

**Oshawa Autoworkers: Social Integration and Oppositional Class Consciousness  
Among the Unionized Workers of General Motors**

**By Reuben N. Roth**

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education  
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the  
University of Toronto**

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**Abstract**

Many social theorists (Goldthorpe, Lipset, Giddens, Hout, Brooks and Manza) have portrayed members of the Western industrial working-class as accommodative and resistant to a class-based social revolution. They suggest that an affluent proletariat has seen its oppositional class-consciousness subverted and transformed by the 'cash nexus' into various forms of social integration. With reference to Mann's (1973) measures of class-consciousness typologies and Livingstone and Mangan's (1996) study of Hamilton steelworkers, I explore expressions of working-class consciousness among organized workers at one of Canada's largest industrial union locals, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 222 at General Motors, in Oshawa, Canada. I accomplish this via an examination of the existence and degree of working-class imagery, class identity and oppositional working-class consciousness among this group of workers on the basis of measured responses to a survey questionnaire (N=102), in-depth interviews and participant observation. My thesis asserts that Oshawa autoworkers' material advantage is insufficient to transform their proletarian consciousness. I have found that among Oshawa autoworkers there is a shared view of Canadian society as class-based, a clear working-class self-identification and measurable forms of oppositional working-class consciousness.

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## Chapter One - Introduction

A question that has often been at issue among students of class structure and proletarian class consciousness<sup>1</sup> is whether the unionized, industrial working-class has an accommodative or oppositional group consciousness. Marxists have typically focussed on the industrial wage worker as having the greatest potential to drive the engine of change in history and move society closer to a socialist utopia (Marx and Engels, 1848). However, in the postwar era, male industrial unionized workers' comparatively abundant economic gains<sup>2</sup> have been cited as chief among the reasons for the demise of forms of social transformation<sup>3</sup> and social justice. The heart of this argument states that the wage worker's enthusiasm for social change evaporates inversely with an attendant increase in the size of their pay-packet, creating a relationship between group consciousness and material surplus. Marx discussed this possibility in objective terms when he wrote that the

[g]rowth of capital involves growth of its variable constituent or of the part invested in labour-power. ... the demand for labourers may exceed the supply, and, therefore, wages may rise. ... [S]ooner or later a point must be reached, at which the requirements of accumulation begin to surpass the customary supply of labour, and, therefore a rise of wages takes place. ... The more or less favourable circumstances in which the wage-working class supports and multiplies itself, in no way alter the fundamental character of capitalist production. ... *i.e.*, the relation of capitalists on the one hand, and wage-workers on the other (Marx, 1967 [1867]: 613).

Here Marx claimed that a more generous proletarian paycheque would not alter the historic fundamentals of production relations. Why study the possibility of shifting proletarian

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'class consciousness' refers to the "patterned distribution of individual consciousnesses within the relevant aggregate, or it is a way of characterizing central tendencies (Wright, 1997: 382)." See also Ollman, 1993: 147-148. I discuss this in detail below.

<sup>2</sup> Autoworkers earn 25 per cent more than the average industrial wage (Frise, 1999: 27).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Engels (1893), Lenin (1902), Gramsci (1971) or Lipset and Marks (2000).



consciousness when ‘the bard’ himself suggests there is no possibility of change in the integral relationship between the classes? On the other hand, if Marx was correct where is the evidence of ‘class action’ — the conscious, class-based social group activity that is counter-hegemonic in character (Mann, 1973: 45-54)? This question has plagued many sociologists for over a century.

In this study I focus on the unionized autoworkers of General Motors of Canada (GM), located in Oshawa, Ontario. My thesis asserts that Oshawa autoworkers’ material advantage is insufficient to transform their proletarian consciousness. This will be evidenced by measures of (1) autoworkers’ class imagery, (2) their working-class self-identity and (3) their working-class consciousness. Accordingly, I focus on the current dimensions of proletarian consciousness<sup>4</sup> among GM autoworkers, with particular reference to expressions of working-class consciousness via three major measures: images of Canada’s class structure, proletarian self-identity and oppositional working-class consciousness. Comparative references will be made to a corresponding survey of Hamilton<sup>5</sup> steelworkers and their families conducted in the 1990s (Livingstone and Mangan, 1996), as well as measures of class consciousness provided by the biannual OISE/UT survey conducted by Livingstone,

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<sup>4</sup> According to Mann (1973) working-class consciousness comprises *identity* (common cause with others in the working-class), *opposition* (to the interests of the capitalists), *totality* (acceptance of the societal causes of class as all-encompassing) and a goal of an *alternative* society which one struggles toward.

<sup>5</sup> The Hamilton project used here as a comparator is based on a research initiative that Hamilton families in terms that included class identity and class and gender consciousness. This research — the Hamilton Families Project — was conducted over the course of over ten years and are discussed in a quartet of books by Livingstone, Mangan, Corman, Luxton and Seccombe. These include *Recast Dreams: Class and Gender Consciousness in Steeltown* (1996) and *Down to Earth People: Beyond Class Reductionism and Postmodernism* (2000).

Hart and Davie (2001). I explore the question identified by Livingstone and Mangan (1996), namely whether

... there are significant associations between employed men's current locations in the economic class structure of advanced capitalism and their expressions of class consciousness (1996: 50).

The respondents in this study are members of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) Local 222, the largest local affiliate in one of the most highly-organized trade unions in Canada (Gindin, 1995; Yates, 1998). Data for this study were gathered primarily through the use of responses to a series of questionnaire probes (N=102), my own participant observation as a General Motors (GM) assembler from 1984-1991, a number of semi-structured interviews (N=5) conducted for this study which explore autoworkers' class consciousness and excerpts from seventeen interviews originally conducted for the Working-Class Learning Strategies (WCLS) study (see Livingstone and Sawchuk, 2004) that help to further illustrate autoworkers' jobs, security and life on the General Motors assembly line. These methods were used to gauge the current levels of social class imagery, working class social identity and oppositional working-class consciousness among highly-organized, industrial workers in a mature industry. This study employs a measured approach and replicated select survey questions (Livingstone and Mangan, 1996 and Livingstone, Hart and Davie, 1980-2001) to come to an understanding of Oshawa autoworkers' proletarian consciousness. My own experience of working as a manual worker on General Motors' assembly lines for seven years furnished me with an additional measure: firsthand intimate knowledge of the assembly processes at General Motors (GM), working-class mores and expressions of worker consciousness, discontent and solidarity.

The question of proletarian consciousness has generated much uninformed speculation and not nearly enough field research (Ollman, 1993: 147). This study is an attempt to extend the field research in class consciousness primarily to men who are employed as auto assembly workers at Oshawa's General Motors of Canada automotive plants. As Wright puts it, "class consciousness is notoriously hard to measure (1997: 407)." But if social classes are a social fact and not a false social construction, then a variety of discrete expressions of class consciousness should be detectable and therefore measurable. Hence, determining specific dimensions of working-class consciousness is the main purpose of this study. The group under study here is composed of both unskilled and semi-skilled automobile assemblers and skilled trades workers, all of whom are employed at Oshawa's General Motors automotive plants. Unlike studies that examine members of a class society at all hierarchical levels (see for example Giddens, Blisshen, Bourdieu or Porter), my research is focussed exclusively on a fairly homogeneous group of manual, blue-collar, unionized, automotive assemblers who readily fall into that traditional sociological category of the industrial proletariat. In this study, conducted during 2000-2001, I attempt to determine whether this particular social group has seen its oppositional class consciousness subverted and transformed into particular forms of social integration as alleged by some observers (see for example Hout, Brooks and Manza, 2001).

As a result of their wage, fully one-half of General Motors of Canada's unionized workforce is more affluent than the bottom four-fifths of Canadian income earners (Statistics Canada, 2000). Due to their comparatively favourable economic position, this highly-organized, considerably advanced sector has ostensibly been characterized as a blue-collar

elite whose manners, behaviours, political and social views — in fact, the core of their very consciousness — has been transformed by the girth of their wallet (see Breugh in CBC, 1999). Some theorists label this integrative metamorphosis of consciousness under the umbrella of *embourgeoisement* which is defined as a “process of incorporation into the bourgeoisie of elements of other classes, the case most discussed being that of affluent workers (Bryant in Mann, 1983: 110).”

In the Canadian context, GM Oshawa’s auto assemblers and skilled trades workers are among<sup>6</sup> the best compensated and most densely unionized industrial workers in the country (Lewchuk, 1996; Yates, 2000) and in many ways Oshawa remains an oasis of relative prosperity in a desert of rusted industrial carcasses. Using Oshawa autoworkers’ comparative affluence as a starting point, a key question of this study is whether these well-heeled auto workers are moving closer to those who have social, material and ideological domination. While social stratification theorists typically refer to the imbalance of distributed resources between the lower ranks of society and those in the upper stratum, this study examines a small proletarian elite whose cause has historically been facilitated by favourable historical and economic conditions.

This study was carried out using a neo-Marxist theoretical paradigm that assumes class conflict is a daily feature of life in capitalist societies (Livingstone, 1987). Social class differences typically refer to disparities among those in the lower and higher ranks of society. The questions which directly guide this study are as follows:

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<sup>6</sup> Autoworkers are joined in this category by steelworkers, chemical workers and several other categories of industrial worker in primary occupations.

1. With direct reference to Mann's (1973) conceptualization of class typologies and Livingstone and Mangan's (1996) study of Hamilton steelworkers, what are the current expressions of working-class consciousness among the autoworkers of General Motors Oshawa, as established via measures of working-class imagery and identity?
2. Are these workers undergoing a process of social integration, as much of the literature of the past half-century suggests, or can it be said that Oshawa autoworkers espouse an identifiable oppositional working-class consciousness?

More generally, I attempt to illustrate some of the outcomes or expressions of *oppositional working-class consciousness* and I make an effort to determine what is occurring to Oshawa autoworkers in terms of their workplace-based oppression and subordination. Livingstone and Mangan's detailed 1996 study of Hamilton steelworkers provides a valuable reference point, given their statement that "oppositional class consciousness is more closely related to locations of dominance or subordination in production-based class relations (1996: 50)," accordingly, I confine my view to exploring class consciousness within production relations. The gulf between Oshawa autoworkers and Hamilton steelworkers is not large and if evidence of strong working-class identity and consciousness can be found in these two arenas we may safely assume they will be found in other similar locales.

This is not a study of embourgeoisement, nor is it a replication of the Luton study of the mid-1960s conducted by Goldthorpe et al. The aim of this research is different: this study is concerned with current conditions of working class identification, imagery and oppositional consciousness as these are constituted within *contemporary* economic and

political conditions in Canada. Here is a general characterization of these conditions, as laid out by Livingstone (in Corman et al., 1993: 14):

- I. heightened global and intercapitalist competition, sometimes leading to overproduction in capacity relative to consumer markets;
- II. increased use of new technology leading to higher productivity and lower operating costs;
- III. employee layoffs as a result of increased efficiencies and new technology, leading to a smaller workforce and a renegotiation of the individual, as well as the societal contract, or the 'postwar pact'.

This environment remains as relevant in 2004 as it was a decade ago, with the caveat that globalization, broader uses of technology, overproduction, bureaucratization, unemployment and the rise of part-time over full-time employment have become even more pronounced. Despite the general environment, and the virtual halving of GM's own workforce, Oshawa's autoworkers still remain an island of comparatively high wages and benefits in a sea of low-wage service jobs. Moreover, when compared to the devastation experienced in other industries, automotive assembly jobs appear to be relatively stable.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An Industry Canada website claims that Canadian "[a]ssembly employment has remained stable in recent years, while production has increased significantly (undated, Strategis website).

## **Ideology and Proletarian Consciousness**

In a reversal of liberal belief and traditions, Marxist social theory typically portrays society within a framework of class dominance, workplace alienation<sup>8</sup> and exploitation. Gramsci (1971 [1932]) argued that the elites within capitalist-democratic societies preserve their dominant socioeconomic position via a cultural hegemony, defined as an ideological command of subordinate social classes. Using the dominant institutions of society at their disposal, the bourgeoisie promotes the cultural norms and dominant ideology of capital and thus normalizes the structural inequality inherent within capitalist societies. This subtle hegemony hijacks the consciousness of the majority of society's members and directs them to cast aside their group interests in favour of a world view that upholds the interests of the bourgeois elite. The Frankfurt School (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944; Habermas, 1962; Marcuse, 1964) extended this argument and claimed that the mass media frequently circulate a depoliticized discourse that helps to conceal widespread social and economic inequality and deepens the appropriation of working-class awareness of their own degradation and potential power (Kollmeyer, 2004: 434).

Bruno (1999) succinctly formulates the question of co-opted proletarian consciousness in his study of Youngstown Ohio's steel industry, which like the auto industry, was a sector that supported the northeastern U.S. with plentiful jobs, high wages and security until the 1980s:

Consonant with theories of rising income and middle-class status is an attendant belief in the workers' contentment with capitalism. Conventional assessments have particularly focused on the workers' satisfaction with the wage-earning

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<sup>8</sup> Blauner viewed alienation as a "quality of personal experience which results from specific kinds of social arrangements (1964: 15)," and catalogued its effects as *powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement* (1964: 2-3).

process. ... many social scientists proclaimed that there was little ideological difference between workers and owners (Bruno, 1999: 80-81).

Here Bruno captures the heart of classic embourgeoisement theory. As he puts it, a widespread assumption on the part of some social scientists is that diminished support of socialist doctrine among the working-class and the failure of transformative politics was due in large part to industrial workers' steady monetary advances (procured via employer concessions) beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and culminating during the post World-War Two period (Bruno, 1999: 81). Added to this phenomena is the outlay by the working-class of their surplus earnings on a multitude of consumer goods, the snubbing of the interests of their own class in a glut of unrestrained consumerism<sup>9</sup> and a marked lack of interest in the class' historical self-interest, as interpreted by advocates of proletarian revolutionary and non-revolutionary (i.e. electoral) activity (see for example Robert Frank, 1999 or Ehrenreich, 1989). Confirming embourgeoisement's cloudy foundations has long been a taxing enterprise. For example, Elizabeth Jelin (1979), claimed that it was difficult to find a "single conceptual framework" (1979: 246) underlying the variety of usages for the term. She professed that

[i]nterpretations ... were based on two types of empirical evidence. First, many of the attitude surveys carried out after the war presented the image of an "integrated" worker who does not contest the existing political system; who defines his interests in terms of reformist short-term gains rather than of a revolutionary alternative model of social organization; and who is willing to fight for his grievances only within established economic and political frameworks. Second, the standard of living of the working-class in advanced capitalist

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<sup>9</sup> Ehrenreich quotes historian Donald Meyer who describes the working-class consumer personality as follows: "... weaned from saving and hoarding so that he [the consumer] might spend, weaned from piling up possessions in order to expedite planned obsolescence, weaned from ascetic discipline so that he might respond to every innovation, weaned from work-identities so that he might have the time for consumption (1989: 52)."



countries has improved considerably over the last few decades, and the image of an affluent society with affluent workers is gaining acceptance (1979: 247).

Postwar attitude surveys presented an image of an integrated worker generally pleased with the status quo. Within this framework workers are seen as more or less fully incorporated within capitalism and possessing only instrumental interests that serve their desire for more and better material goods, purchased courtesy of an improved standard of living. This logic sees individuals' needs satisfied primarily by material goods. The accompanying rationale in turn portrays individuals' views of themselves as fitting neatly into an increasingly affluent society, with a more advantaged citizenry and a general lack of interest in changing the status quo — especially as any further modifications can easily be made within the confines of the present socioeconomic system. A chief claim from the proponents of the embourgeoisement thesis is that the imperative of wholesale social change that would see the working-class overturn capitalism in an effort to cease their own exploitation and domination has withered away. Far from taking action as a class, workers are characterized as predominantly pleased with the advantages afforded by private ownership, appropriation and accumulation. Within the logic of this framework, bourgeois domination is moot and class exploitation largely disregarded. Work merely becomes the means to purchase greater chunks of commodities and holds little meaning otherwise. One main assumption underpinning the success of embourgeoisement as an explanatory instrument is the notion of an appropriated *authentic* consciousness that is replaced by a 'false consciousness' (Engels, 1893, Lenin, 1902) — which posits that the collective consciousness of economically or politically dominated populations more closely parallels the interests of the dominant group than their own. Recent mention of this process includes Goldthrope's (1969) claim that workers have become 'privatized'

and home-centred, while Gindin (1995) describes workers in the late twentieth century as ‘turning inward’. Among the popular explanations for industrial workers’ failure to overthrow capitalism (one form of ‘class action’) are, according to Dahrendorf (1959) the fragmentation of the capitalist class primarily via the breakup of enterprises owned by single families or shareholders; structural mobility, the erosion of the industrial, blue-collar proletariat and a rising standard of living; the influence of trade unions and non-unionized employers’ willingness to increase benefits to combat them; more extensive legal and regulatory protections that protect (to varying degrees) employees’ financial, job or personal security, via workplace health and safety legislation, employment insurance, or disability protection (Macionis and Gerber, 259). As one wag put it:

“What can we write about?” a college newspaper editor demanded querulously in 1957. “All the problems are solved. All that’s left are problems of technical adjustments (Ehrenrich, 1989: 19).”

This reflects a widespread belief that social inequality in the Western world has largely been alleviated, or is a problem well on its way to being solved, an extension of the fallacy that changing material conditions are directly related to the creation of false working-class consciousness. Accordingly, this view posits that the potential for a mass proletarian uprising is not considered close at hand (see Clark and Lipset, 2001). This explanation — twinned with the persistent myth of ever-expanding opportunities within capital<sup>10</sup> — assumes that unstratified, ideologically-integrated viewpoints can be held by members of the working-class whose material conditions lie *above* the socially-

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<sup>10</sup> The theme of *deserved* economic opportunity is best illustrated in, for example, the ‘Horatio Alger’ stories. For example, see *The “Rags to Riches Story”: An Episode of Secular Idealism* in Bendix and Lipset (1966).

constructed norm, while class subordination and workplace exploitation<sup>11</sup> continue to exist in society. Claims of proletarian false consciousness can be found in Canadians' response to the growing wealth gap between rich and poor. On this matter Bauer claims:

[t]here's no social outcry, no call for change. The working class has given their consent to the new reality, with the social inequality that it contains, because the masses hope that they too can one day be among the elite (Bauer in Willis and MacDonald, 2003: F5).

But the alleged aspiration of joining the gentry is innately misplaced. What appears to be "consent to the new reality" may simply be a rational set of decisions based on an accurate reading of material gain, which does not necessarily translate into a change of consciousness. An uncritical reading of Marx would claim the working class cannot shed their proletarian consciousness within the existing relations underpinned by the capitalist mode of production.

### **Comparative Earnings: Provincial and Sectoral**

Of course Oshawa autoworkers' wages have consistently been at the root of false consciousness arguments. But worth noting is the regional gap between Ontario's average wage, which has consistently been among the highest and the average Canadian wage (which of course is slightly inflated by Ontario). In the table below we can see the disparity in Ontario's favour is \$2,392.

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<sup>11</sup> In this study I use Wright's (1997) definition of class exploitation as outlined by the following three measures: (a) the material welfare of one group of people causally depends on the material deprivation of another; (b) the causal relation in (a) involves the asymmetrical exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources; (c) the causal mechanism which translates exclusion (b) into differential welfare (a) involves

**Table 1.1 Average Canadian Earnings by Province (December, 2002)**

Canada	\$35,620
Ontario	\$38,012

Source: Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, February 26, 2003.

Given that Ontario is the heart of Canada's manufacturing sector and the auto industry is chief among these, it comes as little surprise that Ontario workers earn higher wages.

Moving to a measure of the wage differential between various sectors in Canada's labour market, the major gap lies between the manufacturing and service sectors.

Rinehart (2001) notes the popular view, that "manual workers are said to have such an overriding interest in the size of their paycheque and what it can buy that they do not much care about the conditions or the content of their jobs (2001: 119)."<sup>12</sup> But this is not borne out by studies that have identified class identity and solidarity in the workplace (see for example, Livingstone and Mangan, 1996). Rinehart's contention may seem valid to those who find that measuring dollars is a vastly easier calculation than measuring less tangible variables, especially given that class consciousness is so difficult to quantify. One might find it difficult to believe that a differential of \$28,808 means that those employed in the service, food, or accommodation sectors care that much more about their working conditions than those in the manufacturing sector.

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the appropriation of the fruits of labour of the exploited by those who control the relevant productive resources (Wright, 10)."

<sup>12</sup> Rinehart's contention is not entirely wrong, workers *do* have a keen interest in their paycheque, as I witnessed while distributing survey questionnaires on a Saturday overtime shift. That day workers were earning an hourly wage of approximately \$54.00 per hour (without benefits). Mentioning this to a GM worker got this reply: "Now this is more like it, *this* is what I'm worth."

**Table 1.2 - Canadian Wages by Sector per Annum (December, 2002)**

Sector	avg. annual wage
Manufacturing	\$43,680
Health care/social assistance	31,720
Retail Trade	22,672
Accommodation /food services	14,872

Source: The Daily, February 26, 2003. Statistics Canada.

This disparity is even greater when one substitutes the average wage of a General Motors assembler (see Table 1.3) for the average manufacturing wage. Juxtaposed against the average accommodation or food services worker there lies an average annual wage gap of \$56,863. This gap alone represents almost one and a half times the average Ontario wage.

**Table 1.3 - Average Annual General Motors Wage**

GM Assembler	\$71,735 <sup>13</sup>
GM Skilled Tradesperson	\$85,962 <sup>14</sup>

Source: CAW Contact, January 2003.

In 1998 the top twenty percent of Canadian families had an average annual income of \$68,518 (Statistics Canada, 2000). This places the majority of GM Oshawa autoworker families in the top quintile of Canadian income earners.<sup>15</sup> Hence it is not terribly difficult to see the source of the claim that GM autoworkers are no longer part of the working-

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<sup>13</sup> Calculation: \$28.34 per hour multiplied by an average 48 hour week multiplied by 52 weeks, which includes the annual negotiated vacation payment. Note this figure excludes non-monetary benefits.

<sup>14</sup> Calculation: Electrician's rate of \$34.44 per hour multiplied by an average 48 hour week multiplied by 52 weeks, which includes the annual negotiated vacation payment. Note this figure excludes non-monetary benefits.

<sup>15</sup> The February 25, 2005 issue of *CAW Contact* (Vol. 35, No. 8) reports that a GM assembler's hourly wage (total straight time earnings, including cost of living adjustment (COLA) is \$31.24 and an electrician's hourly wage (total straight time earnings, including COLA) is \$37.32. This is a significant rise from the 2003 rates used in the above calculations, although the 2003 rates more closely approximate the wage structure at the time that the survey was in the field.

class. However, as already noted, this depends on which yardstick is being used to define the concept.

In a sense, this case study ‘falls between the cracks’ of the social sciences in that it does not examine the gap between the wealthy and impoverished elements in society, but probes the gap between normative society and those who are at the same time materially comfortable and socially stratified, because while Oshawa autoworkers are a relatively well-heeled lot in economic terms, they are typically subjected to repression and exploitation at their workplace.

In the following chapter I examine theories of class and class structure and I delve into the most relevant literature related to class imagery, proletarian identity and oppositional class consciousness.