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***Ofyn Veg* Session Three Discussion**

I am delighted to join in this celebration of the scholarship of Gerald Tulchinsky, whom I had the privilege of first knowing as an undergraduate student at Queen's University. I am also delighted to offer my comments on the excellent papers presented by Ian McKay, together with Ruth Frager and Carmela Patrias.

McKay invites us to reconsider, to engage in a reconnaissance of the considerable evidence of Depression-era communist activism in Canada. I would draw your attention to what I think is his most searing critique of the "Moscow Rules" school of interpretation:

Note how the application of a 'Moscow Rules' model can become merely the mirror-image of Communist hagiography, in which those who establish the 'meaning' of Communism, as commemorated in official histories and an almost infinite quantity of memoirs, are the certified 'Canadian' luminaries in the pantheon, while the losers – those who within ethnic communities defended different understandings of Marxism and revolution – are consigned to oblivion.

The tyranny of the 'Moscow Rules' methodology casts grass-roots left-wing community mobilizations as inconsequential distractions from the real issues at hand: specifically that of building party discipline and advancing the cause of socialism in one country. So the centre-periphery model between Moscow and its national parties is transposed to Canada, forging a direct chain of command linking the centre CPC HQ in Toronto to the periphery of regional bases of mobilization. I could almost hear McKay chuckling to himself as he contemplated the prospect of Toronto HQ imposing its – or rather the Comintern's – will on mining communities in northern BC and Cape Breton let alone the vibrant working class communities of east end Montreal, leaving aside the linguistic capabilities of the HQ functionaries.

It is as though the 'Moscow Rules' approach picks up where the Comintern left off. The eulogies to Stalin would have only just come to an end when the struggle over the meaning of his murderous regime would commence. That said, McKay offers us a way through this vexatious debate over the extent to which the Comintern called the shots, at least within Depression-era Canada. He writes as a radical democrat, making clear that he does not see himself as mired within the sectarianism that has so characterized much of the literature from either side of the debate. And the stakes are very high indeed, as McKay acknowledges. Who gets to count as a communist? Whose authorial voice matters? McKay correctly dismisses as wrong-headed those who view high politics as all that matters, while denigrating as trivial local forms of cultural activism. Out the window go the engagements of thousands during the depression who actively cultivated counter-hegemonic discourses through which they struggled over the meaning of communism, of anti-capitalism and of the brutal economic violence they faced. The rent strikes, the eviction fights, anti-deportation struggles, street theatre – all were, as McKay argues, the contexts through which

people were “working out new ways, more “modern” ways of thinking and living otherwise in the Depression.”

So, who indeed gets to count as a communist? The card-carrying member, the party cadre, or those who may never have joined the CPC but nonetheless engaged a transformative revolutionary politic at the site of production and well beyond it. Here we look to multiple articulations in thought, action, political and cultural discourse and, looking at the evidence once again, we see not the CPC standing alone, but a socialist *formation* that bespeaks a much more vibrant milieu. In other words, the party was not the epitome of communism, any more than the Toronto leadership held the monopoly of communist authenticity. McKay asks that we shift our gaze beyond the arid terrain of formal party mechanisms and machinations, instead to grapple with the multiplicity of communisms from factory gate to farm gate including those who may have felt to no need to take out a party membership in their quest to think and live otherwise.

Then again, McKay concedes, perhaps Moscow ruled, but it ruled stupidly. His discussion of the multiple language federations and their evisceration during the Third Period is not just compelling, but I think profoundly instructive. Federalism as a principle was crushed, even as the practice “lived lustily on.” While McKay awaits the arrival of “a linguistic prodigy with a flawless command of at least twelve languages,” I think he has provided a compelling and lucid argument as to why the ‘Moscow Rules’ model obscures the historical integrity and experience of those Annie Buller may well have inspired to direct action.

Ruth Frager and Carmela Patrias take up the question of class, ethnicity and gender within the Jewish communities of Montreal, Toronto and Winnipeg. They consider the negotiation of class identity in the context of ethnic community, providing numerous examples where class interests trumped ethnic identity. This suggested to me the important contrast between interests and identities, how they are mutually constituted and exist in tension as shared communities of obligation as well as at times conflicting communities of interest. I was reminded of Ladorie’s discussion of Carnival, of how mortal enemies separated by class and caste who “Despite their rivalry to the death ... were cultural brothers.” I wondered here about Jewishness as a singular category of identity, specifically in the case of the secular Jew. Further, in considering the centrality of Jewishness to working class Jewish identity, did the same apply to middle class Jewish employers in contests where class interests diverged sharply? We can see this clearly during the Winnipeg General Strike.

I was also struck by the changes in tone when Jewish identity was articulated internally – speaking within the community – and externally – speaking to the world outside. What was the shared territory of meaning between the Jewish Labour Committee and the CJC as they came together to forge a human rights campaign? Was

there a shared territory – community of interest – that extended beyond the pragmatic tactical decision to join forces? Frager and Patrias point out that the JLC was anxious to safeguard its credibility within the broader labour movement, while the CJC was getting nowhere in its efforts to reach out to the same labour movement. At this, I wondered whether members of both groups struggled over the meaning of discrimination, from their respective class-based positions and experiences. Did class have anything to do with it? I also wondered if either group differentiated between prejudice and racism?

Frager and Patrias also come to grips with the absence of gender as a political focus for the joint JLC/CJC human rights campaigns of the 1950s. As they argue, “within the Jewish labour movement, the emphasis on both class consciousness and ethnic identity inhibited the development of feminist perspectives.” Indeed, an emphasis on the rights of women might well divide the working class, fragile entity that is was.

At the same time, the authors remind us of the profound racism that so characterised the policies, practices and principles of the organised women’s movement. In the same measure, those who made up the ranks of the various women’s organisations were largely middle class. Internally, Jewish women lacked any alternative outlets as sites for political engagement, discussion, education and mobilization, beyond the National Council of Jewish Women.

The authors’ do not find evidence of a developed working-class feminism, even though Jewish women engaged in mass-based consumer activism, for example during the 1933 butcher boycott. I wonder if, following McKay, we might look to other ways of articulating a working class feminist sensibility, beyond a structural or institutional presence. Where might we find evidence, however quiet these murmurs might have been? I am thinking here of the work of Alice Kessler-Harris and others who acknowledge a limited vocabulary around a perhaps abstract notion of women’s rights, yet we still might discern the basis for a working-class feminism, again through consumer activism and ideas about the economic rights of citizenship. That said, however, clearly postwar Jewish human rights activists did not extend their analysis to encompass sex discrimination.

Pronatalist discourse closely informed the identity of the communities overall: the family was the principle social institution, and women, where they worked for pay were clearly regarded as were mothers who worked, rather than workers who mother. Anti-discrimination measures clearly would not apply within the realm of domesticity to which all women were consigned by definition. And yet, the remarkable awakening in the 1960s would change all that, which leaves me wondering if the feminisms that so animated young Jewish women of the 1960s and beyond might not have been gleaned around the kitchen tables of their mothers and grandmothers through the 1950s.