LARRIKINS IN THE LABOUR MARKET: MASCULINITY, CLASS STRUGGLE AND UNION LEADERSHIP IN THE NSW BUILDING INDUSTRY

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Abstract
Various institutions including employer groups, the media, and legal tribunals have described the industrial behaviour of building workers as macho, violent, greedy, and excessively militant. This paper challenges this view by incorporating the historical construction of masculinity within a class analysis to illuminate the ambiguity of ruling-class conceptions of building workers and to suggest that they stem from the construction of a public profile of the workers that is ideologically based and anti-worker. This paper argues that the behaviour of building workers is a strategy that reproduces and defines leadership within this industry. An analysis of a rally at Parliament House shortly after the election of the Howard Government in 1996 is used to illustrate the issues raised in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Recent sociological work on masculinity has drawn links between gender, class, and work. Donaldson (1991) and Metcalfe (1988) have shown some ways that work and masculinity are interconnected, while Connell (1995) has emphasised the need to incorporate both gender and class when using the labour market as a framework. In industrial relations theory, however, little account is taken of this type of sociological research, focusing rather on the systems and institutions of industrial relations to explain industrial behaviour. Yet to grasp industrial relations as a set of “relations” the theoretical framework must be able to encompass both the macro interactions of the industrial relations system and the micro relationships between sections of the workforce, in order to explain specific historical trends and practices.
This paper will therefore seek to incorporate the construction of masculinity within a class analysis in order to analyse the hierarchy of social and structural power relations that order and reproduce leadership in the Australian union movement. It deals not just with structures and institutions but also with agency, particularly masculine forms of agency, that are relevant to understanding industrial relations in the industry on which it focuses: the New South Wales (NSW) building industry.

Bramble (1995) has identified the increasing trend in union officer recruitment towards tertiary-trained, appointed officers. The effects of this strategy may be many, but this paper will argue that the absence of a gender perspective obscures analysis of this recent strategy. The traditionally trained union official has ten years of association with an occupational and class based identity but this identity is also “masculine.” The presence in the union of tertiary trained officers is bound to cause leadership conflicts not just over issues of knowledge. The accredited officials’ knowledge is often in conflict with the workplace knowledge of the labourers they represent, and is evidenced in the use of the term “academics” in the pejorative sense by workers (fig. 1).

Connell (1995) identifies two “ideal types” of masculinity. The first is protest masculinity, manifested, for example, in the larrikin style of male behaviour of building workers. The second is complicit masculinity, the form of masculinity associated with employers and managers. Both of these “ideal types” have

Figure 1
Source: Election Leaflets FED&RA Rank and File Group 1992
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historical roots and institutional bases (Connell 1995; Walker 1988). The employer is conceptualised as a middle-class male and is usually tertiary educated in contrast with the traditional unionist who is educated on the job and manifests the “larrikin” style of masculinity (Donaldson 1991; Metcalfe 1988; Burgmann 1995). The absence of a gendered analysis of this kind leads to strategic errors in union leadership to which mainstream industrial relations theory is blind.

Here the tertiary trained officials are viewed by workers through the lens of gender as embodying a complicit masculinity, a whole set of assumptions that defines such officials as “bourgeois academics” who, because of their training and manifest style of masculinity, must, according to workers, at the very least have similar values to employers.

FOCUS OF THE STUDY

The analysis undertaken in this paper is based on interviews conducted by the author with union officials of the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemans Association (FED&FA), some of whom had been members of the deregistered the Builders Labourers Federation (BLF) during the Mundey years, and all of whom had been colleagues of the author when he served as a union representative in the building industry during the 1980s. These interviews throw considerable light on the importance of the larrikin style of protest masculinity in creating the credibility of union representatives in the eyes of workers, and in evoking and consolidating support for union strategies. The basic theoretical assumption of the paper is that class and gender are socially constructed and not naturally occurring phenomena. As Walker (1988, 88) says: “You may be born a male but you become a man.” Within this social constructionist framework, there are divergent views about the processes of identity formulation, but this paper relies predominantly on the work of Bourdieu and his notion of the “logic of practice” (1991, 41).

Masculinity among building workers is characterised by overt displays, which are the public proclaiming of the self and collective identity and are the expression and development of a particular masculinity. Bourdieu’s term kategorein situates this behaviour theoretically. Kategorein is a process of self-expression where an action “expresses to the expresser what his identity is to him and to everybody else ... what he is and what he must be” and defines the Self against the Other (Bourdieu 1991, 121). Thus masculinity is, on the one hand, a conception of the self that is publicly proclaimed, and on the other, a collective expression of maleness that is disparate, yet has enough congruence to establish common values, ideas, and feelings. The complicit and protest forms of masculinity thus allow individuals to develop collective yet individual identities in tension with one another. Each masculinity is defined as not the other and establishes the legitimacy of particular struggles between different groups of men.
Figure 2: “Newcastle Building Workers, protesting against the lack of showers on the Civic Centre site, had a shower on the City Hall steps. That got results.” Source: Thomas (1973, 24).

These two forms of masculinity have been identified in various institutions. British research that has focused on school-age males has found overt practice of both in British working-class youth. For example, Willis (1977) describes practices that create an ordered hierarchy of masculinity. Part of this process is defining the Other as lower down the masculine hierarchy. The other for Willis is females and males with less overt dispositions. In Willis’s study, the flamboyant practitioners of protest masculinity refer to themselves as “the lads” and claim superiority over the complicit “ear’oles” (Willis 1977, 14). These young men, through their use of the physical body and their anti-authority behaviour establish the kategoriein of their protest masculinity as dominant within the hierarchy of masculinities found in the school yard. Within what Bourdieu would define as the social field of the school, concrete action as a protest male is a way to acquire a great deal of what Bourdieu (1991, 111–12) has named symbolic capital.

Nevertheless, this capital has currency only within the specific field in which it is acquired. Connell, whose research in Australian schools produced observations similar to Willis’s, argues that the apparatus of the school favours complicit males, and simultaneously conditions the protest male to enter the labour market as a
blue-collar worker. Social class is reproduced at school by the school as an apparatus of the state, and many, though not all, working-class students are placed in a contest with authority (Connell 1995).

Though symbolic capital acquired through protest masculinity appears dominant in the field of the school, complicit masculinity offers symbolic capital that is potent in other fields. A middle-class male may learn from his parents to place a higher value on academic achievement than a working-class male. To achieve academic and thus social capital inhibits the anti-authority behaviour through which protest masculinity is expressed. The complicit male acquires academic qualifications that allow access to academic, economic and thus social capital, from which the working-class male is excluded, through the very protest masculinity that allowed him to dominate the school playground. The complicit male is now dominant, and exerts authority in two specific ways. Firstly, by control through the division of labour. Secondly, academic and social capital enables the complicit male to construct a public image that transforms the protest masculinity of the schoolboy into that of the union larrikin.

MASULINITY AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

I want now to explore the role of competing masculinities in working-class struggles as a means of illuminating the problems raised by recent changes in union leadership. Industrial relations involve a multiplicity of contests between employers and workers that have certain effects that I wish to explore. Firstly, they transform the protest masculinity of the schoolyard into the larrikin identity that creates worker solidarity and defines the symbolic capital of the union official, thus determining his leadership potential. Secondly, these contests have given rise to employer-constructed ideological discourses in which union strategies are trivialised as the irresponsible expression of a low-status larrikin masculinity rather than as legitimate class struggles. Both parties in the struggle, I will argue, mobilise the competing masculinities of their school-days in this new arena.

To take the employers' contribution first: academic qualifications usually demand the adoption of a complicit masculinity, and in return provide access to positions of power in the industrial field. The complicit male of their schooldays now exerts authority over the formerly dominant protest male not simply through the division of labour, but through access to fields where a negative public image of the protest male can be constructed. This process constructs a dominant discourse that places the larrikin lower in the hierarchy of masculinities than the complicit male, and casts the industrial struggles in which he engages as, for this reason, illegitimate. That is, the complicit male now has the power to define the once dominant masculinity of the schoolboy as different from and below his own.
Disparaging bourgeois descriptions of working-class industrial (larrikin) behaviour have been remarkably consistent over time. In 1917, in a trial of unskilled labourers and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a Judge declared that “they were from the lowest levels of society” (Newcastle Morning Herald, 4 February 1921). Similarly, it was asserted of the Mundey BLF members that “these unionists act violently as a policy ... as an industrial strategy” (Sydney Morning Herald, 17 May 1971). Recent history provides yet another example of middle-class characterising of building workers:

Construction workers are held to be in various degrees, corrupt, incompetent, inefficient, lazy, engaged in restrictive work practices, falsely concerned about their own health and safety, overpaid, selfish and greedy. (Royal Commission in Unity August, 1992)

Yet the larrikin behaviour interpreted in this way by employers and the media is an integral component both of the worker solidarity that has led to union successes and of the leadership that has mobilised this solidarity to implement particular strategies. The interviews with FED&FA organisers revealed that their policy has been to encourage equality of status between themselves and rank-and-file members. This was achieved by open-door policies that allowed regular access to officials and to the union infrastructure, complemented by a policy that where possible disputes would be managed by workers directly involved (Peel 1996; Childes 1996; Cambourne 1996). This type of practice is associated with a particular behaviour and subsequent political orientation, and its aim is to train and empower delegates and members. Many of the members of these groups have independent and self-motivational attitudes that require a degree of autonomy, rather than a hierarchy of authority. Importantly, these workers may reject and rebel against dominating behaviour. A respondent noted that many workers who joined the FED&FA during the 1960s and 1970s were semi-skilled labourers, some of whom had been in conflict with the state: “These men were encouraged and learned to act closely with union officials in most of their industrial affairs ... always within the parameters of union policy ... indeed policy formulation in the FED&FA included many of them. This is called collective leadership” (Cambourne, interview, 1995).

Other studies suggest that this is characteristic of union struggles generally. For example, E.P. Thompson writing about nineteenth-century miners, found that aggressive and overt actions were a strategy to intimidate mine management. Andrew Metcalfe (1988) made use of the concept of the larrikin to explain twentieth-century miners’ industrial behaviour, while Verity Burgmann (1995) argues that unionism during the twentieth century has featured various forms of larrikinism. Importantly she notes the larrikin behaviour of some members of the BLF many of whom became members of the FED&FA and the focus of this case study.

The larrikin unionist was typically located within the hierarchy of the protest male at school; however, within the workplace the field has changed and there are new rules. The complicit male, who has entered the field of the labour market
as employer or manager, now has power to order the work of the larrikin, and the authority to construct the larrikin discursively. The worker, in defending himself in this class struggle, constructs his kategorein as larrikin using strategies of physical comparison similar to those he used at school. The complicit male, on the other hand, uses the new institutional means, in particular the legitimating power of the media, at his disposal to turn this strategy of kategorein on the larrikin, reconstructing the unionist and worker as violent and irresponsible.

Individuals or groups are objectively defined not only by what they are, but also by what they are perceived to be (Bourdieu 1990). The larrikin reacts to the construction of the dominant discourse in restricted ways through public displays of the body and voice still using kategorein that was effective at school to express publicly his class position and his identity. The middle-class male can communicate his concerns through other media, but the worker for the most part cannot. The struggle is played out in various ways and in most cases in a public arena, with public opinion being sought to define the victor or the unfairness of oppression. For example, the larrikin sees the muscles and condition of the middle-class gym-goer (who is categorised in similar terms to employers) as being unnatural and therefore less earned, more vanity-inspired. This is distinct from the physical strength and endurance of his own class, as this type is earned legitimately in work. Comments made in the presence of the author include: “They are all piss
and win[d] ... they cannot fight for nuts" (1993); "The bastard could not get on the hook you know, yeah, I'd like to see that" (1996) (see fig. 3); and with reference to a jogger in Hyde Park in Sydney, “Blokes like that don’t work hard enough ye know” (1991); “That wuss couldn’t swing a pick all day I bet. [H]e would be as useful as tits on a bull I’d reckon ... I bet the asshole has never done a day’s work in his life” (1992).

The *kategorein* of the larrikin makes possible a form of collective response to employers and those who define him as what he is not, what he may not want to be. The particular masculine practice of the larrikin is visible, and public visibility, public expression of rebellion using strategies of protest first learned at school, is also precisely the form of behaviour needed to acquire symbolic capital in the eyes of other workers, to make articulate their grievances and to represent and mobilise them.

Most public protests of the larrikin are not, however, interpreted by him but by middle-class men like editors, industrial commissioners, employers, politicians, and economists, and are then consolidated as public truth through the acceptance by the public in the media and scientific literature. The larrikin does not effectively communicate who he is and what he is not outside his own class. Larrikins do not have any institutional forum in which to communicate their views of middle-class men to others; in other words, they have little influence on public opinion.

Symbolic capital acquired through a larrikin identity has been a significant characteristic of most union officials, whether honorary or full time, who have exercised effective leadership. The “rite of passage” is a dramatic confrontation and contest with management within the union’s industry. These contests are then recorded and recounted as heroic narratives. In the building industry, on rainy days when work is closed, many hotels are the site for the recitation of past glories. Great buildings are built through the skill of the rigger or the crane driver. Long remembered and time-distorted histories of past struggles, physical contests, and the like provide symbolic and actual instruction to the young larrikins, with the Green Bans era a case in point.

To be accepted as a leader in the industry, an official must have a record of being a winner in industrial disputes. But this is achieved through the continual reconstruction of the larrikin masculinities. As one delegate commented to the author:

*If you are tough enough you’ll survive in this game.... It depends what sort of bloke you are. You have got to be prepared to stiffen the blokes up at times otherwise you’ll lose control of the dispute.* (Personal communication 1988)

“To stiffen the blokes up” does not mean to reinforce their resolve to struggle. Rather it means using practical instruction and example to convince aspiring larrikins to stick to an agreed strategy for the dispute. Increasing their store of symbolic capital is an integral part of winning the dispute for the leaders: to be
perceived as a winner is the way to ensure compliance with the strategies needed to win. The acceptance of a person as a leader in the industry because he is a winner transcends the boundaries of a particular workplace. For example, one organiser said to the author: “I could start a rumour here [Convent Garden Hotel in Chinatown] and it would beat me to Civil and Civics job at the Rocks” (1989). The grapevine communicates the symbolic capital an organiser earns on one job and this encourages its legitimacy to workers on most other jobs.

The union leader is created as larrikin through struggle. A newcomer acquires symbolic capital through initiation and imitation. He learns of the strength of collective thought through stories of past struggles; he receives guidance in present struggles and by association with established leaders; he gains acceptance in the eyes of the general membership through appropriately larrikin behaviour against management and in the interest of the worker.

The “academic” union official who behaves in a manner approved by the complicit male may at the same time lose credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the union membership.

A CONCRETE EXAMPLE

The so-called “riot” at Parliament House by some workers soon after the election of the Howard Government in 1996 provides an example of the construction of a dominant discourse to explain an industrial dispute. A reinterpretation from the perspective of protest masculinity shows how the creation of a public image that does not accurately reflect the complexity and existence of class struggle that underpins such behaviour affects workers and their unions.

In the Parliament House riot a group of unionists and other activists gained access to the foyer of Parliament House. A police contingent challenged their entry and a scuffle ensued. The public discourse constructed in and by the media and conservative forces focused on an injury to a woman police officer. All those involved were cast in a widespread public discourse as “a violent unruly mob” that ransacked gift shops and assaulted women. The Prime Minister was reported on television as bestowing honours on one female officer who needed hospital treatment. The workers were allowed to bleed unremarked (“Prime News” and “NBN News,” 28 August 1996).

Complicit masculinities are in part constructed through compliance with and support for regimes of authority, and thus endorse a belief that the state should enjoy a monopoly over violence (Weber 1947). The violence of the police action was endorsed in media accounts. The police were, however, defining and constructing their masculinity, their self-worth, and who they were, at precisely
the same time and using the same process as the unionists. In other words, they were defining each other as the Other. How similar behaviour came to have a different meaning for each group requires further explanation. Tanner has written about this specific behaviour.

The rebellious youth who turns into an authoritarian adult is a commonly observed paradox. I recall being surprised at first to hear Charlotte Linde’s observation that policemen whose conversations she had studied talked frequently about what “bad boys” they had been, trading stories about their youthful escapades and how cleverly they had broken the law in their wild days ... As I came to understand the view of the world as hierarchical social order ... [I found that] born rebels who defy authority are not oblivious to it but over sensitive to it. Defying authority is a way of asserting themselves and refusing to accept the subordinate position ... Reinforcing authority becomes the way to assert themselves, as the hierarchy is now operating to their advantage. (1990, 290–91)

The process and the working-out of the struggle are as important here as the issue of who is victor, and how this is defined is constructed differently for each group. Injuries worn as badges of honour adorn both sides here. However, the validity of the larrikins and police struggles and behaviour turns on the endorsement of those they serve and identify with. For the police the state is central to legitimising their actions, for the larrikins it is their respective unions and groups they identify with; they see their behaviour as extending the collective aims of the class.

In industrial struggles the state and employers have historically combined to defeat the larrikin strategies. In the language of the dominant discourse, “the right has vanquished the wrong.” However, the victory, in this case the protection of Parliament House by the police, may not be what it seems. The unionists through the process of larrikin kategorein were seeking to make public their oppression: was this not also achieved?

In the specific case of the Parliament House riot, the victory was won by the larrikin demonstration of anger at class oppression, but lost when the larrikins’ own leaders (in the form of some union officials and nearly all Labor politicians) castigated their struggle. Only the larrikins’ leaders could offer an alternative interpretation of the struggle, as they alone of those involved had access to the media, the instruments of discourse construction, and thus the ability to contradict the ruling class’s construction of truth. But this they failed to do. With no public declaration of solidarity, the victory was turned into the worst kind of defeat: the kategorein of the larrikin was devalued as the larrikin practices were declared illegitimate.

The relevant issue here is the limited ways that the larrikin has to struggle. As a survivor in working-class life, his experiences of struggle and oppression teach him to fight a certain way. His identity is constructed and shaped by his total objective and subjective life experiences and the way he interprets these experiences and thus his actions. The Labor leadership’s failure to recognise these issues enabled the Howard government to pursue a process identified by René
Girard as “the rationalisation of revenge”: a rationalisation that arises because “the right to monopolise violence results in the depersonalisation of its excuse, through the decision making process of judicial bodies and law enforcement agencies” (Schlesinger 1991, 8).

Foucault argues that those who can manipulate the definition of truth achieve power:

Truth is a thing of this world: It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. Moreover, it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics, of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those that are charged with saying what is true. (Foucault 1984, 72–73)

The Labour leaders, by rejecting the legitimacy of struggle, left the conservative forces free to construct truth and therefore power over this set of events, and against the class interests of the larrikin. However, the rejection of the struggle affected the union leadership as well. The absolute power this process gave to the government to construct the truth of these events gave legitimacy to Prime Minister Howard’s immediate decision not to talk to the ACTU leaders, for a period of his choosing: “I won’t negotiate under duress.” He was further reported as saying that if the ACTU leadership could not control its members there was no use in talking with them (“Prime News,” August 1996).

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the historical construction of masculinity can offer insights into industrial behaviour and the problems raised by the increasing trend of unions to appoint tertiary-trained union officers. It is not the intention to criticise this practice in its entirety, but rather to draw attention to the perception some workers have that there is a gap emerging between workers and some leadership regimes where there is “a lack of working-class politics.” By focusing on masculinity, the reasons become clearer. I have argued that the larrikin seeks a fair go by using the strategy of kategorien that he learned in his school years while developing his masculinity in opposition to the school as the apparatus of the state. This contest involved public and overt displays of the body and voice. Further, this process creates a self-imposed difference between the protest masculinity of the worker and management’s complicit masculinity. In the context of the industrial struggles of the larrikin, it is at one and the same time a recognition of profound limitations to change his circumstance and a powerful need to struggle, or at least place hope in the limited ways he may attempt to do so. Furthermore, for the larrikin it is central to his sense of self, and feelings of collectively belonging. Therefore the construction of the larrikin masculinity and his relative position in the labour market from the time he enters the fields of the
labourer are interconnected and combine to legitimate his class position. The larrikin masculinity is manifested in practices, beliefs, and values. As a larrikin said to the author (personal communication 1996): “It is the mark of a man. If you don’t stand up to the bastards you’ll have women and kids back in the coal mines.”

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NOTES

1 Connell (1995) makes the point that historically a division has existed between forms of masculinities such as militarism as opposed to professionals' technical skill. Yet this division is shifting with new middle-class men (1995) having developed within a technostructure of information technology. Tom Bramble (1995) argues that an increased percentage of tertiary trained union officers are being employed in peak union representative bodies and individual unions. This data from Bramble seems to support the more general trend identified in the above claims of Connell.

2 Connell’s concept of dominant masculinity is also applicable to larrikin practice. However, the equally insightful concept of protest masculinity is used throughout this paper to provide consistency and avoid confusion.

3 The view that academically trained union officers have somehow led to a rift in communication and understanding of class issues affecting workers is a widely held belief among members of the Building Division of the FED&FA. A substantial proportion of both traditionally trained organisers and delegates seem to hold this view. However, it is expressed explicitly, and at other times generalisations are made with regard to this general point. The existence of these views argues for a more detailed investigation than is possible using the available data in this case study.

4 Some working-class male students forsake the popularity of their peers, as they seem to make a conscious decision to pursue an education rather than fully conform to peer group pressures and categorisation by the education system. So too some students appear to be able to practice overt displays while achieving academically. However, for the most part Connell’s assertions are that the education system plays a fundamental role in the reproduction of class and gender inequalities.

5 The “hook” is the hook of the crane before this practice was banned: the worker (dogmen) rode either in a sling or on the load of a crane high over city streets. Workers that have a history of this practice enjoy high degrees of symbolic capital.

6 The Green Bans combined community and trade union action undertaken during the 1970s by building unions but specifically the BLF. Elsewhere (1996) I have analysed the powerful source of symbolic capital that these disputes gave workers involved in them.
It is not suggested here that building workers were involved in this specific example; however, it was an example of larrikin behaviour of both the complicit and dominant masculinities.

Donaldson (1991) makes the point that a lack of power at work may lead to physical contests often in hotels and other arenas outside the workplace. This display is in part the result of frustration; however, it is also the use of the body in public displays in the ordering of the larrikin in his social hierarchy of masculinities.

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