

Race and Class in British Columbia: A Comment

RENNIE WARBURTON

Students of class and race relations in general and of the development of the social structure of British Columbia in particular should be wary of accepting the conclusions reached in Professor Peter Ward's recent article.¹ His analysis is typical of much current historical and social scientific work in overlooking certain essential contradictions in capitalist society, failing to examine social structure as involving process and change, and adopting an idealist approach to historical and sociological explanation.

Ward's basic point is that race rather than class has been the major factor in the formation of social boundaries in British Columbia. He claims to have taken his definition of class from the British Marxist historian, E. P. Thompson, who stated, Ward accurately quotes, that it is "a *historical* phenomenon . . . something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships." However, immediately preceding this statement, Thompson maintained that class unifies "disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness."² Ward goes on to downplay this element of experience — i.e., the objective situation, something which "happens in human relationships" — in his discussion of class in British Columbia and to place emphasis on consciousness, arguing that "while usually well grounded in social and economic reality, such boundaries (meaning class boundaries) are ultimately of the mind."³ Here he reveals his essentially idealist approach which, in the section on class, is almost totally preoccupied with class consciousness, with ideas of class which people had in their minds, rather than their actual experience of class relationships. One cannot conclude, on the basis of conclusions that the "consciousness" side of Thompson's two characteristics of class has

¹ W. Peter Ward, "Class and Race in the Social Structure of British Columbia, 1870-1939," *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980), pp. 17-35.

² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1968), p. 9.

³ Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

been weakly developed, that therefore class has played a secondary role in this province's development. Moreover, Ward only considers working-class activities. He seems to have little awareness of the class consciousness manifested among the bourgeoisie or the independent commodity-producing class.

But Ward's misuse of Thompson's framework goes further. In his post-script to the work cited by Ward, Thompson stresses that

class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion — not this or that interest but the *friction* of interests — the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of time — that is, action and reaction, change and conflict.⁴

Now, to be fair, Ward uses part of this definition in his approach. He notes the perceptions on the part of a class of the gulf between "them and us." But he completely ignores the experienced objective relationship which workers have as a result of their commodity status in the structure of industrial capitalism, an experience and a relationship on the basis of which they may or may not become class-conscious. This distinction between a class "in itself" and a class "for itself" was one of Marx's basic observations on the matter and it expresses the distinction between concrete, material, lived relationships and beliefs which people have about them.

Ward's idealism also leads him to spend three pages arguing for the independent role of individualist thinking as a major factor inhibiting the spread of working-class consciousness. But his analysis fails to ask whence this individualism came, which classes or representatives of classes brought it into the province, and in whose interest primarily it had developed and spread. A major part of the answer is that it had already become the ideology of the British, continental European, Eastern Canadian and American bourgeoisies that emerged during the lengthy historical period it took for capitalism to replace feudalism and medievalism. Ward's account of it suggests, in a way that is not historical — in Thompson's meaning of the term — that the non-participants in class-conscious action, their hopes and expectations, etc., which he implies were merely expressions of the individualistic and materialistic outlook of much of North American society, are the primary source of weak class

⁴ Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 939.

consciousness. He fails to study these attitudes in terms of their place in the structure of legitimation that helps to maintain a system of production and a social formation that is dominated by a class of capitalist property owners.

The need for this sort of work is highlighted in Ward's own observation, in his book, that until the late eighteenth century western writers celebrated China's glories.⁵ That this attitude later changed had a great deal to do with Britain's industrial and imperialistic development and the role that China and its peoples came to play in it. The ideology developed together with the concrete social, economic and political situation. Ward himself (p. 27) calls for research into the "conditions, attitudes and experiences of the province's wage-earning population and the economic institutions with which their lives were framed." The point is that such study should be the starting point of research into the class structure of B.C., including the place of race relations within it. Class-conscious behaviour and the beliefs surrounding its presence or absence may then be appropriately examined in relation to those more basic experiences and working conditions. Class relations have to do with such situations as the difference between being laid off work on short notice and being able to plan one's investment activities years ahead, between the courage it takes to walk a picket line and the reaching of a corporate decision not to grant union recognition, in a boardroom far from the workplace; between having to hunt desperately for work and being able to live off one's capital until a more satisfying position or investment opportunity becomes available. These are far more basic situations than deciding whether to join a union or to vote CCF because it represented working-class interests. They are also objective relational situations, involving classes in opposition to one another, not simply groups whose members draw boundaries around themselves.⁶ The "objective" approach to social stratification that Ward rejects has to do with something that is more accurately called "socio-economic status."

Ward rightly points out the power wielded by employers, supported by governments, to defeat unionization — a type of class-conscious activity which he apparently does not recognize as such. That power continues to be wielded, as the experience of the Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union testifies. But such objective, material aspects of the situation are

⁵ W. Peter Ward, *White Canada for Ever* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1978).

⁶ For a very recent discussion of class relations in contemporary societies, see J. K. Lindsey, "The Conceptualization of Social Class," *Studies in Political Economy* 3 (Spring 1980) pp. 17-36.

relegated by Ward to a secondary position below the idealist elements in the minds of potential union members.

In his treatment of race Ward falls into similar errors. He argues from the mere presence of people of different racial origins to the belief in the inherent inferiority and superiority of different racial groups. He does not adequately recognize the uneven treatment given to ethnic minorities from one period to another — e.g., why were the Chinese allowed to vote at one period and not at a later one? He fails to examine the relationship between race and class itself. His approach rates these factors quite independently of each other. Yet, as Munro notes, “the Chinese were roundly exploited at virtually every level of employment and “had become a convenient ‘scapegoat’ for labour and an equally convenient and exploitable issue for political aspirants.”⁷ They were initially welcomed in the province, for their industry, as the *British Colonist* put it in 1861, “enables them to add very largely to our own resources and our circulating medium.”⁸ It is this material situation, the use of cheap Chinese labour for railroad construction purposes and in the coal mines of Vancouver Island, that has to be part of any account of the Chinese experience in the development of B.C. In the early period, when this Chinese labour force was vital to the well-being of the white community, it was clearly difficult to separate race from class factors. Chinese workers were an essential part of the working class. They sold their labour very cheaply, thus contributing to the well-being of the employer class. Sir John A. Macdonald noted that B.C. could be most profitably developed by such a cheap class of labour.⁹ The class relations, then, which were the essential mechanism of the system of production that was emerging, required these workers. But the most significant change came after the completion of the railroad in 1886 when Chinese workers did not return to their homeland, preferring to remain in B.C., where they took up diverse occupations. However, agitation against them had already begun before 1872 because their presence was believed to place hardship on competing white workers who were used to higher wages than those given to the Chinese. The Chinese responded to the demands and contradictions of industrial capitalism by developing a strong sense of ethnic identity. Far from the so-

⁷ John A. Munro, “British Columbia and the ‘Chinese Evil’: Canada’s first anti-Asiatic immigration law,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* VI: 4 (Nov. 1971), p. 50.

⁸ Cited in Peter Li, “Institutional Completeness or Institutional Racism: the Case of the Chinese in Canada, 1885-1947,” paper presented at the annual meetings of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, London, Ontario, June 1978.

⁹ Cited in Munro, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

journing Chinese immigrants themselves having created the market for their labour, that market was created by decisions on the part of capitalists and politicians to build the CPR and to extend British colonial capitalism. It was also due to entrepreneurs in China and Hong Kong who "sold" them to contractors.

Ward's predilection for individualist and idealist explanations over structural and materialist ones also pervades his consideration of Canadian Indians. Fisher has shown that prior to white settlement the relationship between whites and Indians was interdependent and symbiotic.¹⁰ They were collaborators in the fur trade. But with settlement and the establishment of a new economic order their relationship changed. Now this may have been before the period examined by Ward, but it does point out the need to study the uneven development of race relations in terms of prevailing modes of production. However, ever after 1870, as Knight has amply documented, Indians participated in the industrial development of British Columbia, at least down to the depression decades, on a scale which has not been adequately appreciated.¹¹ Nor were they always as segregated as Ward maintains. For example, Knight (pp. 130 and 199) points out that in the Vancouver dock strike of 1935 some Indians were union supporters while others acted as strikebreakers. At one time Indian workers were part of an active labour force. Now many of them have been relegated to being part of a reserve labour force, one which the class-oriented capitalist system requires and one which appears to be growing larger during the current crisis.

On the question of Indian fishermen, Ward (p. 32) maintains that their organizations "co-operated with their white counterparts, but they were not integrated into the industry's trade union movement." Knight's evidence (pp. 96-97) shows Cowichan Indians forming their own local of the B.C. Fishermen's Union in 1900 and Indian members being directly enrolled in the first two locals of the BCFU in New Westminster and Vancouver. Indian leaders also addressed fishermen's union rallies. Most importantly, however, Knight shows that canning employers' exploitation of racist sentiments was a means of driving a wedge into the solidary organizations of fishermen, encouraging Indians to break strikes by intimidation and offers of higher payments for fish. This is highly typical class-related behaviour and it has dominated the province's history.

¹⁰ Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1977).

¹¹ Rolf Knight, *Indians at Work* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978).

Regarding a different class setting, Patricia Roy has shown how retail merchants increased their sympathy for Asiatic exclusion when Chinese grocers began to infiltrate white neighbourhoods — eventually, with the help of business and political support, resulting in the passing of the 1923 Chinese Immigration Act, which cut off the influx of Chinese for over twenty years.¹²

These examples are meant to demonstrate that the degree of racial segregation noted by Ward, which appears to have been less complete at certain periods than he maintains, has been a response to the forms of exploitation to which Asians and Canadian Indians have been subjected by the actions of the employer classes and others who took over the latter's land. The forms of discrimination resulting from conflict within the working and *petit bourgeois* classes have been more significant than the independent operation of cleavages "based on race." Race relations, as found in most post-colonial settings, are not the result of mental factors or collective representations of whole societies but are bound up with particular forms of the division of labour and the contradictions generated by an imposed mode of production. Stuart Hall has raised doubts about the usefulness of the "plural society" model preferred by Professor Ward, primarily because it ignores the processes of cultural legitimation and the incorporation of racial groups into the dominant system of production.¹³ In the case of British Columbia the contradiction between the demands of higher wages on the part of workers in resource industries and the demands for cheap labour on the part of employers led to outbreaks of racial hostility, particularly during periods of economic recession. Their explanation demands a dialectical approach in which the conflict generated by contradictory tendencies in the system is central. Yet, despite a history of race relations which to this day remains loaded with conflict and antagonisms, Ward's discussion of race, unlike his account of class, is curiously lacking in any treatment of conflict. This is because the approach he takes is one which sees individuals, groups, boundary mechanisms, segmentation, etc., as essentially static. He overlooks the movement itself, the "heat" and the "thundering noise" of the system, as Thompson describes it.

As a final point one might ask why, if Ward is really interested in determining the major social boundaries in the province, he makes no

¹² Patricia E. Roy, "The Oriental 'Menace' in British Columbia," in S. M. Trofimenkoff (ed.), *The Twenties in Western Canada* (Ottawa, 1972), pp. 243-55.

¹³ Stuart Hall, "Pluralism, race and class in Caribbean Society," pp. 150ff, in *Race and Class in Post-Colonial Society* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977).

mention of what is believed by many to be the basic division in all societies, that of sex or gender. But this makes us wonder why he poses the question of important boundaries at all. Could it be that he is concerned to use his wide knowledge of race relations in B.C. to deal another blow to scholars on the left who are seen by supporters of the prevailing ideology to be either propagandists or very misguided in their judgment? The comments made here are intended to show that the inter-relationships of race, class and, for that matter, gender, in British Columbia as elsewhere, need to be understood in a framework that incorporates the development of capitalist relations, the recurrent contradiction and crises to which they lead and the manner in which they are temporarily resolved. To study boundaries and divisions without a sense of their place in the developing economic and social totality is to provide a very partial and unobjective account of this province's social structure.