REPORTING ON LABOUR: CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE UNCERTAIN IDEOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES OF CANADIAN JOURNALISM

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Abstract

One of the central questions in this study was whether a group of mainstream labour reporters could create a culture of resistance in their journalism practice. This research also tested a dual conception of the group as an interpretive community and a culture of dissent, rather than as just members of a profession adhering to the rigidities of their professional roles in the mainstream press. The goal in this study was to shed light on the reporters' unique roles during a specific period of change, and to view them as interpreters of unfolding social events during a time of significant political change.

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During Canada's version of the neo-liberal ascendancy, labour reporters walked a tightrope between an older ideology that legitimated their journalism practice and a neo-liberal orthodoxy that lead to the demise of the labour beat. One of the central questions in this study is whether these reporters created a culture of resistance within the mainstream press. This essay also explores how this journalism practice fostered working-class consciousness for readers and the journalism culture. The labour reporters were part of a unique enclave, one that often moved them to challenge the rigid tenets of mainstream journalism, and in many ways these challenges were a byproduct of their own ideologies and the political nature of the beat. The political and cultural changes during this period (1972–1989) also provide the social backdrop vital to understanding the labour beat. That understanding also lends itself to viewing these journalists as key social interpreters, and treats them as critical thinkers who spent a great deal of time trying to understand their press role.

It is important to note that most of these journalists had sympathy for labour and many had worked in the labour movement before or after their careers ended. They were also viewed with a jaundiced eye by many newspaper owners, editors, and some colleagues because of their perceived left-wing leanings. The labour beat, even at its high point in the early 1970s, was seen as being on the press periphery. Moreover, it is the beat's problematic status within the political culture that makes its demise interesting as it relates to the limitations placed on some politically oriented assignments within the mainstream press. The idea that labour reporters were often considered as ideological outsiders is a key element as it relates to a focus in the literature on the conditions and development of alternative reporting cultures within the bourgeois press.

This research also focuses on social democratic journalism in a country where political beats have always had a notable presence in the public sphere (Brennan 1994). The provisions for labour coverage in Canada grew rapidly in the post-WWII period. Prior to that, labour coverage existed in various forms in the nineteenth century, but when the war ended, political events led to changes in labour coverage that endured for well over forty years. After the war, the labour beat also developed a sharper political edge to match the growth of the labour movement that had occurred in the previous twenty years. Along with post-war expansion in the labour beat, the mainstream press was also acknowledging (often grudgingly) the notable growth of the entire labour movement. The journalism specialty was deemed necessary partly because of the influence of the political Left during the war years and beyond. Add to that the growth in influence of labour's political ally, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), later (1961) renamed the New Democratic Party (NDP), and it became nearly impossible for editors to ignore labour's growing public voice.

This study is based on long interviews with many of the Canadian journalists working in the mainstream press during the labour beat's last major period of legitimacy (1972-1989). This research uncovered many layers of meaning within this journalism practice, and the problematic was also advanced by the journalists' reflections on neo-liberal changes in their culture, class consciousness, attempts to enhance their professional standing, and the effect of their union involvement as it related to their own progressive views. While the reporters' may not have been

what Marx once called "ideological moles" in the capitalist press, they did represent a culture of dissent within the bourgeois press during a period of hegemonic change in the political culture.

The people who covered labour also enjoyed a higher level of social power and professional esteem during the early 1970s, which faded in the turn to neo-liberal politics in the late 1980s. The political reality was that the federal NDP actually held the balance of power in the federal parliament as this period started (1972), and within a few years an unprecedented three provincial governments were led by the social democratic NDP party. Many Canadian scholars have pointed to this period as perhaps the high point for "left nationalist" politics in the Canadian culture (Angus 1998; Keohane 1997). By the end of the 1980s, the mainstream press had largely turned away from the beat and news about workers' lives, workplace democracy and the development of collective rights. The respondents in this study were part of the last cohort of journalists that worked on the beat during the study period. The interviews were confined to English Canadian journalists because the Quebec labour beat was different enough to command the attention of an entirely separate research project.

The Conceptual Tools

At its core this research is concerned with the shifting ideological foundations of news work. In this case, the conceptual view of the capitalist media is that it is premised on class domination, with the media as an ideological arena where class positions are fought out and where losers are often vanquished. The labour beat provides an illuminating example that utilizes one of the conceptual strengths of cultural studies, where integral to this conceptual paradigm is a clear recognition of the opposition between the Marxian and liberal views of capitalist journalism.

The Canadian press labour beat was one of the more intriguing political assignments in the post-WWII period, but the mainstream sociology of news work is poorly equipped to delve into its many intricacies. Barbie Zelizer (1997) recognised that deficiency and argued for a broadening of the conceptual frameworks for understanding journalism practices, and along with other scholars she maintained that journalism research needs to recognise the glaring conceptual limitations in the liberal pluralist sociology to the study of journalism (Carey 1983; Chomsky 1989; Hardt and Brennen 1995; Schudson 1995). Some scholars have raised the same theoretical inadequacies and related them to the journalists' codes and interpretive rituals (Zelizer 1997). Hardt and Brennen (1995) add the much neglected dimension of the reporter's labour processes, not to mention the impact of class-consciousness among reporters along with the value of their social histories. The labour beat proved to be a particularly rich topic on many conceptual fronts.

The obvious starting point for understanding the elimination of labour coverage would lead to a critical look at the harsh political and economic realties of contemporary journalism. The examination cannot begin and end at this point, and it is important to note Hardt's (1996) timely elegy to the subordination of journalism, which also dealt with the oppressive nature of the market and the general acquiescence of mainstream journalists to that increasingly oppressive economic rationale. Hardt added that the social power once vested in the mythical "fourth estate" has never been more outdated than it is today. Journalism is now a form of

dependency transforming journalists' labour into a technologically mediated and politically tamed activity.

Despite the ideological and organisational restraints on opposition-style journalism, Hall (1992) argued that dissent within the liberal press has been responsible for helping construct a more radical discourse. In that sense, the reporters on the labour beat were participants in the development of a counter-hegemonic view during the study period. Hall added that these journalists can be an important part of counter-hegemonic movements and are involved in naturalizing nascent ideologies and radical discourses that can become the new common sense.

This research deals with a political and cultural situation where journalists, however briefly, won a modicum of control over their creative responses to the political events of their time. Some of the journalists who provided the focus for this study were often ideologically committed to changes in their professional and public roles, and their successes and failures in that attempt for structural changes in their roles is the focus of this research (Costain 2002).

The idea of the "ideologically unreliable" journalist is an appealing one to some scholars, despite the barriers to that latitude in the capitalist press (Lafky 1993). Kundera (1991) may have had a more realistic view when he argued that journalists are often able emissaries for the modernist project and they rarely ever question its core premises. The media, partially through the journalists' means of signification, provide a variety of ideological frames to represent various versions of "lived reality" (Hall 1976). To some extent this research tests the boundaries of that "lived reality" during a time of hegemonic change. The journalists interviewed were somewhat outside the consensus-building role that Hall once argued is the normal role attributed to most mainstream journalists. Hall also argues that the orchestration of that social consensus has many bends in the road, but ultimately an imaginary social cohesion reasserts itself. Marx argued that the capitalist superstructure led to the main processes of intellectual life, including the work of journalists, but he claimed dissent was possible and that "ideological moles" could practice dissenting journalism. Marx maintained there was always a degree of intellectual autonomy for reporters, even at the heart of the bourgeois press (Murdock 1982; Murdock and Golding 1977).

In one related example, Reese examined socialist Kent MacDougall's anomalous career at the *Wall Street Journal,* and argued that he was capable of violating the core tenets of the mainstream journalism paradigm, as long as he maintained the illusion of complying with the journalism ideology of objectivity. Reese described how this "paradigm defines what becomes part of our second-hand reality received through the media, and this is every bit as important as the larger scientific paradigms" (1997, 423). He suggested that researchers critically examine similar cases in order to "find some evidence of paradigm maintenance – and attempt to 'repair' his … violations of those rules and to normalize the case" (Reese 1997, 423). Reese operates at some disadvantage in that he does not provide a sense of MacDougall's wider social and political relationships with like-minded social democratic colleagues, nor does he deal with the possibility of a wider alternative journalism culture in which he may have participated. The goal in this research is to use the journalists' backgrounds and beliefs to fill in the gaps in this social picture.

Some of the mainstream sociology of news work is also useful in helping understand the overall editorial power relations for most specialty journalists. Much

of the sociology of beat reporting claims that beat journalists have more editorial autonomy and stronger group formations than is available for general assignment reporting (Dunwoody 1980; Ettema and Glasser 1998; Hannigan 1986; Tunstall 1970; 1971; Verma 1988). But this study goes beyond that perspective and delves into the reporters' political views, an area that most of the mainstream sociology avoids, perhaps because it is well outside the conceptual boundaries of their normal professional frames of reference within this scholarship. Most labour reporters did lean farther to the political left than their colleagues in the Canadian journalism culture. The beat reporter's ideological leanings were confirmed by other reporters in research assessments of their political orientations (Farr 1985; Hoyt 1984; LaBerge 1976; Lareau 1989; Mort 1987; Rosner 1975; Verma 1988).

Most of the reporters interviewed in this study reveled in their relative editorial freedom, which they knew that they could keep as long as they did not stray far beyond the dominant assumptions about the labour's movement's role and social resonance within the Canadian political culture (Crouse 1973; Hannigan 1986; Tunstall 1970; Verma 1988; Witt 1974).

The Long Interviews

In this study the labour reporters also dealt with their formative ideological influences, which most of them connected to their choice of the labour-beat as a career option. To some extent the reporters connected their uniquely political practice to their identity formation in childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. When they started their careers in journalism they also elaborated on the rigidities of professional socialisation on the job, which were all part of the formative stages of their political learning (Bermanzohn 1994). The interviews also explored whether the reporters saw themselves as an enclave of professional and political dissent within the mainstream press. This study also examined their uneasy professional socialisation and the conflicting values they faced from their educational preparation, newsroom cultures, and the stark nature of the economic and populist expectations of their employers. Through the long interviews with fourteen labour reporters who were working during this period, this research attempts to trace their socialisation and how they later resigned themselves to the beat's fading legitimacy.

In long interviews the reporters detail their family backgrounds, personal ideologies and connected their insights to their journalism practice. What emerged was a sense of the journalists' broader community of interests.

One of the more influential reporters interviewed started his career as an activist for the NDP in the 1960s, where he was involved in the nationalist Waffle faction of that party. John Deverell left the NDP to spend more than a decade on the labour beat for the *Toronto Star,* Canada's largest newspaper. Like most labour reporters interviewed, he had strong connections with the political Left, both before and after his career on the beat ended. The journalists also worked for many of the same newspapers, but at different times during this period of study. Rosemary Speirs earned a Ph.D. in a labour-related discipline before taking on her beat role at the *Toronto Star.* She immediately preceded John Deverell at the *Star,* where she worked for almost a decade during the 1970s. Several interviews were conducted with Wilfred List, who worked for over forty years on the labour beat, most of that

time for the national newspaper of record, the *Globe and Mail.* Lorne Slotnick replaced List in 1984 and he left the newspaper in the late 1989, when the paper ended its post WWII provision for a labour beat. Ginny Galt also worked for the *Globe and Mail,* and the *Canadian Press* (CP) news service during her long career on the labour specialty. Ed Finn was the longest-serving labour columnist in the history of the Canadian mainstream press, he wrote his column for the *Toronto Star* for fourteen years. Marc Zwelling was the labour specialist for the now defunct *Toronto Telegram* during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Norman Simon preceded Zwelling at the *Telegram* and went on to work in the labour movement for a significant portion of his remaining career. British Columbia and Alberta labour journalist Rod Mickleburgh spent nearly twenty years on the beat in two provinces, working for the *Vancouver Sun*, the *Vancouver Province*, and later the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). Ontario journalist Mac Makrachuck worked on the beat for three years before moving on to a career in provincial politics. *Ottawa Citizen* reporter, Bert Hill, worked in the nation's capital and covered labour for over a decade during the 1970s and early 1980s. Carleton University journalism professor and Newspaper Guild activist Bob Rupert worked on the labour beat, but was also involved with the Canadian and American Newspaper Guilds later in his career. *Windsor Star* journalist Gary Rennie worked as a labour reporter in a city with one of the heaviest concentrations of union membership. Finally, the only conservative labour journalist, Peter Howell, was the reluctant specialist for the *Toronto Sun* tabloid during his career on the assignment.

Formative Ideological Influences

Pritchard and Sauvageau's (1998) recently developed an extensive demographic profile of Canadian journalists, and they argue that most of them now live in a world of middle-class values. In that regard the labour journalists may have come from the last generation of Canadian journalists with a direct connection to the working class. Five of the fifteen journalists in this study described themselves as working-class. Most of their parents worked as teachers, judges, bankers, social activists, and most came from the professional ranks. A few reporters said their parents were working-class people, including one miner and a few factory workers, but this group was in the minority. An even smaller group said that their parents had been active in the labour movement. Former *Toronto Telegram* labour reporter Norman Simon (2000) was immersed in the labour movement and had a family member who was a leader in the labour movement's umbrella organisation, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC).

> *The labour movement was around me everywhere when I was growing up. In our house it was a center for many left-wing causes. My Dad was a labour Zionist and the whole notion of building a labour-based Israel was a big deal in our family. There was a kind of progressive electricity in our house and around us during my upbringing* (Simon 2000).

Simon admitted that his family background and labour connections were unique and probably opened doors with sources during his beat career. Simon's upbringing in the working-class garment district of Toronto meant "my ideas were always from the left and I was an odd duck in journalism school – I was definitely a politi-

cal deviant." Simon's labour background was the exception rather than the rule among most of the labour reporters interviewed for this study.

Perhaps more representative of these reporters was the background of Rosemary Speirs (2000), who thought of her family as lower middle class, but added that she was surrounded by working people when she was growing up in Scarborough, Ontario. Indeed, she was proud of that early class connection, and felt that it helped her know her labour sources better and aided her in her research with her labour based doctoral dissertation.

Windsor Star labour reporter Gary Rennie acknowledged his own "working class roots" and added that his father was an active trade unionist with a

> *strong labour background down in Nova Scotia. He was a miner who had once joined the Communist Party, or at least he talked about it for awhile as an idea. I wasn't receptive to that ideology and it really didn't affect my own political thinking* (Rennie 2001).

Rennie added that his political sensitivities were also activated early for him by the hard working-class life that was experienced by many of his family members. Rennie argued that his type of class background was not a professional asset and "wasn't always valued by editors, what they preferred was moving you on several beats to get a sense of the worker's role in the social order."

Personal Ideological Development

American-born journalist Marc Zwelling left the United States in his teenage years, during what he called the "politically volatile 1960s." Zwelling's ambition was to find a more humane society north of the border that he thought of as more amenable to his collectivist sense of social order. In his youth, Zwelling worked for Associated Press (AP) after completing high school, and he was surprised to find that AP was "loaded down" with older and more conservative reporters. Zwelling was also shocked at the older reporters' "open racism and xenophobia, not to mention the support for the ugliness of the Vietnam War (Zwelling 2000)."

Even when the reporters considered themselves middle-class, they often pointed to their parents' inclination to rebel against some political orthodoxy, and they were proud of their family's role in challenging the status quo. Most of the journalists were aware of their externally imposed reputation as the "ideologically unreliable" journalists, and more than one labour journalist asserted that this outsider status could have "been a genetic predisposition to rebel against some status quo political orthodoxy or other" (Deverell 2000).

Several reporters mentioned that former labour reporter and current journalism professor Bob Rupert was instrumental in nurturing their own small community of labour journalists. Rupert constantly reminded aspiring journalism students about their true working class status, and was one of the few journalism professors to teach a class that dealt with the skills needed for effective labour reporting. *Toronto Sun* reporter Peter Howell credited Rupert with providing him with the skills to survive his first tough year on the labour beat. Howell added that Rupert "was an unusually outspoken professor, and he told me about the key labour reporters to emulate while on my first labour beat job. He would also tell me to never let a city editor tell you what the lead is on a story, particularly with a labour news story" (Howell 2000).

Rupert was also a militant trade unionist, and he, like many of the older labour reporters interviewed here, related his childhood experiences as an "army brat" for the "visceral reasons" for his becoming a staunch advocate for working people. He thought of his family as middle class, and he had what he called a comfortable upbringing in a military family. A few years ago, while Rupert was working on a late career graduate degree, a doctoral student in Maryland asked him to provide an oral history. Rupert credited that long interview with helping him understand his vigorous support for unions and working people. Rupert added that the graduate student "motivated me to figure out what made me a likely candidate for left-wing ideas" (2000). He added "that it was my experience living in an army camp and watching the humiliation officers put the ordinary guys through on that parade square." That kind of military incident and the rank exploitation Rupert experienced early in his journalism career "had me swimming against the stream most of my life. I knew at a young age that everyone was entitled to dignity and respect, and when I watched this military imposition of authority, my resentment grew." Nearly every labour reporter interviewed detailed a similar sense of early career exploitation on the job. To that end, every labour reporter interviewed also participated actively in their Newspaper Guild locals during contract talks and with union grievances as they arose in the newsroom.

Rupert, who went on to become the first Canadian President of the Newspaper Guild, was adamant about not entertaining any grand illusions regarding his relative class status:

> *Young people go to journalism school and they're basically just another dumb kid. But all of a sudden people are taking you seriously, and they're even a bit afraid of you. You are dealing with the powerful and getting a real response from them, but you know you're not their league, certainly not economically* (Rupert 2000).

Rupert added that average journalists' false sense of pride was a clear form of denial about their true class status. Rupert added that young journalists "will not admit they're being exploited and making less than school teachers and other professionals." Rupert started his own reporting career in the 1950s, and he remembered being mortified by his early working conditions.

> *We worked fourteen hours a day with no job security. We were pushed around and I grew to resent that and value collective agreements and how that helped level the playing field. When a journalist goes home [and] looks at her bank balance, she finds out where she really fits. I did something about it with my Guild involvement and refused to be hosed, but I'll admit not many in the Guild went along with me* (Rupert 2000).

What stands out with most of the labour reporters was how often they viewed themselves as workers as opposed to a group with professional status. One labour reporter connected his future role in journalism directly to his own "hard scrabble" life of poverty after the Great Depression. Mac Makrachuck described that harsh life:

> *We were as poor as hell. We went to rural schools, eight classes in one room, and there was a Dukabor teacher who only finished grade eleven, if that. So we had a taste of poverty and there was great social ferment at that time on*

> *the prairies. You don't forget that kind of stuff when you start reporting on working people* (Makrachuck 2000).

Makrachuck became a beat legend of sorts among his labour beat colleagues after covering an NDP nomination meeting in the mid-1960s. During that meeting he impulsively stood for the NDP nomination, after the slated candidate failed to take up the nomination. Makrachuck was the only journalist to proudly label himself a "left-wing ideologue" who was always on labour's side.

Rosemary Speirs attributed one of the major early influences on her political thinking to a high school visit by a social democratic politician back in the 1950s. The man motivated her to attempt a career that related to her own social democratic political leanings. The politician was former Ontario CCF leader Donald McDonald, and "I was very impressed by him and I think he converted me to a left way of thinking" (Speirs 1999). The lone Ontario social democrat made an enduring impression on her because "he talked openly about how working people were up against the bosses in Canadian society, and at the time he was the lone CCF member in the legislature. To me it just seemed so damned heroic in a legislature that was so conservative" (Speirs 1999). Nearly every labour reporter spoke fondly of labour leaders or NDP politicians, but they also admitted their interest in political figures was not spoken about in the newsroom.

Toronto Telegram reporter Marc Zwelling spoke about his exposure to "real workers" as a sociological wake-up call to him: "I didn't fall in love with them as wonderful people, but I did fall in love with them as a good story; they were all so interesting. To me it all came together in terms of their personalities, what they were trying to do politically, it was also a fascinating area of zero boredom for me" (Zwelling 1999). His beat colleagues also commented on the greater personal accessibility of working people, as opposed to business leaders, and Zwelling added that:

> *there were clear differences between workers and the CEOs. You would never dream of going to see the boss, but the union guys were always open to us. There were a few labour aristocrats, but most of them were accessible as well. The stories on working people had drama, conflict. They were also salt of the earth, what you saw is what you got. But at the end of the day you didn't fraternize with them* (Zwelling 1999).

Covering the Working Class

Zwelling recalled going to interview business sources who were "always ensconced in their plush offices, forty stories up, which contrasted with the labour guy who worked in small grubby places with no sense of a good filing system" (2000). Zwelling found that most of his labour sources were decent and interesting people:

> *I became more left in my views after covering labour. I never heard of somebody who just went around all day long helping people, defending them. You always saw the worst of management; so in that way it tends to make you pro-labour* (Zwelling 2000).

British Columbia reporter Rod Mickleburgh also rvealed in his professional contacts with workers during his long career on the labour assignment. The fol-

lowing comment was echoed by many of the reporters who expressed a great deal of respect for working people:

> *I loved labour guys, they had great stories about class struggle. This was a time where there was a real question about which side you were on. It meant something to sing labour songs. There were the unions and the fact that everyone was against them, they really had to fight – I met great people and I don't regret a moment* (Mickleburgh 2000).

The support for labour and working class people often developed even more solidly for these journalists after they had worked on the beat for a few years. One of the highlights of the job for many was their rare ability to "fight for the little guy" just about everyday on the job.

Globe and Mail reporter Lorne Slotnick maintained that the conceptual weight of class issues was largely unknown to him before he started to work on the labour beat:

> *I had no thoughts about class except for what I read in Marx in my university texts. The beat helped me realize that there is class and a handful of executives could wield more clout than thousands of workers* (Slotnick 2000).

Labour reporter John Deverell argued that class theory motivated him and "a larger sense that society should be fairer and more democratic, and in that sense labour reporting was a way a person of no property could influence these larger social matters" (Deverell 2000). He agreed with many reporters that they did not "pick the labour beat to get rich, but to have meaningful influence beyond that available to ordinary citizens" Overall, during this era the political role of the labour beat expanded.

Coming of Age in the 1960s

Most of the labour reporters reached their formative years during the late 1960s, which clearly added an important dimension to their early thinking about economic justice and labour journalism. Most of the reporters said that this period dramatically affected their working lives:

> *As a journalist you came out of that period ready to raise hell. After all, the world's a mess, so let's do some crusading. I'm a bleeding heart liberal, and when someone gets crushed, you have – and this is one of the beauties of journalism – it can be a real platform to write about that injustice* (Hill 2000).

> *No particular event stands out, but I started thinking about inequality, which led me to read more about Marxism in high school. While it interested me I was never a Marxist, and I was dead set against mangling socialist principles that had taken place in the Soviet Union* (Slotnick 1998).

Mickleburgh said that living through the 1960s clearly related to the expanding political role of reporters in his generation. The reporters all saw the social democratic elements of the Canadian body politic expanding to meet their evolving press roles. Mickleburgh's comments reflect what many reporters thought about the influence of the student left-movement of the period, and how it might have empowered them to expand the labour beat.

> *You have to remember the student left was all around us like rock music. You considered yourself part of it, even if not intimately connected to it. It was part of the times and you didn't make a choice it was going on around you* (Mickleburgh 1999).

Deverell started his university days as a "conservative Darwinist, but then there was the usual cliché about new ideas opening up because there were people there with quite developed ideologies" (Deverell 2000). Deverell and other reporters sampled the universities where he often found many "seductive people who had fairly complete systems of explaining things, and some explanations were powerful." He added this was quite different from,

> *the secular Christian ethic floating in our family, that is notions of decency, honour and so on. So what is a young lad to do when confronted with all of the nastiness in the world? It made me think that my parents were hypocritical. But these folks at university were potent Lefties and there was that belief that there was something to be done about the social situation. It was a matter of curiosity for me because I didn't have strong beliefs. I became the leader of the campus NDP, which suited my ego properly* (Deverell 1999).

Several journalists described their political activities, particularly in the student Left, as vital to their journalism careers. As the following comments illustrate, several of the reporters suggested that their activities shaped their professional role as journalists, as well as the stories they pursued on the labour beat.

> *I was involved in the Ban the Bomb Movement, the University Committee for Nuclear Disarmament, which had a connection with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). We went on freedom marches and my brothers were dragged away from the U.S. Embassy. There was ferment in this period but I think I arrived there as a left-winger* (Speirs 2000).

> *My political education came out of the 60s and my student days at the University of Toronto. We had parades over the Sharpeville Massacre; we used our apartment to make signs. I met Rosemary Speirs and the NDP's Jim Laxer, who was then with the Waffle faction of the NDP. They'd come to my town and raised hell over a strike* (Makrachuck 2000).

While most reporters would not consider themselves as part of the radical fringe of the Canadian Left during the 1960s and early 1970s, their early backgrounds and social conditioning counter the general picture of the mainstream journalist as politically detached.

Labour journalists also said they had the political contacts to make this emerging political specialty work toward enhancing their career satisfaction. Political activities increased their status and the growing media profile for the beat had implications for them, along with an editorial expectation that they cover the activities of the NDP party. Ed Finn spoke about the impact that the Left had on their delicate role as political writers:

> *You have to understand the political context, we had a left-wing party that represented labour and that makes all the difference. It gave labour a stronger voice in Parliament, so they can still put that point of view out for wider*

> *public discussion. It could not be ignored or shoved away, so labour here didn't have to makes the same compromises as it did in the United States. Also, Canada is a more collectivist country* (Finn 2000).

Mickleburgh noted:

> *It was a very political beat and labour was front-page news, which was great for us. We had the opportunity to take people behind the violent headlines to what was really happening. The door was open to charge through with all the information, and when you get that chance, you run with it* (Mickleburgh1999).

In addition, Wilfred List said:

> *The golden age for labour was the post-war growth of the welfare state, and unions had a lot to do with it, and they got political recognition. The unions were considered necessary agents or partners in the process, if only junior partners. I think the mainstream press had developed tolerance for this political approach to labour* (List 1999).

List suggested that during the post-WWII period it "was becoming quite exciting to cover the labour movement, because the Communist unions were battling anti-Communist unions and there was plenty of internal foment – this was after all between 1946 through 1947." List won a national newspaper award for his labour reporting and became a walking icon of sorts for the other labour journalists interviewed. Later in his career he also emerged as a critical foil for those contemplating work in labour journalism during the 1960s and beyond. Some of the younger reporters wanted to take an even stronger political stance with the labour beat. List, from an older school of "objective" journalism, would not have sanctioned that planned expansion of the labour beat. List was also considered a textbook of historical information for his beat cohort, and the overall respect for him derives from his four decades on the assignment.

Ed Finn also worked on the beat in the 1940s and after exploring his personal archive of labour stories, realised "that in those days labour was such a huge story and it was always a very political beat. You met fascinating people, especially the old timers who had been around in the 30s and 40s when things were severe" (Finn 2000). Many of the reporters who started working on the beat after the war felt they lacked the resources needed to cover such a significant area. Finn said that they always considered themselves beleaguered "chroniclers of events, and social trends to an extent, we dealt with just the highlights and main drift of events."

Finn started his own long career in Newfoundland, and noted that there were good reasons for labour's high profile in the immediate post WWII period:

> *A thumbnail sketch is that you had the CCF elected first in Saskatchewan (1944). But that was not the seminal point; it was probably the near win of the CCF in 1943 in Ontario – that was a big scare to the establishment. And in response to that we also got a great deal of labour legislation. It follows that you have to cover this phenomenon, and that coverage sort of peaked in the 1970s, through the wage-and-price-controls period* (Finn 2000).

Globe and Mail reporter Lorne Slotnick said that "several intelligent people in the labour movement told me that the labour reporter in the post-WWII era helped

to make labour a legitimate part of the economic and social fabric." He added "nearly every boring story about the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) reaction to the federal budget carried the assumption that they were the legitimate spokesman for workers with something to contribute to the national debate" (Slotnick 1998). Slotnick would eventually fight a public battle with his newspaper in 1989, when the newspaper ended its fifty-year tradition of covering labour and renamed the beat "workplace" journalism. Slotnick tried unsuccessfully to engage the press and scholars about the political implications of dropping the beat for the de-politicised "workplace" journalism of this era.

Most of the labour reporters interviewed dealt with the beat as it evolved during the 1960s and beyond. One reporter argued that the apex for the beats' influence took place in 1976, with events related to a National Day of Protest against the Trudeau government's federal wage-and-price controls. Many reporters thought that this was the peak for the labour movement's influence, and that it was downhill for the labour beat after that national labour event. Despite the lack of scholarly renditions of the labour beat's role in Canadian society, most labour reporters shared their experiences about their specialty from the post-WWII period, right through until the beat was nearly phased out in the 1980s.

The labour reporters recognised how their fortunes were intimately tied to the strength of the political Left, with the labour movement always being a major driving force in that regard. The reporters all agreed that during the 1960s there was a movement toward a tripartite political-economic order in Canada. Deverell said that major political events of the late 1960s, like the "breakthrough NDP election in Manitoba in 1969, which was even more interesting than Tommy Douglas winning in Saskatchewan during the 1940s. This naturally led to the emergence of universal healthcare for them and the rest of Canada" (Deverell 2000). He also maintained that these NDP elections victories gave added press latitude for labour journalists and "it also scared the shit out of people in power, and then in 1972 Dave Barrett became the Premier of British Columbia – that was the masses and the unwashed seizing power – that was a revolution."

Toronto Star reporter Rosemary Speirs spent over twenty years on the beat and added that during "the early 1970s, when the CLC wanted to talk to the federal government, the heads of the CLC would sit down opposite the full cabinet, often with the Prime Minister in attendance!" (Speirs 2000). In this case the leading beat reporters would be camped outside while the high-level meeting went on, often for days, as the government and the CLC debated larger issues like wage and price controls and unemployment insurance. Speirs added that "it was a kind of summit and deadline coverage for us." Many of the labour journalists working during this period agreed that the CLC had enough clout to get the ear of government and get into the national headlines daily. Most of the labour reporters recall this period as a dynamic time for them as political reporters; however, it was not long before the political tides shifted and the labour movement declined, which proved to be the beat's last gasp as a political specialty.

One of the most revealing aspects of the long interviews dealt with reporters' reflections on the well-entrenched credos and dogmas of the pluralist "journalism ideology."

The Chimera of the Bourgeois Journalism Ideology

Most of the journalists had a less than solid commitment to the rigidities of the bourgeois ideology of journalism. The reporters often talked about an ability to manipulate these precepts to their advantage in most of their labour stories. Most of them adhered to what they saw as the narrow capitalist press precepts of "objective journalism," because the sensitive political beat demanded that type of meticulous attention. Many reporters completed their first labour stories in more radical press venues, or college papers that served left-wing or labour constituencies, and therefore they experienced first hand the often malleable nature of objective journalism.

Many of the labour reporters vigorously argued that the tattered notion of objectivity often clouded rather than added any clarity to their journalism roles. But still others defended the possibility that they could be objective chroniclers of events. Several reporters said that the ideology of objectivity worked to suppress dissent, and Deverell maintained:

> *It was not a useful idea because it falsely implies dispassionate and uncommitted work, but I wouldn't say it meant disinterested journalism. If you were really all of those things you might also be unmotivated to go out and chase the real contradictions that make for good stories – especially on the labour beat. … It was clear that the voice of labour was not reflected and I wanted to provide that missing element because even in the beat's heyday it was far below levels of business coverage. What really bothered me was that the only labour event worthy of coverage was a strike or when somebody hit a cop over the head with picket signs* (Deverell 1999).

Zwelling had a more stark view of the mainstream press potential for adequate labour coverage, even during the high point for Canadian labour coverage:

> *The bourgeois media was never labour's friend. As a reporter you aimed for fair coverage, but the bourgeois press never does labour any favours. On the other hand labour reporters tried to cover news fairly and to put labour's view in* (Zwelling 2000).

A majority of the reporters understood the premise that their professors often tried hard to inculcate regarding objectivity. Still others said they saw through it and argued that most journalism was a way of avoiding a closer look at raw power:

> *Objectivity is a defensive shield which people in power use to deflect all questions about why the hell they do what they do. But looking at objectivity in terms of trying to understand the motivation of good journalists, well I don't think that this subject it's all that interesting* (Deverell 1999).

Despite widespread scepticism about the premises of the bourgeois journalism ideology they were persuaded to employ professional codes, and most of the labour reporters saw that there was little contradiction in at least attempting to strive for the fool's gold of objectivity.

Some labour reporters thought that the concept of objectivity was malleable and subject to rapid change. To many reporters, objectivity depended on what the political definition of objectivity was at any given time. Norman Simon, who in

childhood dreamed about a career in the labour movement, provided his own personal definition of objectivity in labour journalism:

> *I remember writing my first labour story and trying not to be a propagandist for labour. I had to work hard and draw on my journalism training to keep objectivity in my stories. To add to it there was expectation from people in the labour movement that I was the son a CLC official, and that they expected me to transform the paper so that it would carry more progressive material. It was an interesting tension and balance for me. My victory with labour stories was bringing them to the "objective" point, rather than leaving them at the anti-labour point. My victory was taking labour stories that might not have been written about the plight of workers, and bringing them up to objective status. That is how I gave life to my views, and took the anti-labour stuff out of stories* (Simon 2000).

Most of the journalists agreed that there was some room for creative manoeuvre and editorial control, and that they could always rely on holding the "editor function" because the arcane nature of their beat made their working assumptions unassailable by most of their editorial overseers.

An Interpretive Community or Nascent Subculture

Very few of the labour reporters felt capable of articulating the larger political affect of their rapidly changing roles during this period of study. As Ginny Galt observed, "most reporters got the message early in their careers that they needed to please the bosses and write the kind of stories that they wanted – that was just the way the system works" (Galt 2000).

The majority of the reporters interviewed took the same critical stance in their broad view of press owners and in their Newspaper Guild involvement, especially those contract talks that were based on labour process issues and their level of editorial autonomy. The reporters also clearly saw a fading collectivist culture in Canada, and beyond the political and professional assumptions they shared, the journalists were valuable witnesses to the social space available for social democratic journalism. The interviews also revealed how sophisticated their understandings were about their relative position in the shifting balances of this increasingly neo-liberal era in Canadian politics.

Most journalists saw themselves as having a more critical orientation in their roles than was apparent with their contemporaries in the journalism culture, even if they did not match the level of dissent that some editors ascribed to them. The journalists also revealed a level of consciousness about each other's objectives, career paths, including who among them were deemed the leading figures on the beat. They all understood their mythological reputation as "outsiders" in the mainstream press, even if they felt that the role was not always earned. That outsider mythology often made its way into their narratives about the fading labour beat, and it often helped create a sense of community among these journalists. Forty year veteran reporter Wilf List was their beat's centre of gravity, which related to both his extraordinary longevity, and his role at the national newspaper of record, the *Globe and Mail.* Ginny Galt spoke for most reporters and related her thoughts about their supposed culture of dissent:

> *Labour reporters did have a collective feeling because we always knew that we were up against a behemoth. There was no sense for me that the behemoth was the status quo. It was more in the nature of the interaction with editors, institutions, colleagues, and the sources that went with the beat. We certainly had a strong camaraderie in those days* (Galt 2000).

Most of the journalists shared cultural and political insights that were never dealt with in the mainstream sociology that examined the labour beat. Their views are vital to understanding their evolving autonomy, which was attached to their participation in an alternative public sphere. For instance, they spoke about their connections to the progressive CBC journalism culture, left-wing magazines, and other progressive inputs vital to understanding these journalists. They were also members of a broader journalism culture and had many progressive connections as their social-democratic formative years clearly attest. They increased the space for autonomy between them and their editors and management, and later it was clear that this editorial control became problematic, especially during the late 1980s after the Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. was a settled economic issue. Galt argued that "it is clear to me that the publishers increasingly would not allow the time we could spend on labour stories then, and there are certainly no more labour bargaining death watch sessions around major hotels" (Galt 2000).

The insights garnered from reporters do not comport well with the findings of most of the institutional sociology, in which reporters are often seen as powerless against a plethora of organisational constraints. Hannigan argued that the labour reporter's relative autonomy was more than offset by organisational constraints, and if "there was a tendency for the labour journalist to lean to the position of organized labour, this was more than offset by … the built-in media organizational bias" (Hannigan1986, 34). Most of the reporters interviewed would vigorously disagree with that argument, and the mainstream sociology tended to see more of the organisational constraints than the reporters felt were in place.

The reporters' multi-faceted exposure to class, in theory and in practice, echoed in familiar themes throughout the interviews. In that respect they shared a deep understanding of class as it related to their roles and their formative ideological influences provided insights about their own political and class motivations. It was clear that many saw their connections with the Left as vital, but at the same time the rigidities of bourgeois journalism impeded these ties in their reporting culture. One of their cultural bonds as a group of journalists was as subtle dissenters within their profession, whether or not they were outsiders by choice, this type of mythological status created a sense of their own community in the process of practicing labour beat journalism.

Conclusion

The class-consciousness of the reporters came through in a number of ways, not least the reporters' nearly universal support for their Newspaper Guild unions. The journalists' allegiance to the professional journalism model was on a much lower level of intensity than many of their contemporaries. Several reporters' mentioned that they had few illusions about their status as workers in the mainstream media. Nearly all the reporters mentioned that their goal was to give a larger voice to working people in the Canadian body politic. They all felt that the rank and file

was nearly silent in the public sphere, and their emphasis on class was highlighted in story choices and in beat models. Given all of these similarities on this pivotal issue of class, it is safe to say that this was another element that led to strong group allegiances for these reporters.

The presence of a strong labour movement, a social democratic political party (NDP), and the paternal collectivist sensibilities that they attributed to the Canadian brand of conservatism, all tended to make class a very relevant issue for their journalism practice. The reporters were asked how the resistance practiced in their beat practice cantered on that class analysis. They had to factor in their largely middle-class backgrounds, and in the long interviews they related this to their interaction with workers and labour leaders – a professional struggle of sorts that produced a variety of insights and, in some cases, more than a little conceptual confusion regarding their class consciousness.

Most of the reporters argued that their goal was to give voice to voiceless people, and they felt that workers issues were nearly always silenced in the public sphere. The labour beat was a site of multiple identities, a great deal of irony, and a contingent social reality of reporters living precariously and resisting some of the changing ideological norms. The research demonstrated that while the reporters were not all shaped in the same ideological mould, they often came from quite similar backgrounds and formative ideological experiences.

This study also explored the limits of that ideological diversity in the mainstream press. The reporters dealt with their rare ability to shape journalism and how they resisted the dominant practices associated with their emerging role in relation to the neo-liberal changes taking place in their society. This research also makes the case that they were indeed an emerging culture of resistance forced to respond when their legitimacy was openly challenged. Perhaps more importantly, given their political beliefs, it demonstrates how a political journalism practice can emerge and find the people willing to expand the voice of a specific political constituency.

The concept of hegemony was central to this study, but the theory often leads scholars to essentialist assumptions about dominant socialisation and the tendency of reporters to support the dominant ideology (Altheide 1984). In some cases this has been a misreading of Gramsci's (1971) subtle concept, often moving critical analysis toward the conclusion that journalists are merely pawns within the dominant ideological formation. This study demonstrated that many journalists are not uniformly socialised into the dominant thinking; in fact many Canadian reporters shared a social-democratic ideology and this was true of most of the labour journalists interviewed for this study. But the labour reporters also had an opportunity in the post-war era to be agents of change in their political culture. They also had strong support from a Left community, which often helped to engender a wider public discourse about the inadequacies of capitalist journalism.

One of the more interesting findings was the dual nature of the beat during this period, in that the younger reporters tended to support the idea of making it a more complete political beat. This outcome was not surprising, mainly because the support for left-wing politics and labour was at one of its high points during the temporal boundaries of this study. The younger journalists started to make it a more political practice than was apparent with the older more "professionally oriented" journalists. This generational cleavage was apparent in the more expansive

story choices of the younger reporters and in the way they critically compared their evolving and more sophisticated beat assignments to that of the older journalists. The younger journalists were also more heavily influenced by the student Left and the social resonance "left nationalism," which was at its high point as evidenced by the electoral successes of the NDP during this study period. All of these cultural variables led the reporters, especially the younger group in this case, toward more overtly political coverage of the labour movement and its many connections to the NDP.

Anil Verma (1988) discussed another important element revealed in these interviews. In Verma's view the reporters misunderstood the pluralist basis for the post-WWII settlement with labour, and they all too often injected more conflict into their stories than was warranted. Verma's traditional sociological approach missed a great deal in that liberal-pluralist assessment, and this study claims that they were all well informed about the implications of the approaches they took in their labour reporting. Many of them wanted real social change to empower working people and yield a more egalitarian social order. To add to that point they were politically aware enough to discern that this might involve more conflict and political debate included in their labour stories.

It is clear that the dominant ideological assumptions did not always pervade their assumptions, or their orientation to labour journalism. Moreover, the journalists developed a degree of autonomy, so the language and codes that resonated in the dominant formation were not so easily transferred to this culture of resistance. In addition, the reporters were very creative in the ways they could use their own cultural categories. The symbols of their work were clearly articulated, which related to their ability to craft "subversive" news representations. More than one scholar has argued that mainstream journalists use the dominant codes tactically to promote the dominant ideology. In this case it is clear that the opposite was true, and the labour reporters often used the same dominant codes to expand political discourse through their journalism.

The wholesale movement away from labour coverage in the 1980s was a major re-balancing of the Canadian public sphere, and these reporters were at the centre of hegemonic change. Their struggle was a public one and the labour movement's role was diminished along with the labour beat. The reporters witnessed key structural changes in the press, and they had to make major representational adjustments to the new political realities – in some cases on a daily basis.

Several elements can now be more clearly articulated as it relates to this research: (1) It is apparent that all journalists do not support dominant formations in their journalism practices. (2) The researcher is obligated to delve into the deeper layers of meaning, including the strong group settings like the labour beat, where they developed a level of specialised knowledge and editorial autonomy. (3) That resistance, when it is manifested in a journalism culture, is often multi-layered and can be traced to alternative political formations, an alternative public sphere, union support, and a higher-level class-consciousness, as was uniquely manifested in this study. (4) In a conducive political environment, reporters live far more complex political and cultural lives than are theorised in much of the research that was reviewed for this study.

The reporters delicate manoeuvring between powerful institutional and political forces was one of the more intriguing elements of this study, especially during

the beat's decline. The labour reporters were ideologically suspect, by sources and editors alike, and often Guild activism was an overt sign to many editors that these reporters were openly supportive of labour. Despite their being suspect, the reporters argued that they had the requisite skill and journalistic subtlety to expand on the quality of labour news in their newspapers, something that almost all journalists were proud of in their own beat practice. It is also clear that that skill was deployed during periods of change, and the reporters revealed how they managed to maintain, or conversely lose, ground in this constant hegemonic balancing act. The resistance that was apparent in this small culture demonstrated that their reporting practice was a location for polysemic activity and that they were acutely aware of the various representations that were negotiated in their journalism practice.

It is clear that these journalists led complex lives and they were active political actors in their own right. As a group they were social democratic in their views; in fact that is what drew most of them to the specialty, along with the attendant need for most to expand the political power of working people. The resonance of the "us against them" role of these reporters added to the sense that they were on this beat with similar political and journalistic goals in mind. Add that to their shared contacts and political backgrounds, and they all developed even more empathy for the struggles of workers while working on this assignment. In addition, participation in an opposition practice that challenged dominant formations helped to structure their group formation in dissent. As mentioned earlier, the political thrust of the beat was similar for most of them, and they shared an argot that was often seen to be the culture's active defence against its detractors.

This study tends to confirm that reporters gather in alternative groups where they can nurture a community of interests within a supportive public sphere. Zelizer's (1997) idea of "interpretive communities" is a useful one to build the case for these hidden cultures of resistance. This concept also builds on their internal elements of community and reveals their importance.

More research is needed if scholars are to understand the possibilities for dissent, and it is clear that researchers need to be interdisciplinary in scope in order to understand how journalism works, how dissent is possible, and how groups coalesce politically. Garnering that cultural sense, or "thick description" of how group's form is the most important insight here, and the area in which it may provide an advance on previous related studies. In that sense this study takes a step beyond the two main research paradigms discussed, using cultural theory to more accurately explore the complexity of resistance. The struggle over meaning in the mainstream press had broad connections to the body politic, and as this study demonstrated, reporters can make a real difference when the balances of agency and structure favour their oppositional journalism.

These reporters led complex lives and they are multi-dimensional citizens with strong political programs in their own right. The journalists were political animals who tried to make an intellectual contribution. This study presented the labour beat during a period that was perfect for this critical focus on their cultural practice. The aim was to understand the factors that lead to a more democratically representative media in which dissent was heard in proportion to its political impact in a given society. Future research must pay attention to the political context associated with such an assignment. This study provided clues to finding and nour-

ishing cultures of resistance and, of course, also recognizing their value to a society with democratic pretensions.

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