

## **Postscript: Comparative Research and the 'New World Order'**

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# Postscript: Comparative Research and the 'New World Order'

Charles Bergquist

I SHOULD STATE at the outset that I am not a specialist on either Canada or Australia and most of what little I know about their respective labour histories I learned from reading this volume. I do have an interest in historical comparisons, however, and like the contributors to this volume I have engaged in comparison of the labour histories of former European colonies which share a common cultural and institutional legacy inherited from a single imperial power. My work has focused on Spanish America and has included comparative study of the labour movement of the one country in that region, Argentina, whose history has occasionally been the subject of formal comparisons with Canada and Australia.

In this short postscript I first try to describe in very broad outline what I, as a non-specialist, take away from the reading of this detailed comparison of Australian and Canadian labour history. I then comment briefly on what my own experience with Latin American material might contribute to thinking about the Australian and Canadian comparison presented here. I end with a short statement that re-emphasizes the virtues of comparative research, especially among historians, and stresses the timeliness and utility of the comparative method adopted by the team of researchers who brought this study to completion. The aim of this postscript, in short, is to present one view of the accomplishments of the volume and to suggest some of the many ways this comparative project in particular, and comparative labour history more generally, might proceed in the future.

## I

I will not reiterate in any detail the many comparative insights generated in these essays. These include, of course, a better and more precise understanding of what these two nation-states have in common. The commonalities of special importance to labour include, as one would expect, the similar and continuing influence of

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British culture and institutions, particularly the example of the British labour movement. They include as well, as several of the essays in the volume persuasively show, a common set of initial assumptions about, and evolving government policies toward, indigenous peoples, on the one hand, and women, on the other. And they include (although this aspect is less consistently covered in the essays, a point to which I return below) a common economic experience. Canada and Australia begin as societies whose economies depend on exports from the primary sector. They both develop, especially during the first three quarters of the 20th century, vigorous manufacturing sectors. And then, during the last two decades or so, they experience a painful (at least for labour) economic restructuring in response to global trends in capitalist organization and investment.

In addition to clarifying commonalities like these, the comparative method of the study is especially successful in specifying differences in the formation and development of Australian and Canadian labour. These differences include the obvious and increasingly explosive question of a francophone segment of Canadian society, which has no analogue in Australian society. They include the much more intimate involvement of the United States in Canadian economic, social, cultural, and political life than is the case in Australia. They involve some significant variations in the experience of immigration in these two immigrant societies. And, it appears, they include the relatively greater weight of regionalism in Canadian compared to Australian development.

But the overriding difference in the history of labour in the two societies — a difference whose consequences in virtually all domains of labour's experience are detailed in the essays of this volume — is the relatively greater strength of the Australian labour movement compared to the Canadian from the late 19th century until recent times. The relative "strength" or "power" of a labour movement is of course difficult to both conceptualize and measure. Nevertheless, it is confirmed in the comparative treatment of, for example, indices of union density and the electoral fortunes of political parties linked to labour. Most significantly, it is revealed in the near unanimous importance the volume's authors attribute to the early "incorporation" of labour in Australia, a process that seems to have peculiarly favoured labour. A comprehensive system of union recognition, collective bargaining, and arbitration procedures comparable in scope to that inaugurated in Australia just after the turn of the century would only come into being in Canada (on terms, ostensibly, at least, much less favourable to labour) almost a half century later, following World War II. Put differently, the process of labour incorporation in Canada during the first half of the 20th century, when compared to that of Australia, seems to have been piecemeal and partial. Labour incorporation in a comprehensive sense in Canada comes at mid-20th century. And when it comes, it involves terms considerably less favourable to labour than in Australia, terms comparable to those achieved in the United States in the period 1935-1947.

There is wide consensus among students of labour in both highly developed and underdeveloped capitalist societies that the process of labour incorporation constitutes a critical juncture in the development of modern nation-states. Many scholars have shown how the timing and nature of labour incorporation has profound implications, not only for the subsequent trajectory of the labour movement, but for future patterns of national economic, political, social, and cultural development. Most labour historians whose work has focused on this process hold that the timing and nature of labour incorporation — whether it comes early or late, whether it is more favourable to labour's immediate interests or less so — are themselves powerful indicators of the relative strength of labour in a given nation at a given point in time. That is because the process of incorporation, which typically occurs following periods of violent, disruptive conflict between mobilized workers and capitalists, involves fundamental compromises between these two classes, compromises which are mediated by the state and incorporated into the fundamental laws and institutions of the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Viewed this way, the extremely early incorporation of labour in Australia (which predates not only labour incorporation in Canada but most other nations as well), and its substance, which includes compulsory arbitration by a state in which labour already had a strong voice, is the most revealing indicator of Australian labour's relative power versus its Canadian counterpart. As in all such cases, measuring labour's relative "power" at a given point in time is a complex issue, which must be considered in material, cultural, physical, and psychological terms. Labour's power, and the scope of the concessions it is able to extract from the state and from capitalists at the moment of incorporation, must be understood in the context of its own cohesiveness and resources, as well as those of both its capitalist antagonists and the state itself. Labour's power is a consequence of human perception — of labour's own sense of self and capacity, of capitalists' and the state functionaries' calculations of their own strength and the magnitude of the threat posed to their interests by labour. And labour's relative power depends on the ability of the main protagonists to construct a vision for the future shared by other social groups and construct political alliances to implement that vision.

<sup>1</sup>In contrast to most labour historians, mainstream liberal historians and social scientists tend to downplay the causal role of labour mobilization in the process of labour incorporation, emphasizing instead the relatively autonomous role and concerns of the state, or, in more extreme formulations, the political mobilization strategies of rival political élites and parties. In the field of comparative Latin American labour studies, my work, *Labour in Latin America* (Stanford 1986) is illustrative of analysis that privileges working-class agency, while the other position is most fully developed in the work of Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena* (Princeton 1991). It seems likely that both approaches capture part of the complexity of labour incorporation and that the challenge for future research, as implied for Australia and Canada in Kealey's and Patmore's introduction, is to better integrate the two.

These considerations may seem elementary, but raising them here, I believe, is important. For while the comparative study before us is extraordinarily informative about the *consequences* for Australian and Canadian labour history of the timing and nature of labour incorporation, it says relatively little about the *causes* of this process. In their introduction, Kealey and Patmore recognize the importance of the system of labour relations, particularly compulsory arbitration in Australia, worked out in the two countries at the start of this century. They note that "the nature of the class forces underlying the state strategies in both countries need careful analysis." "Here," they go on to say, "is where our comparative assessment of the role of the working class in each country may prove most helpful." I think they are right. The volume demonstrates not only the consequences of labour incorporation for the subsequent labour history of Australia and Canada; it is often suggestive also of the ways these consequences inform the larger histories of the two nations.

By and large, however, neither the editors nor the contributors to the volume are much concerned with explaining the different timing and nature of labour incorporation in the two societies. To be sure, some of the contributors suggest reasons for the relatively greater strength of Australian labour over its Canadian counterpart. These include the existence and divisive potential of a large francophone segment within Canadian society, the much greater influence in Canada of conservative union philosophies and institutions emanating from the United States, and the and relative lack of coordination between regional labour movements in Canada. In particular, the contributions on working-class culture and labour politics in the volume suggest ways one might explain the relative strength of radical traditions within the Australian labour movement. The chapter on culture insists on the greater ideological autonomy of Australian labour versus its Canadian counterpart. Its authors attribute this difference to the greater cultural homogeneity of Australian workers, to their concentration in a few large cities, and, curiously enough, to the advantages accorded them by climate. The more benign climate of Australia, they argue, favoured the appropriation by militant workers of public urban space. In the chapter on politics, the authors review (without endorsing) another type of explanation for the comparative strength of Australian labour, the idealist arguments of Louis Hartz and his followers. In this construct, labour's different ideological trajectory in these two societies simply reflects the political tendencies of two static "fragments" of European society as a whole: an Australian fragment, which is radical or labourite, a Canadian one, which is liberal. Neither of these chapters, however, is primarily concerned with the causes of the relative strength of the two labour movements. Like the volume as a whole, both are most concerned with comparing the 20th-century consequences of the relative strength of Australian versus Canadian labour since about 1900.

This concentration on 20th-century consequences rather than 19th-century causes reflects, of course, the 20th-century focus of the volume and the initial

assignments taken on by contributors. Recognizing the need for more attention to 19th-century developments, the editors commissioned the chapter written by Bryan Palmer for inclusion in the volume. Palmer's essay goes far toward conceptualizing the gender and racial dimensions of 19th-century working class formation in these rich "white settler" or "white invader" societies. That allows him suggestively to frame a powerful interpretive paradox which accounts for both the power of working-class opposition to — and the logic of its integration into — a national capitalist project in the two societies. But Palmer's emphasis on the similarity of what labour "gained" from capital and what it "gave up" at the turn of the 19th century in both nations proves not very illuminating of the differences, explored in the other essays, of the way labour incorporation played itself out in 20th-century Canada and Australia.

Perhaps the causes of the relative power differential between the labour movements of Australia and Canada at the start of this century, and the different paths of labour incorporation that result, are stories well known to specialists on Australian and Canadian labour history and their respective national audiences. Speaking as a non-specialist, however, this aspect of the story merits much more attention. To my knowledge, the best comparative work on the process of labour incorporation in the two societies is the study by Richard Mitchell done for the 1988 conference on Australian and Canadian labour history and published under the same editorship as this volume.<sup>2</sup> That study reveals the intricate and complex nature of the process that led to full labour incorporation in Australia and something significantly less than that in Canada. Mitchell shows how the different goals of the protagonists in the two countries reflected different levels of social conflict in the immediate past, different experiences with government intervention in labour disputes (especially at the local and regional levels), different appreciations of efforts to deal with industrial conflict in Britain and New Zealand, and finally, different understandings of the meaning of government involvement in labour affairs generally, including how government mediation and arbitration related to the pivotal matter of union recognition by private employers. Through all this

<sup>2</sup>Gregory S. Kealey and Greg Patmore, eds., *Canadian and Australian Labour History: Towards a Comparative Perspective* (Brisbane 1990). The separate evolution of Canadian and Australian industrial relations is treated in chapters by Diane Kirkby and Gregory S. Kealey in D.C.M. Platt, ed., *Social Welfare, 1850-1950: Australia, Argentina and Canada Compared* (London 1989). Both emphasize in passing the role of labour mobilization and industrial conflict in precipitating industrial relations legislation, with Kirkby, in particular, noting the role of "strikers in the pastoral and maritime industries crucial to an Australian economy heavily dependent on the export of primary produce," (108) and Kealey emphasizing the role of militant miners and railway workers of British Columbia in influencing the thinking of William Lyon Mackenzie King, a primary architect of changes in Canada's industrial relations system in the early years of the 20th century, (136-7). The goal of these two chapters, however, is not to compare the different outcomes of industrial relations reform in the two countries at the start of the 20th century.

complexity, however, the greater power of the Australian labour movement relative to the Canadian continually reveals itself in Mitchell's analysis, although Mitchell himself does not attempt to explain the basis of this power differential in his article.

## II

As a student of Latin American labour history, my own understanding of the process of labour incorporation — and of the relative strength of labour which precipitates its timing and nature — is grounded in economic structure. By "economic structure" I mean specifically the peripheral "export economies" through which underdeveloped societies around the globe realized their comparative advantage in world trade under the aegis of the British-dominated liberal capitalist world order between 1850 and 1930. These "export economies" were the special concern of the Latin American structural economists who laid the basis for Latin American "dependency theory" in the decades following World War II. They, like their counterparts in the English-speaking world, particularly Canada, who developed "staple theory," were concerned with how specialization in producing a given primary commodity affected the course of national economic development, particularly the capacity to create over time a dynamic industrial sector. Neither school was very concerned with labour per se, certainly not in the sense labour historians are, although each recognized that questions like the structure of ownership of the means of export production and the size and wage level of the labour force in the export sector influenced the success of capitalist development and industrialization.

Although, to put it mildly, neither school of thought is as influential today as it once was, I believe that labour historians who ignore the work of these economists miss an important opportunity to define their own subject matter more precisely and to relate it more directly to broader questions of national development. Most contemporary labour historians focus their studies on workers in manufacturing industry and frame their inquiries in terms of the "new" social and cultural history that has flourished in labour studies in core industrial societies like Britain and the United States in recent decades. I believe that labour historians who study national societies decisively influenced in their formative years by the export of primary products should take a different tack. By shifting their focus and extending their inquiries to workers in export production they encompass the experience that makes the development of their object of study unique.

Looked at this way, the locus of the great power of the Australian labour movement and the reasons for its early incorporation on terms favourable to labour is to be found in the structure of export production concentrated in the southeastern Australian heartland. Mining and wool production not only made Australia extraordinarily rich by the late 19th century, a fact that made generous compromises with mobilized labour more likely, but they also favoured the creation of a working-class culture and forms of union and political organization among miners, rural workers,

and transport workers that threatened (or were perceived to threaten) the whole capitalist national order.

In Canada, the "super-staple" was wheat. (The term is employed by D.C.M. Platt and Guido di Tella, in their very useful comparative study of Australian, Canadian, and Argentine development, to indicate the particular export commodity that overshadowed the other primary agricultural staples all three nations produced.<sup>3</sup>) Canadian wheat was largely grown on the central prairies by owner-operators whose vision of a democratic commonwealth appears to have been hard to link up to labour's radical concerns in the regional mining and extractive economies of the west, the booming industrial economy of the southeast, and the more stagnant economies of the east (whose main export at the end of the 19th century was working people).

In Argentina, wheat and wool became subordinate to beef production by the end of the 19th century. Labour mobilization in the arid sheepraising periphery of Patagonia reached extraordinary proportions during the post-World War I depression. And earlier in the century, rural workers and enclaves of small and medium wheat producers also mounted significant challenges to the social status quo in the Argentine heartland (the area of fertile soil and adequate rainfall radiating outward from Buenos Aires known as the pampa). But although these efforts by rural workers were sometimes supported by militant elements of urban labour and transport workers they were successfully (and, on the pampa, relatively easily) contained through repression.

The Argentine labour movement proved unable effectively to contest the power of the great landowners who dominated national politics and beef production on the pampa. Beef production did not require much labour, and beef producers made wheat production subservient to their interests. (Typically, wheat was produced by Italian immigrant tenants who, after two or three harvests, were required by their contracts to plant the land in alfalfa and move on.) The result was an Argentine labour movement, centred in the service and manufacturing sectors of the large cities of the coast, that proved too weak to extract significant concessions from the élite until after World War II. As in Canada and Australia, projects for labour incorporation were discussed in the Argentine legislature after the turn of the century and again following widespread labour mobilization during and after World War I. But these projects were stillborn and labour incorporation was finally accomplished only with the rise of Peronism in the years after 1943.

Posing the issue of labour incorporation in the comparative context of export production takes the study of labour, including the vital subjects of working-class culture and the labour process, outside the realm of manufacturing industry, which is the customary focus (indeed, traditionally defines) labour studies. The customary focus of labour history is more appropriate for the industrial centre of the world

<sup>3</sup>D.C.M. Platt and Guido di Tella, eds., *Argentina, Australia and Canada: Studies in Comparative Development, 1870-1965* (London 1985).



economy than it is for the study of labour movement formation and incorporation in the primary export economies of the periphery. Clearly, as the 20th century progressed, and industrial development proceeded in societies originally dependent on primary exports, workers in the manufacturing and service sectors become ever more central to national life, as the studies in this volume attest. Yet even this 20th-century process is structured in part by what went before. A pivotal dimension of that structuring is the fate of labour incorporation at the start of the century, which may be termed full, partial, or virtually non-existent in the respective cases of Australia, Canada, and Argentina.

The compromise between capital and organized labour in Australia had profound implications, as the essays in this volume show, for subsequent immigration, tariff, and social policy. All of these policies helped structure the process of industrialization in the 20th century, making it more vigorous than the freer play of market forces would have allowed. Labour's lesser power in Canada may have encouraged the investment of foreign capital in Canadian industry, while farmer-labour pressure seems to have fostered government policies that promoted a diffuse pattern of land-ownership and expanding levels of agricultural productivity. These policies both cheapened the cost of material inputs to industry and broadened the domestic market for industrial goods.

These labour influences on the course of national development in Australia and Canada stand in sharp relief to those in Argentina. In early 20th-century Argentina a lack of a significant labour voice in national politics assured the continued dominance of the great rural estate owners. Meanwhile, government policy promoted a flood of European immigrants who kept wage levels depressed and undercut labour organization. These developments help to explain the relative retardation of Argentine industrial development when compared to that of Australia and Canada. They also help to account for the dismal record of Argentine cereal and livestock production in matching, as the century progressed, the productivity gains of its major international competitors. Argentine rural producers failed to become as productive as their Australian and Canadian (and US) counterparts not because they harboured traditional Latin values, a cultural argument effectively refuted by the gifted comparative economic historian Carlos Díaz Alejandro.<sup>4</sup> They neglected productivity because, relieved of effective taxation of the land and payment for costly social welfare measures (conditions that reflected the relative weakness of labour and middle class political parties), they could maintain high profits without having to invest heavily in modernizing production. Ultimately, the relative weakness of labour in Argentina also compromised the course of liberal democracy. The development of liberal-democratic institutions seemed quite promising up to 1930, when they succumbed to intervention by the military allied with the conservative landholding élite. When labour was finally incorporated

<sup>4</sup>See Carlos Díaz Alejandro, *Essays on the Economic History of the Argentine Republic* (New Haven 1970).

(following growing mobilization of urban workers during World War II) it was under the auspices of a right-wing nationalist, corporatist regime.

If this hypothetical comparative sketch is largely correct, integrating the story of labour fully into the literature on Australian, Canadian, and Argentine economic and political development could have important ideological and political consequences. It could, for example, enable one to contest the cultural (and implicitly racist) assumptions that undergird mainstream scholarship and popular understandings of the past in the former metropolis and colonies of the English-speaking world. The uncritical cultural and racial underpinnings of those understandings, which Palmer laments in his chapter in this volume, are clearly revealed in the conclusions editors Platt and di Tella draw from their comparative study of the economic development of Australia, Canada, and Argentina. Their study makes clear, they claim, "that the cultural and historical inheritance of Australia and Canada is not only much deeper but clearly distinguishable from Argentina's, and entirely relevant to the understanding of differences in economic evolution. The blunt fact is that we are talking about different peoples ...." In other words, the greater economic success of Australia and Canada when compared to Argentina depends in important respects on British culture and institutions, on what the editors call in their next sentence "the mores of the British Empire ...."<sup>5</sup>

Labour studies focused on the different implications of export structures for workers' cultural autonomy and organizational strength in the three countries point to a different, more democratic, understanding of the past, one which emphasizes the relationship between the relative power of labour and the relative success of liberal capitalism and democracy in the three countries. Were British culturalists to concede that point and respond to it with the notion (which is probably also widely shared in the industrialized liberal democracies of the English-speaking world) that British "mores" may also explain the relative success of labour in Australia and Canada, I submit that they need to broaden their comparative perspective. Such cultural explanations need to account for the fate of labour in the British West Indies or the US South. There, as in Latin America, colonial production of export staples yielded patterns of land concentration and forms of coerced labour that persisted or intensified during the export booms of the 19th century. That legacy is what primarily explains the weakness of US labour (noted in several chapters in this volume) when compared to its Australian or Canadian counterparts.<sup>6</sup> It is this broader vision of the relevance of comparative labour studies —

<sup>5</sup>Platt and di Tella, eds., *Argentina, Australia and Canada*, 16 and 17. To their credit, two of the contributors to the volume, Carl Solberg and Díaz Alejandro, acknowledge the role of labour in the different economic outcomes described by the volume's editors. Solberg's argument is developed in his posthumously published book, *The Prairies and the Pampas: Agrarian Policy in Canada and Argentina, 1860-1930* (Stanford 1987).

<sup>6</sup>I develop this argument in *Labor and the Course of American Democracy: U.S. History in Latin American Perspective* (London 1996), forthcoming.

the challenge it can pose, for example, to the ethnocentric “common sense” of mainstream scholarship and popular understanding in the societies of the former British Empire — that may hold the greatest, and most politically relevant, promise for future research.

### III

Formal comparison of nation-states, along the lines of this volume, and in the ways I have tried to suggest in this brief postscript, is a powerful tool of social analysis. It allows researchers better to pinpoint and begin to weigh the multiple factors that influence national developments over time. Such comparison is especially important for historians, whose training in and practice of their discipline is customarily confined to the study of a single nation-state, and whose methods are typically not driven by theoretical concerns. Cross-national comparisons force historians to question the “seamless web” of historical causation, and (as noted in the introduction to this volume) the notions of national exceptionalism and peculiarity that rest on that assumption. Ideally, comparison should force historians to take social theory and the efforts of social scientists more seriously. At the same time, however, I believe historians must strive to preserve the disciplinary strengths of their own approach to historical studies. These strengths include a commitment to mastering what is known about a particular time and place, a sensitivity to context and the interrelationships involved in social change, and a commitment to primary research to expand the pool of knowledge about the past that is subject to interpretation.

Unfortunately, these very disciplinary commitments make cross-national comparisons difficult for historians. And these difficulties are greatly magnified when the nation-states in question grow out of different cultural traditions and research depends on working in different languages. That is why the solution adopted in this volume, of linking together national specialists in teams charged with comparing different domains of historical experience across nations, seems so promising. If historians have good reasons for not being content to leave big comparisons to social scientists, they must adopt transnational procedures for research and analysis of the kind pioneered here.

Most labour historians have sought through their work to enlist better understandings of the past in the service of democratic politics in the present. Their national focus on these issues was probably never sufficient to the task they set for themselves. Today, however, the national preoccupations of labour scholars seem particularly inappropriate. The neo-liberal logic of the contemporary capitalist “new world order” is aimed precisely at reducing the social welfare functions of the state and the legal protections for labour won through incorporation. As sketched in this postscript, I believe a powerful comparative case can be made for the proposition that labour’s past accomplishments have been vital to the health of the two liberal-capitalist democracies surveyed in this volume. As for the future, who knows what a world labour movement less divided than before by national,

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**cultural, and racial prejudice rooted in ethnocentric understandings of the past might achieve? For these reasons, I believe the case for continuing the kind of comparative research brought to fruition in this volume is compelling.**