

## **“The Difference a Generation Makes”<sup>1</sup>**

### **John Holmes**

Let me start by thanking the CAUT Council for honouring me with this award. It was with some reluctance that I agreed last summer to allow my name to be forwarded in nomination. I have been fortunate and privileged to enjoy stimulating and rewarding work throughout my career and that should be recompense enough. I was genuinely surprised when I received word that I had been selected to receive this year’s award and it is still with some degree of disbelief that I stand before you.

Although I have lived in North America for over forty-five years, people tell me that my accent still belies the fact that I grew up elsewhere. Whilst in high school in England, I did my best to avoid the arcane game of cricket, much rather preferring sailing and rock climbing as summer sports activities. However, I have always thought of cricket’s “all-rounder”, a player who strives to combine a high level of performance in all three aspects of the game - batting, bowling and fielding, as an appropriate metaphor for my work as an academic.

I also wish to thank my colleagues in the Queen’s University Faculty Association who sponsored my nomination and especially to thank Lesley Jermyn who first twisted my arm to agree to be nominated and then took charge of soliciting letters and assembling the nomination dossier. I am grateful to those colleagues and former students who were gracious and kind enough to write letters on my behalf. I formally “retired” from Queen’s at the end of June 2013 – or rather that’s when Queen’s stopped paying me since I continue to be involved in graduate student supervision and several ongoing research projects. In my research, I have had the great good fortune to work with a number of excellent colleagues at Queen’s and, through research collaborations, with colleagues at a number of other universities across the country – especially those in the fields of industrial relations and labour studies. I have also had the privilege – and it truly has been a great privilege – to work with many outstanding students in my classes at

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<sup>1</sup> My title is shamelessly borrowed from that of the first chapter in David Harvey’s book *Spaces of Hope* published in 2000. I first met David Harvey during my first year as an undergraduate student and over the years his writing has greatly influenced my own thinking.

Queen's. Without those colleagues and students I would not have the honour of standing here today.

I do want to acknowledge the central role my family plays in my life. I am pleased that my life partner of 46 years, Angharad Holmes, is able to be here today. We have three sons, three daughters-in-law and now two wonderful granddaughters. We are immensely proud of them all. Angharad possesses a strong sense of social justice inherited from her family's roots in the coal mining valleys of South Wales. She also has a healthy skepticism regarding academia and academics! Angharad has always kept me grounded and reminded me of the things that are truly important in life.

A word about Queen's: whilst I have been known, on occasion, to be highly critical in public of decisions taken by the senior administration, I have a deep and abiding loyalty and commitment to Queen's. I arrived just as the academic job market was beginning to tighten after the hiring surge of the late 1960s but at a time when career pressure was much less intense than it is today. Throughout the 1970s I held only a series of short-term contract appointments but Queen's allowed me the space, time and freedom to undergo a very significant and radical intellectual transformation. In 1971, and on the strength of several already published articles in good quality journals, I had been hired as a quantitatively trained spatial economic modeller. Little did Queen's know that I was rapidly becoming disenchanted with that line of academic endeavour and increasingly interested in political economy and critical social theory. For several years, whilst I re-educated myself through an intensive reading program in political economy and social theory, I published virtually nothing – including absolutely nothing from my doctoral dissertation. It would have been so easy for Queen's not to renew my contracts. In today's academic environment, I would have perished for certain. I will be forever grateful to Queen's for providing me that opportunity to reorient my scholarship and teaching.

For the past thirty-five years, my teaching and research have fallen under the broad headings of economic geography and urban and regional political economy. Theoretically, my work has

drawn on various interdisciplinary strands of political economy, heterodox economics, and critical social theory. Empirically, it has focused on the impact of the restructuring associated with economic globalization on employment, on the nature of work, and on workers and their unions. Much of my research and writing has focused on the automobile industry in North America.

There is now a recognized sub-field within human geography, and more specifically in economic geography, labelled “labour geography.” Labour has long been an important concept in economic geography, but more often as a cost that influences the locational investment decisions of firms than as a social force in its own right. In the late 1990s, labour geography emerged as a discernible strand of research from within a broader Anglo-American Marxist-inspired geographical tradition. Contemporary human geography has long recognized that landscapes are socially constructed and that the making of economic and social landscapes in particular ways is fundamental to the articulation of political power. Labour geography strives to see the making of economic landscapes from the perspective of labour and examines how workers and labour institutions such as trade unions seek to shape the economic landscape in ways that will advance their own material interests. Conflicts over work and employment practices frequently revolve around the geographical (re)scaling of such practices. Historically, political struggles to define the geographical scale at which labour relations and collective bargaining will be conducted have been of crucial significance to the labour movement. Of particular interest from a geographical point of view are the strategies deployed by labour in creating new scales of organising, and in rethinking old ones. I will return to this idea towards the end of my remarks.

Teaching, especially at the undergraduate level, has been one of the great joys of my life and I have had the opportunity at Queen’s to work with some extraordinarily bright and capable students. I hope that I have been able to challenge them to think critically about the economy, society, and the world in which they live; they have regularly challenged my own thinking and I have learned much from them. I can put it no better than John Loxley, a previous recipient of

this Award, who in his 2008 address to the CAUT Council noted that “One of the priceless aspects of being a university professor is the joy of being constantly exposed to youthful inquiry and energy, to emerging ideas and social movements and to a genuine desire to put knowledge to good use in the world.”

I like to think that the scholarly focus of my research, my teaching and my community involvement seamlessly overlap. My community involvement has centred on social justice issues and the labour movement, through involvement in my own union (QUFA), involvement in OCUFA, and work in building solidarity both with sister campus unions during collective bargaining and with the broader labour movement through my involvement in the Kingston and District Labour Council of which I am a Trustee. My union-related work over the last decade has been both interesting and tremendously rewarding.

It is fashionable these days for human geography graduate students in their research proposals and dissertations to include a paragraph or two addressing their own “positionality.” The *life course approach* is also a popular conceptual device in a number of social sciences. It is an approach developed in the 1960s for analyzing people's lives within structural, social and cultural contexts. In particular, it directs attention to the powerful connection between individual lives and the historical and socioeconomic context in which these lives unfold and are lived. Whilst this may well be somewhat self-indulgent, I would like to reflect on my own “positionality” and “life-course.” I do so by way of underlining some of the formative influences on my thinking, on the paths I have taken during my career, and on how the world in which I work is now a very different place than when I began.

I was born in the last months of WW II into a very modest manual working-class household in mid-Northern England. My father was a framework knitter – a machine operator in a knit-ware factory - and before her marriage my mother had worked first as a cotton spinner and then, during the war, as a munitions worker. We lived with my maternal grandmother in a rented

“two up and two down” terraced house on a windswept hillside on the edge of town. Until well after I started school we had neither electricity nor indoor plumbing.

This was not, however, the stereotypical bleak urban landscape normally associated with industrial Northern English towns and cities. Indeed, it was very different. We lived in the Derwent Valley in Derbyshire on the edge of the scenically picturesque Peak District National Park. The Derwent Valley is rich in industrial and labour history. It is now a UNESCO World Heritage site due to its acknowledged status as the cradle of the Industrial Revolution and the factory system.<sup>2</sup> It was here in 1771 that Richard Arkwright built the world’s first water powered cotton spinning mill. Arkwright’s mill at Cromford provided the blueprint for the factory system by, in the words of one author, “substituting capital for labour, machines for skill, factory for home, and mill discipline for family work routines.”<sup>3</sup> Other mills and small industrial communities to house the workforce soon sprang up along the valley. When coal-fired steam power superseded water power and the locus of the cotton industry moved further north to Lancashire, the Derwent Valley became a relative backwater. However, mills, such as the one in which my mother worked during the 1930s, survived well into the 1970s by specializing in the production of cotton sewing thread. The mills are now industrial museums or house factory outlet stores.

Just down the valley from Cromford is Lea Mills, the knit-ware factory where my father worked piece-rate for over 50 years as a framework knitter. It was built in 1784 and the company – John Smedley which still produces very high quality and expensive fine gauge knit-ware – claims to be the world’s longest running factory manufacturer.<sup>4</sup> Just a few kilometers away is the village of Pentrich, which, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century and before framework knitting moved into larger scale factories, was a centre for the cottage-based frame-knitting of hosiery.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Derwent Valley Mills and Their Communities*. County Hall, Derbyshire: Derwent Valley Mills Partnership. 2001.

<sup>3</sup> David Jeremy (ed.) *Transatlantic Industrial Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 1981.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.johnsmedley.com/>

In 1817 the village was the site of the Pentrich Rising which the historian E.P. Thompson, in his magisterial *The Making of the English Working Class*, argues “could be seen as one of the first attempts in history to mount a wholly proletarian insurrection, without any middle-class support.”<sup>5</sup>

I owe both of my parents an enormous debt. Since we did not possess a car, on Sundays we went for long walks in the countryside (usually ending at a pub!). Besides educating me in the art of drinking, these walks nurtured my appreciation of natural history, landscape and a strong historical and geographical sense of place which I think was instrumental in eventually leading me into the study of geography. Perhaps more importantly, my parents instilled in me a strong sense of social justice, a deep respect for working people, and the true meaning of solidarity. I grew up in a union household. Both my parents were or had been active union members as had both of my grandfathers. My maternal grandfather was a carpenter and his large framed illuminated craft union certificate issued by the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners and dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 1899 now hangs on the wall of my study.

I grew up during what some political economists refer to as the Golden Age of post-war capitalism – the roughly quarter century following 1945 which witnessed sustained productivity and economic growth and a narrowing of social inequality through rising real wages and substantial improvements in the standard of living for large numbers of regular working folk. The Golden Age was very much reflected in the lived experience of our household. Also, I benefitted enormously from the health, education and social reforms long advocated for by the labour movement and implemented between 1945-51 following the surprise 1945 election of a majority Labour government. Not least of these reforms was the opportunity to acquire a university education. A lack of family financial resources was no longer a barrier for working class kids who showed academic promise to go to university. My education was essentially free. Not only did I not have to pay tuition fees but, because my parental income was so modest, at the start of each term the state issued me a cheque to cover my full living expenses.

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<sup>5</sup> E. P. Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1968. p. 733.

You can probably guess where I stand on the question of rising tuition fees and accessibility to post-secondary education.

As an undergraduate student I read Physical Geography, Geology and Mathematics for a B.Sc. degree. By my final year, however, quantification and statistical modelling had taken hold in the social sciences. This was linked to the more general ideological belief at the time in “scientism” – the view that through the application of the principles of big-S science we could construct explanatory models of society and apply them through social engineering and state-led planning to manage the economy, alleviate poverty and reduce social deprivation. With my background in math, I was attracted as a graduate student to social science and to quantitative urban modelling. The most interesting work in this area was being undertaken in the United States and so in the summer of 1968 we left the UK for Columbus, Ohio in order for me to pursue my doctorate at The Ohio State University.

Some refer to 1968 as a year of revolutionary hope. It was certainly a watershed year in terms of politics and culture. During the so-called Prague Spring, Czechs had tested the Soviet Union with reforms aimed at political liberalization; in May '68 massive civil unrest had broken out in France with tens of thousands of students and workers taking to the streets of Paris to demand reforms; the movement against the war in south-east Asia was gaining strength on US campuses; and, in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, uprisings against social injustice broke out in over a hundred US cities. These broader societal events proved to be a serious challenge for much orthodox and conventional economic and social theory and triggered a resurgence of interest in political economy and radical social theory across the social sciences. The three politically turbulent years we spent in Ohio (1968-71) had a profound and lasting impact on our political thinking and certainly reshaped the direction that my academic work was to take. I have already mentioned the positive and transformative experience of my early years at Queen's and will not repeat that part of the story.

My life course and work have continued to be shaped by broader political economic developments. I have watched with mounting concern as the neoliberal project built around a lexicon that emphasizes ‘competition’, ‘privatization’, ‘deregulation’, ‘flexibility’ and ‘individual choice’ came to dominate public discourse. In the administration of my own university, I have witnessed the seemingly inexorable drift towards a neoliberal corporate mentality and the erosion of collegial governance. The senior administration is increasingly driven not by core academic values but by risk management, activity based budgeting, and, as our principal wrote in a 2011 letter to the Board of Trustees, a need to “recalibrate labour relations within the university.” I know that Queen’s is not unique in this respect.

The fifth and final season of the brilliant HBO drama *The Wire*— incidentally *The Wire*, set in Baltimore, is a superb teaching resource for a course in urban political economy – revolves around the role of the print media in the city. In the commentary that accompanies the very last episode, someone makes the observation that in the US newspaper industry there is now a cadre of senior corporate bean-counters who move from paper to paper and, through their shared managerial practices, produce a banal sameness that erodes what made formerly great newspapers great. I have witnessed a very similar process at work within the university system over the last two decades.

Some commentators interpreted the 2007-08 financial crisis to be the first major crisis of neoliberal capitalism and argued that the crisis opened up an opportunity to advance alternatives to what had become dominant neoliberal ideas and institutions. However, others, such as my friend and fellow geographer Jamie Peck at UBC, suggest that “the most perverse legacy of the global crisis has been a further entrenchment of neoliberal rationalities and disciplines.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Jamie Peck et al. Neoliberalism resurgent? Market rule after the Great Recession? *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 11/12 Spring, 2012, p. 265.



This is certainly true with regard to labour relations. Collective labour rights are under attack in both the United States and Canada. Emboldened employers in both the public and private sectors have seized the opportunity afforded by the global financial crisis and the accompanying “Great Recession” to undertake a renewed offensive against organized labour. In the broader public sector, of which we are all a part, this is being done under the guise of “austerity.” Witness the legislated restrictions placed on the collective bargaining rights of public sector workers in US jurisdictions such as Wisconsin, Ohio, and Michigan. In Canada, the Harper Government has used back-to-work legislation to intervene in collective bargaining and impose labour agreements at Air Canada, Canada Post and CN Rail. The most recent federal omnibus Budget Bill (C-4) made sweeping changes to a number of federal labour laws, including the *Canada Labour Code* and *Public Service Labour Relations Act*. Two private member’s bills - C-377 and C-525 - currently before Parliament and strongly supported by the Harper Government are designed, respectively, to impose time-consuming and costly financial reporting obligations on labour organizations and to impede union certification.

Recently, the idea of US-style “right-to-work” (RTW) laws has been gaining political traction among conservatives at both the federal and provincial levels in Canada. By prohibiting collective agreement clauses requiring workers to join unions and by making the payment of union dues voluntary, RTW laws represent a major challenge to a union’s ability to recruit and service its members. Canadian proponents, such as Pierre Poilievre and Tim Hudak, use positive sounding phrases such as “worker choice” and “defending worker rights” to advocate for policies that, in reality, undermine workers’ collective labour rights.

It is ironic indeed that the institutional restructuring that was triggered by the previous major crisis of capitalism - the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression - led to the legal institutionalization of collective bargaining and a strengthening of labour rights in the US and Canada; the very institutions that are now under such vigorous attack from the political Right during this crisis.

One challenge that has faced the labour movement for some time is that changes in the organizational structure of many manufacturing and service industries have undermined the effectiveness of the prevailing principal framework for union organizing –the industrial union model - which came out of the institutional restructuring in 1930s North America. In fact, I would suggest that there are strong parallels between the 1930s and today. By the late 1920s, the craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labour (AFL), which had historically organized people on the basis of their skill, found that they were ill-suited to the new task of organizing unskilled workers in large-scale mass production factories. The challenge was eventually resolved in the mid-1930s through the development of industrial unionism. Industrial unions organized everyone in a particular workplace into a union “local”, irrespective of their precise job description or skill level. Today, the world of work has again changed and the industrial union model is similarly ill-suited to organizing demographically diverse workers in the small and geographically dispersed workplaces that characterize much of the burgeoning service sector. We need innovative new forms and scales of organizing to address the realities of today’s workplaces.

Today, well-paid and good quality unionized jobs continue to be lost in both the private and public sectors while the number of precarious jobs grows by leaps and bounds and income inequality has returned to levels not seen since the late 1920s. In closing, I would encourage faculty associations to engage and build alliances with other unions and progressive social justice organizations within their broader local community to not only push back in defence of collective labour rights but also to advocate for a living wage, improved working conditions and a collective voice for the increasing numbers of workers in the low-paid casualized service economy. This is a formidable challenge but historical precedence and my own lived experience give me hope that it can be done!

I thank you for your presence here this afternoon and, again, I sincerely thank the CAUT for this Award.

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