

Infinitely more Palpitating and Varied: Celebrating Working Class Scholarship

Closing Remarks for the International Conference of Working Class Academics-
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Budd L Hall, UNESCO Co-Chair in Community-Based Research and Social
Responsibility in Higher Education

I would like to acknowledge that I live and work on the unceded traditional territory of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples, the Songhees, Esquimalt and Wasaanc First Nations peoples. I honour both their historic care and their on-going relationships with this land. The colonial name of where I live is Vancouver Island, named after the first white man to visit our Island. We are found on the West Coast of Canada in the Pacific Ocean. My city is called Victoria and our local newspaper is called the Times Colonist. Nothing more needs saying!

Secondly, I would like to formally acknowledge, to pay tribute to the very many people who have brought this extraordinary event together. In the West Coast Indigenous traditions, when people are thanked, we raise our hands to them saying *Haitchq'a*. I raise my hands to Peter Shukie, Hina Suleman, Jeanette Alvarado-Cruz, Amina Khan, Craig Hammond, Saleem Seedat, Jamie Holman, Alex Dunedin, Alexandra Shukie, Kick down the barriers, Ragged University and to my Doctoral student at the University of Victoria, Elaine Laberge, a participant in this conference, whose insights into kicking down the walls and the doors continue to inform me. Each of you and many more whose names I may not have even heard have collectively created a unique space of dissonance, resistance, creativity, joy, rage, hope and the imagination. I am honoured to be among you and honoured by this opportunity to learn from and with you and all of the participants in this event.

I am a colonial settler Canadian, a descendant of a family originally from Staffordshire, England. My great grandparents came to Vancouver Island in the 1860s to get farm land for themselves and their children. The land that they purchased for about 50P or CDN\$1 per acre had been stolen from the Halalt First Nation, the Indigenous people who had been custodians of that land for over 14,000 years. That land propelled my family into middle-class status and built a legacy of privilege for their dependents which includes me that I continue to benefit from. In fact if it were not for that stolen land, I would never have attended university, nor gotten a job in academia. In fact neither Peter nor any of the rest of you would have ever heard of me.

I share this story because it reminds me that the particular pathway that has taken me to be with you today cannot be attributed to some unusual or special characteristics or skills which I possess. I am here today in large measure because of the invisible backpack of privilege that speaks for me so that my words are not even needed. I benefit from white privilege, from patriarchal privilege, from being a binary male, from English as a Mother Tongue privilege and deeply from middle-class privilege. When we read ancient or contemporary history about success in any aspect of life, we are to be reminded that the very structures of success are mounted on an invisible scaffolding of working class labour, or stolen Indigenous land, of the invisible labour of women, on slavery and on contemporary low wages in parts of the global South. And whatever else the Pandemic has brought us, it has pulled back the curtain that has hidden social class and racial exclusion and oppression. The idea that we are all born equal, and have through the application of hard work equal chances to rise in class terms is utterly false.

So my most important message to everyone listening today is congratulations. Neither history nor capitalism would have predicted or appreciated an International Conference of Working Class Academics. None of you are supposed to be here! Whatever wonders lie ahead for all of us associated with this event, we have already done something that was never supposed to happen. This combination of women and men, races, ethnicities, sexualities, ages, disciplines were never supposed to have been together in this way. This is subversive. This is divergent. This is disobedient. This is, dare I say it, revolutionary!

Let us remind ourselves of an earlier would-be working class scholar's experiences. This story begins in 1895 where we learn about the character of Jude, the stone mason determined to learn deeply so as to become a Minister. I am indebted to the late David Watson, historian and adult educator for his bringing to my attention the Thomas Hardy book *Jude the Obscure*. Jude is a poor stonemason determined to become a scholar of note. In the course of his self-directed learning, he decides that Oxford University would be the place to engage with his fellow scholars. The resistance offered by the Oxford of the day to Jude's efforts to learn amongst them is brutal. Jude is thrilled in seeing the spires of Oxford as he visits there seeking admission after many years of learning on his own. He learns brutally that Oxford was not ready for the self-taught intellectual. The Master of Balliol College, after listening to Jude's request to study there, tells Jude, "I venture to think that you will have a much better chance of success in life by remaining in your own sphere" (Hardy, 1895:117). Jude begins to understand the differences between the knowledge of the community and the knowledge of the

academy, “He (Jude) began to see that town life was a book of humanity infinitely more palpitating, varied and compendious than the gown-life” (118).

Let me use Jude’s last sentence, “That town life was a book of humanity, infinitely more palpitating, varied and compendious than gown-life”(118) as a link the concept of knowledge democracy. In his excellent video about the conference, Peter Shukie, noted in so many words that working class origins far from being about a deficit are about an asset. Like Jude says the life of the town, of the streets, of the social movements, of the neighbourhoods, of the land are rich, palpitating and compendious. Working Class academics and working class students are the ways in which this energy, this variety of knowledge and these values can find their ways into the higher education. But finding a way in for these ways of thinking is not easy. What is called the Western Canon, the body of Eurocentric knowledge has so monopolized and silenced other ways of knowing over the past 500 years that one of our Portuguese colleagues, de Sousa Santos, says that we have experienced and continue to experience epistemicide, or the killing of other knowledge systems. His work refers specifically to the way in which Eurocentric knowledge has eliminate the diverse knowledge systems of the global South and of the Indigenous land-based peoples.

But the same can be said for class based knowledge. Historians are familiar with the idea that history is written by the victors. Feminists are familiar with the reality that history has been largely written by the men. In Canada we know that our history has been told by non-Indigenous people. From a class perspective is true that academic knowledge has largely been written by non-working class scholars. Regardless of the discipline, explanations and understandings of the world that we all live in has been written by non-working class scholars and intellectuals. This does not mean that all academic work written by non-working class scholars has not been useful. Both Marx and Engels came from bourgeois backgrounds. Paulo Freire the Brazilian scholar-activist who wrote the Pedagogy of the Oppressed was raised in a privileged household in Northeastern Brazil. Even Gandhi came from a privileged background. But these authors are the exception. They are to be sure intellectual allies and even very useful guides, but when one thinks about the vast body of academic knowledge, the absence of scholarship written by working class intellectuals stands out. We are missing what Jude said in the late 19th century could be found in the streets and homes of our communities, knowledge that is “more palpitating, varied and compendious” than what is found in academia. But how did this come to pass? If knowledge making is a skill that all people possess, how is it that the power to name the world in contemporary times has been restricted to an academic elite? How has this dispossession happened?

The geographer David Harvey has provided us with the suggestion that capital accumulation and our contemporary capitalist economic system began through the processes of dispossession (Harvey 2006). Dispossession of people of access to their land he suggests lies at the heart of early capital accumulation. The story of my family's transformation through the dispossession of the lands of the Halalt First Nations Island is one example. Harvey draws attention to the processes in 14th-17th Century England, which removed people from their land through what has become known as enclosures. He tells us of wealthy landowners who used force and even arms to transform the traditional open fields and communal pastures into private property for their own profit. A similar process similarly affected the clans of Scotland, which was so widespread that their dispossessions were known as the clearances. Each of these acts of dispossession left the majority of people without access to land and allowed for wealth to accumulate to those who were now known as private landowners. New categories of people were defined, the landed gentry, the workers in the estates and the land and the landless. Lest you think that these acts went on unnoticed, let us recall the words of an English rhyme from the period.

The law condemns the woman or man
Who steals the goose from off the common
But leaves the greater felon loose
Who steals the common from the goose

Several year or so ago, I had the opportunity to spend a few days in one of the Oxford Colleges, perhaps the one that our fictional working class Jude visited. It was college that was created at the same time as the enclosures. I entered the college through a low doorway only accessible to students and fellows and their guests. The college was walled in and only accessible through one or two guarded entryways. While staying in the college, the linkage between the enclosing of previously common land for private purposes and the creation of walled places for learning became disturbingly apparent. The act of creating Oxford and the other medieval universities was an act of enclosing knowledge, limiting access to knowledge, exerting a form of control over knowledge and providing a means for a small elite to acquire this knowledge for purposes of leadership of a spiritual nature, of a governance nature or a cultural nature. Those within the walls became knowers; those outside the wall became non-knowers. Knowledge was removed from the land and from the relationships of those sharing the land. The enclosing of the academy dispossessed the vast majority of working class knowledge keepers,

forever relegating their knowledge to witchcraft, tradition, superstition, folkways, or at best some form of common sense.

Imagining an Inclusive University

One of the characteristics of even the best scholars is that we are eloquent and generous with *critique*, but often silent or vague about *create*. So one of the qualities of excellent working class scholarship is that attention is given to the question of creation. Accepting the many reasonable explanations for the exclusion of working class knowledge and working class scholars, what might we imagine for a truly inclusive university? The seeds of some of what we would like to see has been shared by various colleagues in this conference. First of all we would like to see conferences, seminars, working groups such as this conference by Working Class Academics exist everywhere, in all spaces of higher education. It should not be exceptional or the unique for people like ourselves to gather together.

I would like to use three themes that have been presented in this conference to open up our imaginations about what a truly inclusive higher education institution might look like. You have offered many more ideas, but let me draw on these as a starting point. They are ‘creative placemaking’ offered by Christian Bell, ‘zine making’ by Kristy Fife and ‘curriculum and class’ by Ian Duckett

Creative Placemaking

Christian asks whether a community of creatives might be the basis for a new narrative about learning, action and higher education in the working class town of Blackburn? Several exciting elements in this question. First of all is the notion of place. Place, land, location, roots are all fundamental to building a knowledge base which draws on the knowledge of everyday people for change in a community. He speaks of action research, what Rajesh and I would refer to as participatory research, a knowledge accumulation process where the research question comes from the place, the community. He speaks ‘creatives’, people who construct and share knowledge in artistic ways. These are all critical elements in imagining a university in new ways. The research focus would come from the questions in the community itself, not from an academic journal. The university or higher education institute would have deep organic structural relationships with the community, with the trade union structures, the social and ecological justice organizations, Black Lives Matter and other equity movements.

Zine Making

Kristy Fife shares her experience in zine making as a educational and action oriented form of knowledge making. This builds on Christian's experience as a 'creative'. In our work on knowledge democracy we speak of the need as scholars to explore the use of the arts as a tool for knowledge making and sharing. Zines, poems, dance, theatre, ceremony, murals, quilts and more. This is because the arts allow for an integration of cognitive and affective knowing. Zines through their disruption of the printed form allow for emotions to come onto a page in a way that linear text often does not. Poetry, as we heard from Elaine Laberge in this conference allows us to feel as well as learn cognitively. The inclusive university that we imagine, one where working class scholars and working class students are comfortable and supported will be a creative space where emotions and logic are never far apart and action for change is a given.

Curriculum and Class

Ian Duckett says something quite important, "Working class skills have been narrowed, undervalued and downgraded by the ruling class". He was speaking specifically about the skills agenda that governments all over the world have been spreading through adult education and further education programmes. The skills favoured by government programmes are those which global capital needs so that workers everywhere can plug into the global assembly lines. We can extrapolate from Ian's reference to the entire curriculum of higher education. As I said in my earlier comments, our knowledge base is limited for historic reasons to a Eurocentric white mostly male canon. This knowledge base is also limited by the exclusion of working class knowledge, knowledge of racialized communities, women, youth, the differently able and more. So the curriculum of our reimagined universities will need to be locally placed, supportive of community-driven participatory research, open to arts-based research and pedagogy and incorporating working class skills and knowledge. Skills of community-building, resilience, advocacy, solidarity, ceremony, confronting authority and more. And what more? Joy and Hope.

In closing, I would like to dedicate two poems to all of you. The first by the remarkable Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, in 1916 and the second by the 101 year old beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti

"I know what a risk one runs...in being styled an idealist in those days when the sound that drowns all voices is the noise of the marketplace, and yet...I feel that

the sky and the earth and the lyrics of the dawn and the dayfall are with the poets and the idealists and not with the marketmen...”

Working Class Academics As Insurgent Artists

Budd Hall’s adaptation of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s *Poetry as Insurgent Art* New York: New Directions (originally 1975)

I am signaling you through the flames.
The North Pole is not where it used to be.
Manifest Destiny is no longer manifest.
Civilization self-destructs.
Nemesis is knocking at the door
What are working class academics for, in such an age?
What is the use of working class academic work?
The printing press made poetry so silent, it lost its song.
Make it sing again.

If you would be a working class academic, create works
Capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times,
Even if this means sounding apocalyptic.

If you would be a working class academic write living newspapers.
Be a reporter from outer space, filing dispatches to some supreme
Managing editor who believes in full disclosure and has a low
Tolerance for bullshit.

If you would be a working class academic, experiment with all manner of poetics,
Erotic broken grammars, ecstatic religions, heathen outpourings speaking in tongues,
Bombastic public speech, automatic scribbings, surrealist sensings, streams of
Consciousness, found sounds, rants and raves---to create your own limbic,
Your own underlying voice, your *ur* voice

If you would call yourself a working class academic, don’t just sit there.
Working Class academic work is not a sedentary occupation, not a
“take your seat” practice. Stand up and let them have it.

Have wide-angle vision, each look at world glance. Express vast clarity of the
Outside world, the sun that sees us all, the moon that strews its shadows on us,
Quiet garden ponds, willows where the hidden thrush sings, dusk falling
Along the river run, and the great spaces that open out upon the sea...high tide
And the heron’s call...And the people, the people, the people, yes, all around
The earth speaking in Babel tongues.

Give voice to them all.

Adapted on June 26, 2020