951 and 1961, the proportion of married women in Ontario working for pay rose from one in ten to one in five. By the mid-1960s, half the province’s female workforce was married. Joan Sangster, “Doing Two Jobs: The Wage-Earning Mother, 1945–70,” in *A Diversity of Women: Ontario, 1945–1980*, ed., Joy Parr (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1995), 99–100; Veronica Strong-Boag, “Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945–60,” *Canadian Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (December 1991): 479–81.

5 The backyard vegetable garden lasted only a few summers, probably as a result of the low cost of fresh food in those decades.

connections and a half-finished house, which they spent many years fixing up (in a suburban neighbourhood where such owner-built houses were numerous).⁶ Eventually, they made small sums by selling off four lots for new housing, and, many years later, in the late 1980s, sold the remaining land for a substantial sum. Many working-class families had similar survival strategies in this period, much as they had done for generations in Canada in response to the economic uncertainty of their material situation.⁷

All that said, there has never been a clear theoretical consensus about what various scholars and writers have actually meant by “structure.” Broadly speaking, they drew on two largely unacknowledged (and generally unfortunate) literary images. Liberal writers within the social sciences tended to use geological metaphors of “stratification” made up of “layers” or “strata.” In the structural-functionalist social science of the 1950s and 1960s, classes were simply objective categories of occupation and income in which people found themselves as a result of their individual capabilities, and which existed in a non-conflictual balance with each other that guaranteed social cohesion and integration. Relations among these groups was merely a question of status. Studying social class in this way was largely to describe and label — for example, to identify “lifestyles” or to locate inequality or poverty lines — rather than to analyze how these categories got created and filled with particular people. The most important question seemed to be charting individual movement between occupational groups, or “social mobility,” especially in the middling groups.⁸

6 S.D. Clark noted that in Toronto’s suburbs of the early 1950s, “taking over the countryside in this early phase of movement of population from the city was most successfully accomplished by people in impoverished circumstances prepared to accept whatever the country had to offer them in preference to what was available to them in the city.” The east end of the Township of Scarborough, where Harold and Marg settled, welcomed many such people. S.D. Clark, *The Suburban Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966), 23–46 (quotation at 29). Working-class suburbs in the period are also discussed in Strong-Boag, “Home Dreams,” 484–8; Pierre Vallières, *The White Niggers of America* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), 78–120. On the general phenomenon of owner-building, see Richard Harris, *Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900–1960* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2004), 148–52.

7 Harris, *Creeping Conformity*; Clark, *Suburban Society*; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 200–12. Doug Owrām is undoubtedly right to see all this as a search for security after the disruptions of depression and war. See Doug Owrām, “Canadian Domesticity in the Postwar Era,” in *The Veterans’ Charter and Post-World War II Canada*, eds., Peter Neary and J.L. Granatstein (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 1998), 205–23. See also Magda Fahmi, *Household Politics: Montreal Families and Postwar Reconstruction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). The older patterns are discussed in Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Gender, Age, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993).

8 Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates*, 2nd ed. (London: Polity Press, 1998). There was a Marxist variant that pursued the infinite complexities of mapping the class “positions” or “locations” of various groups within capitalist society,

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Further to the left, the imagery of “structures” often became more architectural than geological. Some orthodox Marxist writing seemed to conceive of the so-called material “base” as a mindless block of bricks and mortar and heavy machinery, though more commonly the focus of attention was the relations of production between owners and wage-earners in and around all that technology. In either case, the “base” was assumed to be analytically distinct from a “superstructure” of institutions, cultures, ideas, ideologies, and languages.⁹ That perspective, however, tended to be the conceptual landscape of theorists, rather than empirically oriented historians, far more of whom got their intellectual inspiration from much more dynamic currents of subtler Marxist thought that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, especially what has become known as anglo-Marxism.¹⁰ Those writers helped many historians to understand that the architectural metaphor does not work, and that the base-superstructure distinction is deeply problematic. The functioning of a factory or a mine or a fast-food outlet rested on the relationships of human beings, as worked out every day on the job, informally and institutionally; but was also shaped from outside by laws and regulatory apparatuses of various kinds and by a host of cultural influences. The material or the economic does not exist in some analytical space completely apart from the discourses of culture and politics, nor does it necessarily take precedence in some kind of hierarchy of causation — simply because the material, the cultural, and the political are so tightly interrelated and mutually constituted.¹¹ In

notably Eric Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985). For a more freewheeling approach to class as status, see Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992).

- 9 For the clearest statement, see G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). That mode of thinking led some Marxist writers and scholars to focus primarily on the top-down restructuring of capitalist industry and its internal management. In particular, see Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).
- 10 Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (London: Polity Press, 1984); Eley and Nield, *Future of Class*, 19–43; Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994).
- 11 Karl Polanyi made this point more than half a century ago in *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Transformation of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1957). More recently, the commanding figure in arguing against a base-superstructure model or a separation of structure and agency was E.P. Thompson. In his early work Anthony Giddens also advanced a parallel notion of “structuration” that integrated the two. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” *New Left Review* 82 (November/December 1973): 3–16; William H. Sewell, Jr., “Toward a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History,” in *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis*, ed., Lenard R. Berlanstein (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 15–38.

particular, studies of the state in its many dimensions have emphasized the relative autonomy of its policies, programs, and practices and its critical impact on economic activity, not in a simple, servile relationship to the material realm.¹² Through international comparisons, we have also learned how differently the social relations of production can develop in different regions and countries, depending on the timing of industrialization, the particular forms of industrial development, the extent of managerial and technological innovation, different pools of labour, different traditions of labour organizing, and, in particular, divergent state policies. This was why so many of us talked about class formation as not universal, but as contingent and specific, and why there has been such a great emphasis on narrowly focused local studies of class experience.¹³

What made all this seem “structural” was how much of it appeared to be beyond much individual control, involving large numbers of people simultaneously in broadly similar processes of seemingly inescapable subordination. The relentlessness is perhaps best symbolized by two clocks — one beside the bed and the other at the entrance to the workplace. I invite any sceptics to ride Toronto’s Bloor-Danforth subway line any weekday morning between 6:00 and 8:00 a.m. to see the stamp of that structural reality in the tired faces of working-class commuters moving between those two clocks.

Much of even the more sensitive, sophisticated research and writing on class and class formation in history, however, suffered from a severe myopia about gender, which has always added crucial additional dimensions to any notion of “structure.” The working class was not simply made up of male wage-earners, but also included other unwaged members of the family households out of which those wage-earners emerged each day — women, children, the elderly, and the disabled. The family and all the relationships and practices within it therefore had to be a major focus of analytical attention alongside the world of production. Girls and women faced systematic restrictions on the range of their social options, both in the family home, where they were expected to take responsibility for most domestic tasks, and in the broader public world of employment and citizenship. Compelling discourses about gender roles and identities, and about rigidly distinct public and private spheres, justi-

12 Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (London: Quartet Books, 1984); Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State: Marxist Theories and Methods* (New York: New York University Press, 1982); Leo Panitch, “The Role and Nature of the Canadian State,” in *The Canadian State: Political Economy and Political Power*, ed., Leo Panitch (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 3–77; Ian McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (December 2000): 617–45.

13 In particular, see Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

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fied these inequities, including male labour leaders' tendency to construct the working class as masculine.¹⁴

Similarly, theorists of ethnicity and race have reminded us that the life experiences of all wage-earners and their families also took shape within additional limitations and pressures resulting from their position within particular ethnic and racial relationships. Occupational hierarchies in almost all Canadian enterprises included ethnic and racial distinctions that grew out of segmented labour markets and invariably put the white, anglo-Celtic workers at the top and various other European, Asian, African, and First Nations groups in less skilled, less well-paying jobs further down the occupational scale. Potent discourses of racial ordering sustained those practices of discrimination, nurtured by Canada's place as a white-settler dominion within a far-flung, multi-racial empire. "Race" was thus closely connected to nationality and citizenship.¹⁵

Writers and scholars now tend to argue that these three forces worked together, simultaneously, to produce distinctive experiences, for example, for a male Italian-Canadian construction worker, a female black Caribbean-born domestic worker, or a white anglo-Celtic female secretary like Marg. Bringing together this "holy trinity" of social history obviously injects more complexity and diversity into class analysis, and it draws our attention to many more sites of experience — at home, in neighbourhoods, in community organizations, in schools, in health clinics, and so on — but it does not make class disappear. It simply requires more sensitivity in investigating how these social forces interacted.¹⁶

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- 14 Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice," in *Gender and History in Canada*, eds., Joy Parr and Mark Rosenfeld (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1996), 8–27; Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1991); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose, "Introduction: Gender and the Reconstruction of European Working-Class History," in *Gender and Class in Modern Europe*, eds., Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1–33; Meg Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love: Three Generations of Women's Work in the Home* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1980).
- 15 Donald Avery, *Reluctant Host: Canada's Response to Immigrant Workers, 1896–1994* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995); Constance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Franca Iacovetta with Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants: Women, Workers, and Communities in Canadian History, 1840s–1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).
- 16 In particular, see Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Ruth Frager, "Labour History and the Interlocking Hierarchies of Class, Ethnicity, and Gender: A Canadian Perspective," *International Review of Social History* 44 (1999): 217–47; Pamela Sugiman, "Privilege and Oppression: The Configuration of Race, Gender, and Class in Southern Ontario Auto Plants, 1939 to 1949," *Labour/Le Travail* 47 (Spring 2001): 83–113; Kathleen Canning, "Gender: Meanings, Methods, and Metanarratives," in *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3–62; Sonya O. Rose, "Class Formation and the Quintessential Worker," in *Reworking Class*, 133–66.

The “structure” of the class experience, then, has meant the regularized patterns of engagement with the means of production, the divisions of labour within patriarchy, and the racial distinctions in particular societies.¹⁷ Most importantly, structure has meant dynamic relationships — between the broad social classes, genders, and racial and ethnic groups, and among people within those categories. Inevitably, it meant that those structural patterns were never fixed for all time, but were constantly shifting and changing, being reconstructed and reformed. Those who insist that fragmentation, instability, and fluidity are hallmarks of our turn-of-the-millennium globalized, postmodern society have underestimated how much has always been in flux since the first flickering of capitalist modernity in the mid-nineteenth-century in British North America. There was never a moment of one single lurch into a homogeneously modern experience. Class formation was always a project under construction, and class “location” was frequently fluid as people moved (or were pushed) between occupational possibilities.¹⁸

Of course, as the class experience kept moving under the workers’ feet over the past century and a half, what has been at work has been the uneven accumulation of wealth and the unequal distribution of power and authority, in which more powerful social classes and the power blocs within which they participated pursued their own best interests.¹⁹ Power is central to any sustainable conception of class. But power did not flow only from a single, centralized source. Capitalists did not dictate all working-class behaviour in any mechanistic way, and, despite plenty of evidence of strike-breaking and red-baiting, state policy has seldom relied principally on overt coercion. Workers’ responses were conditioned through a vast number of decentralized forces, some of them within state institutions, others elsewhere. In this sense, the post-modern/post-structural critique of what is taken to be old-fashioned Marxism is right to draw our attention to the diffusion of power to many sites.²⁰ Although Harold and

17 Neville Kirk also uses this broader construct of structure in “Decline and Fall, Resilience and Regeneration: A Review Essay on Social Class,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 57 (Spring 2000): 88–102.

18 Craig Heron and Robert Storey, “On the Job in Canada,” in *On the Job: Confronting the Labour Process in Canada*, eds., Craig Heron and Robert Storey (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press), 3–46; Gregory S. Kealey, “The Structure of Canadian Working-Class History,” in *Workers and Canadian History*, 329–44.

19 Jamie Brownlee, *Ruling Canada: Corporate Cohesion and Democracy* (Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood Publishing, 2005); Stanley Aronowitz, *How Class Works: Power and Social Movement* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003); Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, NY: ILR Press, 2000); Ian McKay, “Canada as a Long Liberal Revolution: On Writing the History of Actually Existing Canadian Liberalism, 1840s–1940s,” in *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, eds., Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 347–452.

20 Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1999).

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Margaret had a strong sense of who the rich and powerful were, epitomized in household discussions about the flamboyant Canadian industrialist E.P. Taylor, those were distant, relatively unknown people. They had a sharper sense of difference from the variety of interventionist middle-class people they more regularly encountered in inherently disciplinary settings — the company managers, doctors, school teachers, clergymen, government bureaucrats, and others who had a direct or indirect role in controlling and regulating their lives. These middle-class professionals were in fact the custodians and propagators of the regulatory discourses that promoted the self-disciplined body and mind.²¹ Harold and Marg might have resented the ways that the members of these other classes impinged on their lives, but they also generally worried about their own inadequacy and inferiority alongside such people. These were not merely individual reactions, but formed broad patterns across many working-class communities.²²

In fact, the deepest scholarly and theoretical controversies have entered in when we ask what people thought about their structural circumstances, and how they responded to them. On the one hand, it would certainly be unwise to assume that living within structural pressures and constraints had no impact on how members of particular classes conceived of themselves and their material situation. Strong dispositions, widely shared by people in diverse situations, emerged from living within those regular, routinized contexts.²³ Yet, on the other hand, it would also be an exaggeration to argue that consciousness or awareness of their lives was completely determined in this way, that their structural situation led straightforwardly to any obvious, predictable way of thinking and acting, whether compliance or resistance. Indeed, one of the most significant breakthroughs in recent writing of social history has been the recognition that consciousness of the class experience cannot be a simple read off class location as a direct reflection of material conditions. There has to be theoretical space to allow for the historical subjects, individually and collectively, to

21 As many scholars have been reminding us, coping with these structural pressures constantly engaged the human body — in physical labour, childbirth, levels of health and nutrition, accidents, sexuality, and much more. Kathleen Canning, “The Body as Method? Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History,” in *Gender History in Practice*, 168–89; Ava Baron, “Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian’s Gaze,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (Spring 2000): 143–60.

22 They were palpably nervous having to entertain the parents of the older boy’s first partner, a university professor and his stay-at-home wife. On this general working-class sense of failure alongside the more educated, see Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); also James Lorimer and Myfanwy Phillips, *Working People: Life in a Downtown City Neighbourhood* (Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel, 1971), 46.

23 One influential theorist labels such “durable, transposable dispositions” as the “habitus” that shaped much behaviour. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1977); and “What Makes a Social Class? On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32 (1987): 1–17.

engage in some independent reflection and assessment, to exercise some degree of agency, albeit within the narrative limitations of the language through which it is expressed. Harold and Marg, like others in their situation, processed the economic constraints on their lives through familiar cultural lenses. To use a slippery concept, we can say that this is how people have “experienced” their structured social existence. Moreover, the meaning that people like them drew from their social experience could vary, particularly because there were always many different discourses at work attempting to ascribe that meaning and to encourage particular behaviour or action. Some of those flowed through institutionalized channels like the mass media or the education system, or even the labour movement, while others operated through informal modes and practices of communication on the job, in the neighbourhood, or around the kitchen table. They might mutually reinforce a compelling social vision, but the divergences among them could create plenty of discursive cacophony. People like Harold and Marg then understood the world around them through a complex kind of awareness that was shaped by the structured patterns of their daily life, the information, ideas, and language available to make sense of them, and their own willingness and ability to accept, reject, or adapt those understandings.²⁴

It is worth noting in passing that most of the sound and fury has raged over working-class consciousness (or the lack of it), but class awareness has varied among the major social classes depending on the power and resources (or “capacities”) at their disposal.²⁵ Class-consciousness has always been particularly vigorous at the top and in the middle of the social scale. Ironically, given

24 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968), 9–15; William H. Sewell, Jr., “How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson’s Theory of Working-Class Formation,” in E.P. Thompson: *Critical Perspectives*, eds., Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 59–66; Marc W. Steinberg, “Talkin’ Class: Discourse, Ideology, and Their Roles in Class Conflict,” in *Bringing Class Back In: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, eds., Scott W. McNall, Rhonda F. Levine, and Rick Fantasia (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 261–84; and “Culturally Speaking: Finding a Commons Between Post-Structuralism and the Thompsonian Perspective,” *Social History* 21, no. 2 (May 1996): 193–214; Canning, *Gender History in Practice*, 72–7, 101–20; Eley and Nield, *Future of Class*. In an effort to break the simplistic assumption that awareness of working-class self-interest leads straightforwardly to collective organization in support of those interests, Ira Katzelson has tried to elaborate a more sophisticated analytical framework of “levels” of awareness, which, however, do not fundamentally abandon the close association of material situation and political expression. Ira Katzelson, “Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons,” in *Working-Class Formation*, 3–41. Even one of the severest critics of postmodernist history, Neville Kirk, has admitted that “language and systems of discourse play active roles in the creation of aspects of social reality, rather than being mere expressions and reflections of a totally given, or pre-existing external reality.” See Neville Kirk, “History, Language, Ideas, and Post-Modernism: A Materialist View,” *Social History* 19, no. 2 (May 1994): 233.

25 Göran Therborn, “Why Some Classes Are More Successful Than Others,” *New Left Review* 138 (1983): 37–55.

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all the scholarly attention, workers have always constituted the loosest, least coherent, least unified of the social classes, the one least able to express its own sense of itself. New patterns of labour-market recruitment regularly brought people into wage-earning from pre-industrial backgrounds or, like Harold and Marg, from experiences outside wage-earning. They brought with them values and practices rooted in those previous class locations that persisted in the new proletarian context.²⁶ Workers brought together as the raw material of a working class generally had to learn over time to cooperate, and could be highly vulnerable to constructions of their experience from elsewhere.

Labour historians (including me) have put a preponderance of their scholarly energy into documenting one particular set of discourses and practices, those involved in mobilizing working people around their distinct class interests. It is now clear that a united, coherent working class was not sitting ready-made, but had to be constructed through a painstaking process of argument and conversion and difficult mobilization. We now have a rich history (and historiography) of unions and political organizations that articulated those goals from a variety of ideological perspectives. We certainly still need to know about the organized, the militant, and the radical and their impact; but we have been somewhat less successful in situating their efforts within the broader landscape of working-class life. In fact, unionization in Canada was consistently attacked and marginalized until World War II, and since then has seldom risen much over a third of the gainfully employed. And even among those, there were reluctant conscripts like Harold who had no strong attachments to the most familiar forms of working-class solidarity. The crises of labour movements in the western world since the 1970s have also compelled some reflection on how workers allow right-wing, anti-union politicians such as Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, or Mike Harris to become hegemonic politically.

One answer has come from the largely discredited notion of workers' "false consciousness."²⁷ Others drew on the idea of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci,²⁸ or various theories of language laid out by Michel

26 Like others in his position, Harold kept alive a faint hope of starting his own business; but, after a bank manager rejected his application for a loan to start a trucking company with his brother in the 1950s, he never actively pursued such an independent option.

27 This argument rested on two kinds of explanations. One focused on the narrow, exclusive self-interest of better-off workers, who cut themselves off from the less skilled — a "labour aristocracy" in the nineteenth century and a white-supremacist occupational élite in the twentieth. The other put more emphasis on ideological failings of "reformist" labour leaders. Such a perspective suffered from both unfortunate condescension toward working people (who appeared as either charlatans or dupes) and an impossible standard of comparison — no working-class has ever reached the purity of class consciousness expected of them.

28 This Italian Marxist of the 1920s argued that the class domination and subordination could not be explained simply by the exercise of direct coercion, but required the cultivation of "consent" to the system of subordination, that is the production through many cultural institutions

Foucault and other postmodern writers responsible for the so-called cultural or linguistic “turn” in the writing of social history, which has brought an insistence on the primacy of language itself in creating human subjects.²⁹ Whatever the theoretical inspiration, the central question remains what, if any, relationship exists between cultural and political discourses and the social, material, or “structural” condition of historical subjects. The postmodern approach has been to deny any connection. Others, myself included, agree that there is no direct, inevitable reflection of the material in the cultural, but see the necessity of looking closely at the interaction. Most writing inspired by the linguistic turn has looked to the texts of particular discourses and not to their reception. It is important to appreciate that this is a negotiated process, through which members of subordinate groups engage in some kind of weighing and evaluation in the light of their material existence and the kinds of awareness that their experience has produced. They listen and accept, comply and ignore, confront and reject, mix and integrate the discursive elements swirling around them. In the process they nonetheless construct a class identity that distinguishes them from the middle and upper classes. To make this clearer, let me turn more specifically to the discursive universe of Harold and Marg between the 1940s and the 1970s. In particular, I want to consider the major cultural cross-currents that have most often been proposed as the death-knells of class awareness in postwar North America. So I descend from the rugged, wind-swept peaks of theoretical disputation to the carefully trimmed lawns of working-class suburbia.

Harold and Marg never talked about themselves as members of a working class — indeed rarely used the word “class.” They were not prone to thinking in such abstract sociological terminology.³⁰ But they did refer to themselves as “working people,” often in a slightly self-deprecating comparison with middle-class people (“just working people”). They were trying to signal a general like-mindedness with others similar to themselves and a difference from others — a prickly defence of hard work and manual labour (and a suspicion of idleness)³¹; a reliance on collective mutual support and care; a pride in self-help,

and processes of hegemonic understandings of capitalist societies that were accepted by the subordinated as apparently intuitive “common sense.” Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (June 1985): 567–93; Constant and Ducharme, *Liberalism and Hegemony*.

29 Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, eds., *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-84* (New York: New Press, 2003).

30 Harold and Marg had little time or interest in printed text, beyond the daily newspaper, one or two women’s magazines, and the Bible. Magazines from union and church were largely ignored.

31 Even though Marg spent her paid workdays seated at a desk, engaged in relatively clean office work, she came home to a great deal of hard manual toil.

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self-sufficiency, and independence; a hard-headed preference for the utilitarian, concrete, and practical — the “sensible” and “down-to-earth” — over the abstract or theoretical; a greater comfort with the local and familiar than the exotic or strange; a sense of propriety but also an informality, lack of pretension, genuineness, and simplicity; a preference for emotional intensity over “refined” restraint or aestheticism; and a relentless fixation on the value and cost of everything. When the older boy struck up a friendship with the son of the local bank manager, he was gently admonished that his new friend had “false values.” Much of this framework of thinking carried over from the world of small-scale family farming and shopkeeping out of which they came, but it was recast in a context of life-long wage-earning. They drew on what was more like folklore about the value and rewards of hard work and the merits of those who toiled — hoary old chestnuts in Canadian popular culture. And, although mainstream culture said less and less about such worthiness, they continued to extract from such popular myths a pride and dignity distinct from people who were not “working people.”³²

The circuits of that folk wisdom were among workmates and neighbours, but even more among kin. In fact, in a familiar pattern from their own childhoods, the most important solidarities for Marg and Harold were with their extended families, even though they did not necessarily live nearby.³³ They got loans, jobs, help with manual labour and child care, and general moral support, and they reciprocated.³⁴ They also visited and socialized with kin more often

32 Bryan D. Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1979), 97–122; Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1987); Lorimer and Phillips, *Working People*, 106–17; Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Wally Secombe and D.W. Livingstone, “Down to Earth People”: *Beyond Class Reductionism and Postmodernism* (Aurora: Garamond Press, 2000), 47–8.

33 As S.D. Clark made clear in his study of Toronto’s suburbs of the 1950s, the more remote and under-served, such as Harold and Marg chose, filled up overwhelmingly with younger couples under age 35. In their case, older kin therefore, remained either in the city or in rural areas. Clark, *Suburban Society*, 82–90.

34 Harold got his first job driving a coal truck from an uncle who owned a small firm, and later had help getting his public-utilities job from Marg’s uncle, a suburban politician. Both boys got summer jobs from uncles or family friends, and, after the younger boy dropped out of university, Marg’s cousin shepherded him into an electrical apprenticeship. They got cast-off furniture from kin. They also reached out for help from kin — Marg’s grandmother provided a mortgage for their first house; Harold regularly borrowed tools from this father and got his brother to help dig a well and fix a disabled car; and Marg talked to her mother every day about any number of domestic problems and sent the boys to stay with her twice for extended periods when Marg was seriously ill; and eventually Marg moved her mother into their household in her old age.

than friends or neighbours, and exchanged gifts with many of them at birthdays and Christmas. Kin were also an important audience for Harold and Marg's performances of respectability. These were networks of social solidarity that, for all their potentially oppressive patriarchal dynamics, rejected competitive individualism and could thrive on life-long loyalty, mutual support, and warm emotional attachments. And these were solidarities that the womenfolk were expected to nurture as part of their domestic responsibilities.³⁵

Yet that was not the whole story of class identity in their lives. Implicitly, Harold and Marg were also part of a broader working-class experience. They were newcomers to the working class in the 1940s, but they were beneficiaries of the major working-class mobilizations of that decade.³⁶ They built their new life together on the victories of those great wartime and postwar confrontations. Once Harold started at the public utilities commission in the early 1950s, he was a member of a local of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. He had no enthusiasm for the union, rarely went to its meetings or read its monthly magazine, stayed home during its only strike, and expressed no affinities with the broader labour movement. Yet, like so many other male wage-earners in the postwar period, he and his family reaped the benefits of collective working-class organization in the workplace that many more male breadwinners now enjoyed — regular wage increases, modest promotion opportunities (in his case from metre-reader to service man), a benefit plan, more leisure time in the form of 40-

35 We have been told about similar kin solidarities among new immigrant groups in this same period, but the experience of this anglo-Canadian family suggests that we should be paying far more attention to family and kin in our understanding of working-class behaviour in postwar Canada more generally. Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Leslie Bella, *The Christmas Imperative: Leisure, Family, and Women's Work* (Halifax, N.S.: Fernwood Publishing, 1992); Micaela di Leonardo, "The Female World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship," *Signs* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 440–53. The importance of kin networks was noted in Canadian, American, and British studies of working-class life undertaken in this period. Lorimer and Phillips, *Working People*, 45; Berger, *Working-Class Suburb*, 67–8, 72; William M. Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1963), 106–7; Mirra Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987 [1962]), 36–7, 208–15, 236–79; Lilian Breslow Rubin, *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 197; Michael Young and Peter Wilmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).

36 Peter S. McInnis, *Harnessing Labour Confrontation: Shaping the Postwar Settlement in Canada, 1943–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2002); Judy Fudge and Eric Tucker, *Labour Before the Law: The Regulation of Workers' Collective Action in Canada, 1900–1948* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 263–301; Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1992), 278–90.

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hour weeks and regular paid holidays and vacations,³⁷ and, most important in his Depression-era consciousness, good job security.

He and Marg and the boys also felt the effects of the reconstruction of politics in the 1940s in response to major working-class mobilizations that had brought into mainstream government policy the Keynesian ideas of full-employment.³⁸ Harold was never unemployed after the early 1950s and never drew unemployment insurance. Expanded state intervention also brought many new jobs, and Harold found secure public-sector employment with a public-utilities commission that was providing service to the huge number of new homes spreading through suburbia, often with help from new state housing programs. Marg's paid work as a medical secretary was possible because of the large-scale increase in public support for health care that brought many more people into doctors' offices. The new state social expenditures also brought better roads, which facilitated commuting to work, shopping, socializing, and holidaying, and better schools, which enabled both the boys to get to university. They would also take advantage of major state programs to promote more social security — the monthly baby-bonus cheque that Marg always looked forward to, the Veterans' Land Act that allowed them to purchase their house and two acres of land, the health insurance, and pension plans — all of which amounted to small but definitely significant enhancements of their quality of life.³⁹ Harold and Marg would never have tried to articulate a clear vision of their social rights in postwar society, but implicitly they built their dreams and aspirations within that new hard-won consensus that working people had a new right to a decent standard of living.⁴⁰ It is important to add, however, that the dominant political narratives that were used in the 1950s to explain this new

37 In the early 1940s, Harold had been required to work Saturday mornings, like most other blue-collar workers. By the 1970s, he was able to use the overtime provisions of the collective agreement to work up a month's extra holiday time, in addition to the month he was already entitled to.

38 David A. Wolfe, "The Rise and Demise of the Keynesian Era in Canada: Economic Policy, 1930–1982," in *Readings in Canadian Social History, Vol. 5: Modern Canada, 1930–1980s*, eds., Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984); Robert M. Campbell, *Grand Illusions: The Politics of the Keynesian Experience in Canada, 1945–1975* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1987).

39 Dennis Guest, *The Emergence of Social Security in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); James Struthers, "Family Allowances, Old-Age Security, and the Construction of Entitlement in the Canadian State, 1943–51," in *Veterans Charter*, 179–204; Dominique Marshall, *The Social Origins of the Welfare State: Quebec Families, Compulsory Education and Family Allowances, 1940–1955* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006); Richard Harris and Tricia Shulist, "Canada's Reluctant Housing Program: The Veterans' Land Act, 1942–1975," *Canadian Historical Review* 82, no. 2 (June 2001): 253–82.

40 S.D. Clark was thus too hasty in claiming that new suburbanites wanted "a home, not a new social world." Clark, *Suburban Society*, 110. The home was the centrepiece of new aspirations for a better life. Magda Fahmi perceptively calls this a search for "economic citizenship"; see *Household Politics*, 119–23.

world of enhanced social security did not highlight the agitation of workers and their allies a decade earlier that lay behind it. In fact, class-based narratives were vanishing as the Cold War settled in.⁴¹ So other discourses became more readily available to working people like Harold and Marg to try to comprehend and act on their social situations.

One of those involved gender. The 1950s has become known as a period of powerful re-assertion of rigid gender norms within traditionally structured heterosexual families, symbolized by such media icons as Ward and June Cleaver and Jim and Margaret Anderson (*Father Knows Best* was a family favourite).⁴² Both Harold and Marg certainly wove into their consciousness some sharp-edged gender expectations. Harold saw himself as a working man in the full meaning of the term. He expected to go out to work for wages and to have specific gendered tasks around the household — garden and yard maintenance, car repairs, upkeep on the house, and so on. The stove and washing machine were a mystery to him until Marg was dying of cancer in the 1990s, and he played only a marginal role in socializing his sons.⁴³ He was committed to breadwinning for his family and would rather have been able to earn a “living wage” that would have kept his wife out of the labour market,⁴⁴ but at the same time he was uncomfortable with many of the responsibilities of patriarchy and often needed prodding or nagging to bring him out of a kind of boyish resistance to domestic burdens and tensions — much like many other men in his class. He participated in a rougher homosocial celebration of that boyishness among this blue-collar workmates — swearing, joking, roughhousing, storytelling, and what not — of which the rest of the family was only dimly aware, though he never joined them in a tavern or other after-work activities.⁴⁵

41 Reg Whitaker and Gary Marcuse, *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945–57* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

42 Strong-Boag, “Home Dreams”; Ooram, “Canadian Domesticity”; Valerie J. Korinek, *Roughing It in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

43 Blue-collar men interviewed in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s had similar attitudes to housework. See Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage*, 50–6; Rubin, *Worlds of Pain*, 100–4. See also Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love*, 180. Harold was nonetheless prepared to do dishes regularly and sometimes made brown-bag lunches for himself and the boys.

44 Joan Sangster found many women she interviewed faced similar resistance to their wage-earning from their husbands. Sangster, “Doing Two Jobs,” 120–1.

45 I have explored some of the issues of working-class masculinities in “Boys Will Be Boys: Working-Class Masculinities in the Age of Mass Production,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69 (Spring 2006): 6–34; and “The Boys and Their Booze: Masculinities and Public Drinking in Working-Class Hamilton, 1890–1946,” *Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 3 (September 2005): 411–52. On the homosocial life of married working-class men in this period, see Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage*, 28–32. See also Thomas W. Dunk, *It’s a Working Man’s Town: Male Working-Class Culture in Northwestern Ontario* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991).

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For her part, Marg was a strong, dominant figure in the family, who kept a firm control over family life, but she struggled to do that within the expectations of rigid gender identities. She accepted full responsibility for all domestic labour and took great pride in her gleaming, well-ordered household and cooking skills.⁴⁶ She constantly pushed Harold to be the strong breadwinner-husband that she expected,⁴⁷ and watched over the boys for any deviations from the narrow path to manliness (even though expecting them to help with housework). Yet, in practice, she struggled with a much more complex view of her own femininity. While trying persistently to meet current standards of youthful beauty and attractiveness (through intermittent regimes of diet and exercise), she juggled the demanding double-day of paid secretarial work and unpaid domestic responsibilities, partly because the family needed extra income, but also, as she told the boys, because she wanted more to her life than the family household could offer.⁴⁸ She had started work in the early 1940s when the rapidly expanding occupational possibilities for women in the wartime economy had opened up visions of wider possibilities. Now she basked in the respectability of working in doctors' offices, despite the scorn she must have felt from the popular media that questioned the worthiness of working mothers.⁴⁹ She also enjoyed the greater leverage her income gave her in the family's financial decision-making. She often expressed a deep frustration at the unfairness of her crushing responsibilities, but the language of second-wave middle-class feminism in the 1960s and 1970s never resonated with her — indeed, it frightened her — and working in non-union jobs, she never had

46 In her interviews with working-class housewives in the early 1960s, Mirra Komarovsky found considerable satisfaction with the domestic role. *Blue-Collar Marriage*, 56–60. Compared to an early twenty-first-century household, Marg's work at home was still relatively labour-intensive. For food preparation, the family's only electric domestic technology before 1970 included a stove, refrigerator, toaster, and deep freezer, for cleaning a vacuum cleaner and floor polisher, and for laundry a wringer washing machine and electric iron. Domestic technologies in postwar households are explored in Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). The "labour-saving" technologies did not necessarily mean less work for housewives, since expectations of good housekeeping rose dramatically in the same period. See Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love*, 117–59; Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983). When she started full-time work, Marg insisted that part of her income had to cover the cost of having a cleaning woman come in once a week.

47 Marg even insisted that Harold barbeque the steaks as a symbol of postwar masculinity — a task he neither liked nor excelled at. On that practice more generally, see Christopher Dummitt, "Finding a Place for Father: Selling the Barbeque in Postwar Canada," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 9 (1998): 209–23.

48 See also Rubin, *Worlds of Pain*, 169. Marg had opportunities not available to married women living in many Canadian resource towns. See Luxton, *More Than a Labour of Love*, for a discussion of women in a Manitoba mining town.

49 Sangster, "Doing Two Jobs," 102–7, 120–5.

access to the emerging labour feminism of the 1970s.⁵⁰ She continued to believe that, for working people, a well-ordered family structured around familiar gender roles was the basis of security, success, and happiness. She saw her central role as a working-class wife and mother as an important process of holding everything together, to keep it all from flying apart. Doing so could nourish her self-esteem and pride, but she lived with considerable stress and disappointment.⁵¹

Many writers then and since have situated these still rigid gender identities spatially — in the treeless mud of former farmlands where the suburbs were springing up in the 1950s. A lot of popular discourse at the time (and since) claimed that these new residential zones were social levellers, where everyone became middle class. As several sociologists in the United States and at least one in Canada discovered in that period, however, most suburbs had distinct class complexions, and many of the familiar patterns of working-class family life were simply transferred to these new locations.⁵² Harold and Marg's neighbourhood was no exception. Yet the suburb brought a new way of life for a man who had grown up on a farm and a woman raised in a big city. Theirs was not as intimate and close-knit a community as many workers had known in older downtown working-class neighbourhoods with their corner shops, cafes, taverns, clubs, halls, and so on.⁵³ Life here relied centrally on the family car. Harold and Marg rarely walked anywhere. They drove some distance to their jobs in the suburbs, and on weekends wheeled into relatively impersonal suburban shopping centres, also often far from home. People they worked with and lived near similarly drove off in all directions. What people in the new postwar working-class suburbs created spatially through their housing choices was thus new in working-class history. Their sense of "community" was now far more sprawling and loose. It gave far less opportunity for associating together and for sharing common experience on a daily basis on doorsteps and street corners. It probably made the family a more central feature of their lives.

50 As Strong-Boag notes, feminists tended to be preoccupied with issues of paid work and had little positive to say about the domestic labour that women like Marg took so seriously. Strong-Boag, "Their Side of the Story," 66–9. On labour-based feminism, see Meg Luxton, "Feminism as a Class Act: Working-Class Feminism and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Labour/Le Travail* 48 (Fall 2001): 63–88.

51 For similar, though more tragic, stories of working-class wives and mothers in this period, see Vallières, *White Niggers*, 80–5; Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago Press, 1986). For the persistence of many of these gender dynamics in working-class households into the 1980s and 1990s, see Meg Luxton and June Corman, *Getting By in Hard Times: Gendered Labour at Home and on the Job* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

52 Berger, *Working-Class Suburb*; Dobriner, *Class in Suburbia*; Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Vintage, 1967); Clark, *Suburban Society*.

53 For example, see Lorimer and Phillips, *Working People*.

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We are often told that in the postwar period religion also became a powerful force in the cultural landscape of North Americans. For Harold and Marg, religious belief and practice were indeed important. Theologically, they were attached to a moderate version of an “old-time” evangelical Protestantism that historians have been telling us recently had long been common among many working people.⁵⁴ The socially mixed United and Presbyterian church congregations they joined were less significant as social spaces than as spiritual filling stations and sites for public rituals of respectability every Sunday morning (except in the summer, when God was apparently on holiday).⁵⁵ For Marg in particular, these were intense moments of weekly spiritual renewal. In their daily lives, their religious precepts became arguably the most compelling discourse available to them to give meaning to their social situation. It certainly encouraged resignation to fate and hope for divine intervention to improve their lives or to explain their misfortunes. Yet it also structured their thinking in other significant ways. On the one hand, it gave them a set of clear moral precepts and a strong code of “thou-shalt-nots” to govern personal behaviour, which encouraged sharp judgments about individual moral worth and an easy condemnation of laziness or other moral failings. Among working people struggling for decency and respectability, this could be a significant force in distinguishing them from classes above them, but also from those neighbours in the owner-built suburbs who seemed more dissolute or degenerate. Yet, on the other hand, their Protestant faith also provided a ready vocabulary, a rich imagery, and a treasure trove of Biblical references for understanding and evaluating the world. It gave them a strong sense of equality of all humans before God and a brotherhood of man. It was in fact the core of their sense of democracy. When the chair of the Board of Elders, a local businessman, stood up in their church to lambaste those who dropped too little onto the collection plate, Harold and Marg spluttered that the man did not understand working people and that Jesus had driven the money-changers from

54 Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, “The World of the Common People Is Filled With Religious Fervour,” in *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, ed., G.A. Rawlyk (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 337–50; Eric Crouse, “They ‘Left Us Pretty Much as We Were’: American Saloon/Factory Evangelists and Canadian Working Men in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Canadian Society of Church History, Historical Papers*, 1999, 51–7; Norman Knowles, “‘Christ in the Crownsnest’: Religion and the Anglo-Canadian Working Class in the Crownsnest Pass, 1898–1918,” in *Nation, Ideas, and Identities: Essays in Honour of Ramsay Cook*, eds., Michael Behiels and Marcel Martel (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 1997), 57–71; Melissa Turkstra, “Working-Class Churches in Early Twentieth-Century Hamilton: Fostering a Distinctive Working-Class Identity and Culture,” *Social History/Histoire sociale* 41, no. 82 (November 2009): 459–504.

55 Beyond a few years in a “Couples Club,” Harold and Marg were not joiners within their congregations. They sent the boys to Sunday School (where Marg taught for a while) and later to a teenage church group.

the temple. They promptly searched out and found a more compatible congregation.⁵⁶

Religion, of course, is closely connected to ethnic and racial identity, which, we are often told, became enhanced in postwar Canada — the era of blossoming francophone nationalism, multiculturalism, and white anglo-Canadian reaction. Harold and Marg would probably never have admitted to having an ethnic identity beyond “Canadian.” They both had Scottish roots, but limited attachment to British cultural symbols and an unrelenting scorn for the monarchy, which they saw as pretentious and undemocratic. The suburb where they settled was solidly white and anglo-Celtic, and the immediate school district included only one African-Canadian and two Japanese-Canadian families.⁵⁷ Like their working-class anglo-Canadian neighbours, Harold and Marg were acutely conscious of ethnic and racial difference, and slotted people into rigid categories with predictable behaviour, particularly personal and public morality. In the 1950s, they accepted Hollywood’s version of First Nations people and the minstrel-show image of blacks. Although they nominally opposed discriminatory policies and occasionally socialized with non-white friends, they expected ethnic and racial minorities to lose their distinctiveness, and had no tolerance for those who fought back, including French-Canadians. As the American civil rights struggles unfolded in the 1960s, they scoffed that they did not understand what all the fuss was about,⁵⁸ but the growing population of Caribbean blacks in Toronto also made them increasingly uneasy. Race and ethnicity then were tightly woven into their sense of themselves in a complex fashion that labour historians will recognize from many studies — a democratic, egalitarian, if sometimes patronizing inclusiveness among those who seemed to pose little threat, and a harsh distancing from those whose cultures appeared to challenge white, anglo-Canadian privilege.⁵⁹

56 The democratic thrust of their Protestant faith also made them harsh critics of Catholicism, which they saw as priest-ridden authoritarianism. For the role of religion in black working-class consciousness in the United States, see bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 38–49.

57 Three-quarters of residents of the suburban township (later borough) in which they lived in 1961 were Canadian born, and the same proportion claimed British ethnicity. Clark, *Suburban Society*, 100.

58 Marg was particularly scornful of the mother in the neighbourhood’s only black family, who had begun writing articles about anglo-Canadian racism. “We never did anything to her,” she insisted.

59 For example, see Allen Seager, “Class, Ethnicity, and Politics in the Alberta Coalfields, 1905–1945,” in *“Struggle a Hard Battle”: Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed., Dirk Hoerder (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 204–24; Carmela Patrias, “Relief Strike: Immigrant Workers and the Great Depression in Crowland, Ontario, 1930–1935,” in *Nation of Immigrants*, 322–58; Gillian Creese, “Class, Ethnicity, and Conflict: The Case of Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1880–1923,” in *Workers, Capital, and the State in British Columbia: Selected Papers*, eds., Rennie Warburton and David Coburn (Vancouver:

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Harold and Marg tended to root their sense of ethnic entitlement in a vague notion of their citizenship. If asked, they would no doubt have expressed a strong awareness of their civil rights, particularly personal liberty, in contrast to what they were told about Communist tyranny,⁶⁰ and expected the police and courts to treat them fairly. In practice, however, they never turned to those institutions for any kind of real support. They also knew they had political rights and voted in virtually every election. In the 1950s, they were loosely Diefenbaker Conservatives. For them, that silver-tongued Tory wrapped together a Cold War anti-communism, a strong “unhyphenated” Canadian nationalism, a suspicion of French-Canadian pretensions, and an anti-élite populism. They would probably have agreed with songster Bob Bossin that Diefenbaker “always had a hand for the working man.”⁶¹ Those were not secure political moorings, however, and by the 1970s, as public social protest swirled around them, they seemed to lean more often to the NDP.⁶² That was a practical rather than an ideological shift, however, and did not last into their later life.

Politics generally held little appeal to them beyond a kind of short-term entertainment value, and they certainly never joined a political party. They often denounced politicians as fundamentally untrustworthy and politics as corrupt.⁶³ In fact, overall, they had limited faith in the state to help them much, and were more likely to complain about taxes or restrictions on personal liberties. I would argue that a profound detachment from politics and the state characterized much of the postwar working class in Canada, in sharp contrast to a more

University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 55–85; Maria Kefalas, *Working-Class Heroes: Protecting Home, Community, and Nation in a Chicago Neighbourhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 27–43.

- 60 Whitaker and Marcuse, *Cold War Canada*. In the 1980s, Marg would still look visibly frightened at the prospect of visiting a Communist country like Cuba.
- 61 Peter Stursberg, *Diefenbaker: Leadership Gained, 1956–62* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* (Toronto: McFarlane, Walter, and Ross, 1995). The lyrics of “Dief Will Be the Chief Again” are available at www.stringband.net. Harold and Marg were Canadian counterparts to the much-studied British working-class Tories of the same period. In particular, see Robert McKenzie and Allan Silver, *Angels in Marble: Working Class Conservatives in Urban England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Eric A. Nordlinger, *The Working-Class Tories: Authority, Deference and Stable Democracy* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967).
- 62 Across the country the rising support for the party brought provincial NDP victories in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, and official-opposition status in Ontario. Desmond Morton, *The New Democrats, 1961–1986: The Politics of Change* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1986).
- 63 David Halle found similar views among New Jersey blue-collar workers in the 1970s. *America’s Working Man*, 191–201. Many social scientists explored the apparent weakness of class voting in Canada. For example, see Jon H. Pammett, “Class Voting and Class Consciousness in Canada,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 24, no. 2 (May 1987): 269–90.

engaged middle class.⁶⁴ It would certainly be hard to claim that, for Harold and Marg, appeals to their identities as citizens were a powerful force in their daily lives. Perhaps symbolically, they never flew a Canadian flag.

A stronger claim has been made about the impact of mass culture on working people in the postwar period. Marg and Harold kept some distance from much of this, for the practical reason that they had little to spend on commercialized pleasures.⁶⁵ In any case, they tended to prefer participatory popular culture such as singing and occasionally square dancing. But from the late 1950s on, a television set took pride of place in their living room and was on for some part of almost every evening. Out of that flickering screen beamed a myriad of messages about the way the world allegedly worked. The impact on this family, however, was limited and fractured by age and gender. The boys were TV addicts. But Harold was always more detached, except during Saturday's "Hockey Night in Canada," and Marg preferred wholesome, earnest sitcoms and dramas that reinforced the core values in her approach to life. They favoured the folksier CTV news over than the snootier CBC broadcasts. In general, they both looked for what was familiar and reassuring. Little of what they watched, however, gave them much of a glimpse of their own lives, since television scripts in that period were almost invariably sanitized stories of middle-class Americans. It was spectatorship on a different world.⁶⁶

Through much of the media, the life of such middle-class people was also being held up as a goal worth aspiring to. Why not push your children up the social ladder into the middle class? A powerful ideology of social mobility through meritocracy suffused Canadian society in the 1950s and 1960s. Families like this one were told repeatedly that higher educational credentials would bring greater occupational choices and social status, and in Ontario the vastly expanded space in universities and colleges, especially in the Toronto area, made this look possible. Four-fifths of the boys' generation in Canada never made it to post-secondary education, but, with sharp memories of their own difficult youth and truncated schooling in the hard times of the 1930s, Harold and, especially, Marg wanted to give their own boys a better chance.

64 For example, see Lorimer and Phillips, *Working People*, 75–117. Hence, the voting patterns of people like Harold and Marg are not good indicators of class awareness, since they did not expect electoral politics, or much else about the workings of government, to have much to do with confronting the major issues in their daily lives.

65 They did give the boys access to commercialized youth culture by buying them cheap transistor radios and a record player.

66 Paul Rutherford, *When Television Was Young: Primetime Canada, 1952–1967* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Eric Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Gerard Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: The Selling of the American Dream* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992); Berger, *Working-Class Suburb*, 74–6. There was even a Sunday evening ritual of eating dinner while watching such family-oriented television as "Disneyland."

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Since Harold was permanently employed and Marg was working full-time as the secondary income-earner, the family could afford to delay having income from the boys. Like a sizeable minority of Canada's working-class parents, they poured their hopes for family betterment into the next generation.⁶⁷

The results were mixed at best. To the profound disappointment of Harold and Marg, the younger boy lasted less than a year in an engineering program and became an electrician instead. The older boy went through post-graduate training and ended up in a professional career. His parents greeted his apparent success with gushing pride but also growing unease. They worried about the unfamiliar ideas he embraced and his new-found atheism. They were shocked at his plunge into the youth counter-culture — his long hair, “sloppy” clothing, communal living, and petulant radicalism. They must have felt betrayed that their son had become so distant, hostile, and apparently ungrateful. Once he eventually found full-time work, they were mystified by the content and rhythms of his job, which seemed to include a lot of unsupervised pencil-pushing. For Harold and Marg, formal schooling was palpably the most deeply felt dividing line between themselves and middle-class Canadians, and now the line ran right through the middle of their family. In many ways, they felt they had lost a son to processes they could not fully understand.⁶⁸

Marg and Harold certainly did not abandon hope that their own lives could be better, and, with shorter working hours and relatively more disposable income once Marg was working full time, they were susceptible to appeals to find fulfilment and identity in the world beyond work.⁶⁹ Some postwar social scientists were convinced that workers like Harold and Marg had simply been integrated more tightly into capitalist society through easier access to consumer goods and thus suffered “bourgeoisification” or “embourgeoisement.”⁷⁰ Were they? For this couple, consumerism was not a simple phenomenon. On the one

67 Neil Guppy and Scott Davies, *Education in Canada: Recent Trends and Future Challenges* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1998), 88; Paul Axelrod, *Scholars and Dollars: Politics, Economics, and the Universities of Ontario, 1945–1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); Doug Owram, *Born at the Right Time: A History of the Baby Boom Generation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996). On working class interest in the educational advancement of the next generation, see also Berger, *Working-Class Suburb*, 15–27.

68 Sennett and Cobb explore these ambivalent feelings among American working-class parents in *Hidden Injuries of Class*. See also Michael D. Yates, *In and Out of the Working Class* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2009).

69 Cohen, *Consumers' Republic*, 152–5.

70 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); John H. Goldthorpe, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969); David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness* (London: Unwin, 1966). More recently, postmodern critics of class have generally made consumerism central to their alternative perspective. For example, see John R. Hall, “The Reworking of Class Analysis,” in *Reworking Class*, 5.

hand, their purchases were necessarily limited by tight budgets (and a resistance to running up debt). They were also invariably practical. Buying their house was a hard-headed decision to find affordable housing and to make some extra money from the land around it — not a flight to a some suburban utopia.⁷¹ Beyond the house, the car was their most important possession. Yet it too met a practical need — there was no public transit to their part of the suburbs until the 1970s, and their whole way of life had to be organized around automobility. Indeed, the car was arguably enabling working people like Harold and Marg to redefine public space and to appropriate more of it.⁷² These major purchases, along with the refrigerator⁷³ and deep freezer, were simply basic efforts to make life a little easier and more comfortable. And Marg knew that it was her extra earnings that made it all possible. On the other hand, Marg was a dedicated, almost compulsive shopper — she loved the experience. Without a driver’s license, she dragged Harold and the boys off on frequent consumerist expeditions through the cheaper department stores in suburban shopping centres (K-Mart, Woolco, Zellers, etc.). But the pleasure was not merely in the looking and buying. Shopping had a larger purpose. For Marg, it was a careful process of finding bargains on small goods that would enhance the family’s comfort and respectability. She was enormously proud of her ability to use her shopping skills to put a good face on the family. Her triumph was to put together products of her shrewd shopping expedition into a display - the costumes and stage set of respectability. This was her “text”; she inscribed her aspirations in the material culture — the textures, colours, surfaces, and objects — of the family household.⁷⁴

So Harold and Marg lived through the three decades after World War II actively engaged with powerful discourses that, according to much historical and theoretical writing, should have channelled their consciousness away from class-based identities. Yet, as I have tried to suggest, that would be a simplistic reading of their consciousness and behaviour. They constructed an understanding of their social situation and a set of behavioural practices from elements of their upbringing in farm houses and urban shops, from the variety of cultural

71 S.D. Clark found this practical need for affordable housing was the main motivating force behind the move to the suburbs. *Suburban Society*, 47–81.

72 See James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990); Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Steve Penfold, *The Donut: A Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

73 The refrigerator was purchased in the 1950s when getting ice blocks for the ice box became difficult in the outer suburbs.

74 See Joy Parr, “Household Choices as Politics and Pleasure in 1950s Canada,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 55 (Spring 1999): 112–28. Class differences in consumption are also explored in Cohen, *Consumers’ Republic*; and Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

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forces around them, but also from the regular need to make ends meet. They justified and rationalized their behaviour within the discursive frameworks available to them, but that involved negotiation of all that received wisdom in the specific context of their lives and a process of sifting, adjusting, absorbing, and rejecting, often in confusion and with contradictory consequences. Their understanding of the world, in all its fragmented, incomplete, and muddled dimensions, was constantly woven and re-woven in ways that connected with the daily realities of surviving through wage labour. In the process they not only shaped distinctively working-class forms of gender, suburbanism, religion, ethnicity, citizenship, popular culture, meritocracy, and consumerism; but also wove all of those into a distinctively working-class identity. If we are to come close understanding the making of working-class Canada in the postwar period, we will need to pay attention to how working people drew on these cultural resources around them to fashion something new and distinctive.

For Harold and Marg the core of that identity was working-class respectability. What they wanted above all was to achieve the public affirmation of their success in combatting the economic vulnerability that resulted from their subordination and the demoralizing effects of having to accept limited earnings from employers who demeaned their skills. Their class struggle was to maintain a level of decency in the face of still tight material constraints. In these circumstances, respectability was not simply an attitude — it was a practice. In fact, for Marg, respectability was a collective performance, one that involved orchestrating all family members into active, dramatic compliance.

Harold and Marg never walked a picket line or marched in a demonstration. They never went to a union picnic or marched in a Labour Day parade. They never took out membership in a radical organization or attended any meetings or events of such groups. They therefore stood outside the mainstream of most writing in labour history. But, if we scale down our preconceived expectations of collective class accomplishments, they were nonetheless, in the broadest sense, part of a class *for itself*, expressing one form (and certainly not *the only* form) of class consciousness. They were somewhat deferential, but not passive or easily manipulated. In their own ways, they were unquestionably engaged in a class-based struggle for existence, which they shared with countless thousands of other Canadians in the postwar period. They did not wage this struggle alone. Unions or political parties remained unfamiliar, distant, and unappreciated as vehicles of their interests and concerns (as they quietly took for granted the benefits of Harold's union membership); but from their respective backgrounds they knew they could trust family and kin as crucial collective resources for their immediate, local, and narrowly conceived battles for security and dignity.

In fact, they are exemplars of something more generalized within the working class — what I like to call working-class realism. It was not a fixed political

position and certainly not a synonym for conservatism, but rather a propensity among workers during the past 150 years to evaluate what is possible and realizable in any given context and to act on that understanding, an evaluation often proceeding from similar places in the same period across the working class. At historic moments such as 1886, 1919, or 1946, the scope of “realistic” possibilities could expand dramatically.⁷⁵ At others they contracted just as abruptly. The difference between those moments was how workers evaluated their changing social circumstances through the cultural and discursive lenses available to them. In the case of Harold and Marg, the context of full employment and Keynesian state policies in the three decades after the war gave them a new terrain on which to make a decent life for themselves, but their responses fit patterns running back to the Montreal families of the 1870s.⁷⁶

And what about the boys? What happened to them? Their adult lives diverged sharply, one closer to their parents’ working-class experience, the other moving into a middle-class professional niche. Like many professionals in the public sector, the older boy was nonetheless unionized and walked picket lines for his own union twice.⁷⁷ Yet his conception of class came increasingly from research and writing on the history of working-class Canada. As he stands before you today, honoured that his labours on these subjects garnered him sufficient respect to be elevated to head an organization of Canadian historians, he remains convinced, from personal experience, intellectual formation, and political awareness, that class analysis in Canadian history, and in the present, is more important than ever.

But we have to do it right. We have to retain an important component of the materialism that always inspired class analysis. But we also have to incorporate the many complexities and complications that all the rethinking of class has brought about. If we do, unassuming people like Harold and Marg will find their rightful place in history.

* * *

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⁷⁵ See Kealey and *Dreaming of What Might Be*; Craig Heron, ed., *The Workers’ Revolt in Canada, 1917–1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

⁷⁶ As revealed in Bradbury, *Working Families*.

⁷⁷ There were also personal challenges in adapting to a middle-class way of life. bell hooks explores some of these issues in *Where We Stand*, as do Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey in *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), and Yates in *In and Out of the Working Class*.