

*Cheap Wage Labour:
Race and Gender in the Fisheries of British Columbia*

Alicja Muszynski

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THIS BOOK WILL be of interest to scholars of BC's political economy, and not just for what it reveals about the province and its fishery. Muszynski uses the shore fishery as a starting point to revise Karl Marx's labour theory of value (LTV) so that it better explains why workforces have been segmented along lines of race and gender.

The lack of accommodation of race and gender are two weak points in Marx's LTV which argues that the value of any commodity depends only on the amount of labour time needed to produce it "under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society" (*Capital*, vol. 1, p. 129). Muszynski points out that Marx largely ignored women's unpaid "re-productive labour" and that the labour of women, children, and non-Whites was already devalued before it was drawn into capitalist work relations. Both capitalists and White male workers used these pre-capitalist forms of exploitation to try to improve their respective positions in workplace bargaining.

This point is a contribution to the LTV, but there is something pyrrhic about it. The LTV has numerous other problems in addition to its failure to acknowledge the role of race and gender — problems that have caused many Marxists to abandon this part of Marx's theorizing. Taking only one

of these, Marx himself raises the question of whether the LTV can be usefully applied in a cross-cultural situation.

According to Marx, labour value is unique to "a given society." BC's shore-fishery existed, as Muszynski shows, at the intersection of Aboriginal, Asian, and European societies. The components of labour value — skill, intensity, and organization of labour — vary from society to society, so it becomes impossible to talk about a consistent value of labour when goods and labour are exchanged between societies. Even Marx himself would have admitted that many of his assumptions are problematic in an intercultural context.

Unfortunately, Muszynski's thoughtful examination of the interaction of race and gender in the workplace is saddled with theoretical assumptions that are at odds with her case study. To make the case fit the theory, key historical details have been either assumed rather than investigated or shoe-horned to fit. For example, Muszynski assumes, as did Marx, that "labourers will not voluntarily approach capitalist employers, but must be forced by having their means of production wrested from their control" (p. 32). But a close look at BC history shows that Aboriginal peoples, a key element of Muszynski's cheap wage labour force, sought wage labour in the fisheries long before Europeans undermined their resource base. Although cap-

italists were buying Aboriginal labour as a part of their economy, Native peoples were selling their labour as an adjunct to their own prestige, or potlatch, economy. The non-capitalist reasons Aboriginal peoples had for going to work do not fit within the Marx/Muszynski framework.

There are other important gaps between theory and evidence. To make her point about the conjunction of capitalism and patriarchy Muszynski assumes that, before the arrival of Europeans, West Coast Aboriginal cultures were largely cooperative (pp. 25-26, 92) and non-patriarchal (pp. 38-9). Neither assumption is born out by a close examination of these slaveholding societies, where males held the economic and political power. To make the point that the industry needed cheap wage labour and so looked to Aboriginal and Asian cannery workers, she states that the wages paid to this racialized cannery labour were lower than were wages paid to the British labourers who bought the canned salmon (p. 47). In fact, the monthly rates paid to Aboriginal workers, \$40 to 60 per month in the early 1880s, far exceeded the \$14 average monthly wages of ordinary labourers in Britain. By important standards of comparison this was not cheap wage labour, and this fact undermines Muszynski's explanation as to why fishery labour was gendered and racialized.

The book has structural weaknesses as well. Muszynski's main critique of Marx is that he was not dialectical enough in his analysis and so did not see the effects of race and gender (p. 255). While Muszynski's book offers a remedy to this important shortfall, it is strangely lacking in dialectical

analysis itself. Her theory and her evidence hardly engage each other. The theoretical analysis, in two chapters, one at the beginning and one at the end of the book, is isolated from an essentially narrative account of historical events in the middle chapters. Since it is its theoretical framework that sets this book apart from other accounts of the industry, the narrative chapters themselves offer few new insights. The exception is Chapter 5, which examines the unionization of the shore workers after 1931 — an important topic neglected in other works. Here, the author gets away from the government reports and secondary sources that inform the other narrative chapters and asks questions about how workers themselves thought of, and used, categories of race and gender. This chapter is built on primary research in the United Fishermen and Allied Worker's papers; their organ *The Fishermen*; and the business papers of a prominent company, J. Todd and Sons.

By the time she reaches the end of the book, Muszynski appears to be reassessing her original problematic. What began as an attempt to refine Marx's LTV concludes: "What we need is not more grand theory but analysis that takes into account the diversity and complexity of lives as people live them from day to day. This is the feminist project — not to discover *the* one theory that will explain everything" (p. 257). Had she begun with diversity and complexity and re-examined, rather than refined, the grand theory known as Marx's LTV, the author would have contributed a great deal more to our understanding of race, gender, and capitalist relations in the BC fishing industry.