

The Making of the Heiltsuk Working Class: Methodism, Time Discipline, and Capitalist Subjectivities

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Abstract

The Heiltsuk,¹ a First Nation group in British Columbia, first encountered Europeans around the beginning of the 19th century. By the 1830s, they were thoroughly engaged in the trans-Pacific fur trade and the burgeoning commercial economy of the region. The fur trade generated considerable wealth for Heiltsuk traders, who maintained autonomy as providers of an important commodity. However, by the 1880s, many Heiltsuk were employed as wage-laborers, working at a nearby cannery, or as part of logging or commercial fishing crews. This shift to a wage-labor economy was accompanied by ideological shifts, a product of formal education and, in particular, the teachings of Methodist missionaries. Using E.P. Thompson's study of the English working class in the early Industrial Revolution, and his concept of 'time discipline,' these ideological transformations are viewed as components of capitalist subjectivities.

Keywords

Capitalism, missionization, acculturation, subjectivities

Traditional Culture

The Heiltsuk are a band of First Nation people in British Columbia, previously known as the Bella Bella.² They have occupied the area around Milbanke Sound in central coastal British Columbia since roughly 14,000 years B.P., according to a recent excavation completed there.³ The Heiltsuk were neighbors of the more famous Kwakwaka'wakw (previously known as Kwakiutl), who spoke a language of the same family (Wakashan).

¹ I conducted fieldwork in Bella Bella, British Columbia, between 1985 and 1987.

² 'Bella Bella' was a corruption of a local place name, mistaken by Whites for an ethnonym. Heiltsuk is the correct ethnonym, although many of the older community members preferred the name Bella Bella, because of its positive connotation (Harkin 1988).

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/archeological-find-affirms-heiltsuk-nation-s-oral-history-1.4046088>. Accessed 12/12/18.

Like them, the Heiltsuk had a rich ceremonial life, centered on the *potlatch*, a traditional system of competitive gifting and feasting through which chiefs would redistribute large amounts of property and thereby gain prestige (Harkin 2015).

Traditionally it was a ranked society, with chiefly and noble titles inherited through both maternal and paternal lines. One important type of potlatch involved ‘fastening on’ a title name that had been bestowed. Names, and their accompanying symbolic property (masks, the right to certain dances, myths) had to be validated in this way because potlatching was a core obligation of chiefs and nobles. The highest-ranking chiefly titles also contained rights to land and its rich resources, especially salmon streams. Feasting on salmon at potlatches was thus indexical of the wealth of the land and, hence, of the chief himself. As with other Northwest Coast societies, slavery was widespread; slaves were former war captives or their descendants, who provided the bulk of the labor for crucial activities such as cutting wood and drawing water (Donald 1999; Harkin 1997, p.1-22).

Society was organized according to clan, of which there were four: Raven, Eagle, Killer Whale, Wolf, although inheritance was cognatic, rather than unilineal, which is more common in clan societies. In addition to the clan totem, individual lineages had secondary totems, which were displayed on poles, other carvings, and house front paintings. Among noble families, intermarriage with other tribes was common, leading to a regional system of alliances. Warfare was prevalent, with a prime objective being the taking of slaves, and, later, control of the fur trade (Harkin 1997, p.6).

Religion included the honoring of important food species in first fruits ceremonies. Salmon, in particular, were treated with respect, as it was believed that they could choose not to return to spawning grounds, causing famine. It is certainly the case that such rituals had the pragmatic effect of conserving crucial species of salmon and other marine resources, as it was within the chief’s power to declare a fixed season on particular species and runs of salmon, as well as other resources (Harkin 2007). In addition to first fruits rituals, there was a series of masked rituals that constituted the Winter Ceremonial. During this time of darkness and bad weather, when normal human activities such as hunting and fishing were severely curtailed, it was believed that spirits antithetical to human life were loosed upon the world. These included spirits of disease and death, with the highest-ranking being the *hamatsa*, or cannibal dance. These possessing spirits were eventually ‘tamed,’ allowing the initiate to return to society. With the return of spring, the world returned to its normal human-centric state, and the menacing spirits were exiled until next winter (Harkin 1997, p.10-18).

Northwest Coast culture, including the Heiltsuk, is renowned for its fine artwork, much of which was connected to the Winter Ceremonial. However, in addition to esoteric items such as masks, there was considerable artwork that was public, such as totem poles, house fronts, and textiles. The abundance of cedar allowed for monumental art as well as large chiefly houses. Natural dyes were used to paint wooden surfaces; mostly, this consisted of red and black, although the Heiltsuk also possessed a shade of blue prior to contact (Jonaitis 1988; Jonaitis and Glass 2010).

Contact and Early History

First contact with Europeans probably occurred in 1793 with George Vancouver's voyage. Captain Cook's third voyage had reached Nootka Sound to the south in 1778, but made no contact with the northern groups. It is possible that intermittent contact with Chinese sailors predated European contact, but there is no direct evidence for that. The existence of Chinese coins in the region could be a product of extensive trading networks along the northern Pacific Rim. In any case, the arrival of Vancouver was a signal event. According to oral tradition, Vancouver distributed brass thimbles, which were displayed at a Heiltsuk potlatch as a spiritual treasure (Harkin 1997, pp.124-125, 132).

Although early contacts with the English were intermittent and friendly, soon English migration to Victoria and southern Vancouver Island began to displace native people, leading to the establishment of a colonial government and the adoption of a '*mission civilitrice*' towards native people. Smallpox and other deadly diseases spread through native populations, leading to massive loss of population (Boyd 1999). This was exacerbated by an increase in intertribal warfare, probably arising out of competition for fur trade wealth. At the same time, fur trade wealth invigorated the potlatch system, which reached a climax in the late 19th century. The loss of life from disease resulted in a number of vacant titles, which were often filled by '*nouveaux riches*,' whose wealth came from the fur trade. The availability of metal tools and commercial paint led to a florescence of traditional art and architecture, which found new forms and media (argillite, e.g.) that were not feasible before the arrival of outside goods (Fisher 1977, p.21; Harkin 1997, p.47).

The fur trade was an early example of globalization, as it involved trade between the Northwest Coast, China, Europe, and the east coast of North America, with Hawaii serving as an entrepôt. Initially, the trade was ship-based but eventually, as in other parts of Canada, the Hudson's Bay Company established forts along the coast, to intercept furs before they could be traded to American ships (McDonald 1994). One of these was Fort McLoughlin, built on Campbell Island, at the site of the new village of Bella Bella (located about two miles south of the current village). It opened in 1833, and operated for about ten years, when the Hudson's Bay Company replaced forts with steamers plying the Inside Passage. During this time the village grew, as formerly autonomous groups coalesced into a tribal entity. The Heiltsuk were known to be particularly shrewd traders, and often acted as middlemen for other native people, who actually collected the furs. Bills of landing of this era tell the tale of increasing material wealth. At first the goods are utilitarian: guns, steel tools, cooking pots, and utensils. They began to include luxury items, such as silverware, colorful bolts of cloth, and crystal. By midcentury locks were among the items going into Bella Bella (Harkin 1997, p.139).

This story of increasing consumption of manufactured goods reflects a common story among Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Traditional clothing, made mostly of the soft inner bark of the cedar, was replaced by wool and cotton clothing. Traditional ways of cooking and eating were transformed by the acquisition of kitchen implements and place settings. Even houses were transformed, from the traditional longhouses to Victorian style

frame houses (Harkin 2005). This led to major changes in social organization, as extended kin groups no longer cohabited, but instead nuclear families with generational extensions constituted the main residential unit. The new household was also a property-owning unit, with the new luxury items being an important part of that property, and thus of the family's prestige. Hence the sudden popularity of locks (Harkin 1997, p.139).

It is evident that the Heiltsuk were quick to adopt the consumer mentality that gripped Native people in North America more generally in the early phases of post-contact life. An entire world of new goods was available, many of which made fundamental chores such as wood chopping and food preparation significantly easier. At the same time, the potlatch culture of the Northwest Coast had prepared Heiltsuk people to adapt easily to consumer culture. Although the point of the potlatch was to give away goods, it nevertheless encouraged a mentality of distinction: items were graded according to their quality and rarity (Bourdieu 1987). This segues easily into the idea of obtaining prestige goods for display in a household context, as, for instance at Christmas celebrations. This is the first of two capitalist subjectivities to take hold in the Heiltsuk world (Harkin 1997, p.132).

Time Discipline and Methodism

If the trader-consumer subjectivity largely segued with traditional Heiltsuk values, the transformation of Heiltsuk people into capitalist laborers was more problematic. In a slave-owning, ranked society, the expectation was that those of chiefly and noble rank would not concern themselves with physical labor, except insofar as it was connected with prestigious activities, such as wood carving and canoe making. Indeed, one interesting early venture was the organization of master canoe makers into a sort of boat-building collective, that produced fishing and other vessels commercially (Donald 1999). However, the settler colonial state did not encourage Native entrepreneurship, but rather assumed a role for them as a proletariat for the developing economy of British Columbia. It was assumed that they would take menial jobs in fish canneries and work for White interests in commercial fishing, logging, and other resource extraction industries (Knight 1996; Menzies and Butler 2001, 2008). Although Native people were ideally situated to control the commercial fishing industry, a variety of political and legal measures were used to limit their ability to do so (Newell 1993).

If one aspect of the post-contact world was the enhancement of aspects of traditional culture, notably artwork and potlatching, this is far from the complete picture of Heiltsuk life in the mid-19th century. I have already mentioned the great loss of life due to European diseases; in some areas of the Northwest Coast mortality approached 80-90% of the total population (Boyd 1999). Death on this scale is scarcely imaginable. What is more, such plagues often preyed primarily on the elderly and children, leading to a huge loss of cultural knowledge and memory, as well as to a sense of disconnection with the future. Moreover, the fundamental cultural system, including taboos and norms, was threatened if not overturned. In some extreme cases, surviving members effectively renounced their traditional culture (Harkin 2004). Sorcery accusations—a mark of social dysfunction—proliferated. To this was added the scourge of alcohol, and the rise of prostitution and other sorts of formerly unthinkable practices, and a picture emerges of Native society as

hopelessly debauched and in need of salvation. Although originating in the colonial press (especially the newspaper *The Colonist*) as well as Protestant missionary writings, such an image was adopted by many native people, including prominent Heiltsuk people .

One such person, known in the historical record as ‘Bella Bella Jack,’ later baptized Arthur Ebbstone, found himself in the early 1870s in a Victoria establishment, a tavern converted into a storefront church. According to his own account, he had been drinking profusely prior to his attendance at the church. There he became an enthusiastic convert to protestant Christianity (probably Methodism, but possibly non-denominational). He returned to Bella Bella with a Bible and began to preach a redemptive message. Reflecting the admonition of the fifth commandment to ‘remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,’ Ebbstone kept track of the days and raised a Union Jack up a pole each Sunday (Harkin 1997, pp.107-108).

Rarely do we see a symbolic action so perfectly epitomizing a transitional historical moment. Employing the traditional cultural device of the pole to a new purpose; raising a symbol of the settler colonial oppressors, but one that accorded perfectly with Heiltsuk concepts of heraldry and display—all bespeak both irony and crisis. (Irony is a condition of culture rapid change, as in *Don Quixote*). It has been said that the orientation of Indigenous peoples is primarily spacial, as opposed to the Western primacy of temporality (Rosaldo 1980; Guo 2003). Here we can see the contrast between the pole, which is a spatial marker, implying territorial ownership, among other things, and the flagpole, which serves as a temporal marker. (Think also of the use of flags as a marker of whether a head of state is in residence, or the practice of lowering flags to half-staff to mark an event).

It is not a question of course of a simple opposition between space and time, however, as Indigenous cultures (however defined) clearly possess a sense of temporality, just as colonial societies quite clearly possess a concept of space, manifest in their quest for territorial expansion. Rather, it has to do with how time is imagined: as, for instance, larger cycles linked to nature, or as a quantity to be measured, divided, and subdivided (Munn 1992). In his seminal article on time discipline, the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson quotes Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*: remembering ‘when one-handed clocks sufficiently subdivided the day’ (Thompson 1967, p.56). Thus two distinct styles of temporality, what Pocock (1967) calls ‘social time,’ linked to season, ritual, economic and social activity, can be contrasted to disciplinary time, something, as T.S. Eliot said, to be ‘measured out in coffee spoons’ (1915). Disciplinary time is scalable; rather than linked to a definite and limited activity, such as salmon fishing or the harvest, it was a universal quantity to be applied to a range of activities. Needless to say, this latter concept of time has won the day and is a central feature of our neoliberal order (Koeber 2017). However, it is worth pausing to consider how revolutionary this would have appeared to the Heiltsuk.

Not only did Ebbstone’s action introduce a new mode of temporality based on the calendar, but it represented a brazen challenge to the traditional social order. Temporality was the traditional purview of the chief. He was responsible for declaring resource seasons via the first fruits ceremony, as well as the timing of potlatches and ceremonies. Not surprisingly, the reaction to his actions, including preaching, which also usurped chiefly privilege, was

sharply divided, so much so that the important hereditary chief Moody Humchitt felt it necessary to host two reconciliation potlatches for the community; at the second of these he announced his intention to convert to Christianity (Harkin 1997, p.114). This, combined with the mass conversion of an important sub-group (as Bella Bella was settled by various groups that had migrated from other islands), led to a consensus view in the community that Christianity was to be the future and that a mission would be desirable. There were notable dissenters, but the wheels were in motion (Harkin 1997).

Chiefs and wealthy nobles raised funds and repeatedly approached the Methodists about establishing a mission in the village. Finally, in the summer of 1880 a Native preacher named William H. Pierce arrived, using an old Hudson's Bay Company warehouse as a makeshift church (Edwards 2005; Pierce 1933). His reception was lukewarm, partly because much of the population was at fishing camps, but also probably because he was a Native preacher, when what the community desired, at least in hindsight, was a White missionary who could bring the whole suite of White knowledge and technology, viewed from the Native perspective as a strong form of spiritual power. Within several years, this wish would be fulfilled, with the establishment of a permanent mission manned by a medically-trained missionary, who also oversaw a school. Throughout this process, it is remarkable how much money was raised by the Heiltsuk themselves for building a school, church, and hospital, and for other purposes. It is important to view the process of cultural change that ensues as being a cooperative enterprise, rather than as something imposed wholly from the outside (Harkin 1997, pp.110-114).

Methodism and the Making of Working-Class Subjectivities

Disciplinary time was a central feature of the Methodist technology designed to transform the Heiltsuk person into a functioning member of the new proletariat of Native people in British Columbia (see Burrows 1987). Once a permanent church was established, a bell was purchased. This announced not only church services and events in the liturgical calendar, but also hours of the day, especially the time to rise and begin work, and the time to go home after work. Much like the bell in a small Catholic village or the factory whistle in a working-class town, the Bella Bella bell regimented Heiltsuk bodies temporally.

A variety of other disciplinary techniques were employed to regiment Heiltsuk bodies, to make them pliable for potential capitalist employers. Much of this was centered on questions of sexuality, especially of women. Thus European clothing was mandated; although allowing and even encouraging fashionable styles—as a means of strengthening consumerist subjectivities—clothing was required to be 'modest,' and, like all women's clothing of the day, physically restrictive. Women were monitored in other ways as well, especially in terms of personal hygiene and household management. 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness' is a particularly Methodist credo, proclaimed by John Wesley himself. Indeed, as part of a daily routine, or 'method,' cleaning, whether of oneself or one's possessions and surroundings, becomes a keystone (Foucault 1979:30; Harkin 1996). The wife of the missionary (herself often trained in both theology and medicine) was the point person for this initiative; on one occasion she led a meeting of the Ladies' Auxiliary in a

session where brooms were constructed from pine straw (see Hare and Barman 2007). This was of course predicated on the prior adoption of Victorian architectural styles, which included plank, rather than dirt floors. This not only gave women ‘proper’ houses to maintain, but allowed for far greater legibility and control than the old log houses had. Not only were fewer people living in them, but large ground-level windows allowed others—not necessarily only the missionary—to observe activities within the house and its state of cleanliness. This panopticonal milieu represented a completely new social formation for the Heiltsuk, although in some ways it was built on a foundation of social mistrust that was the product of a newly-amalgamated social unit, which expressed itself in sorcery accusations in the traditional system. Under the missionary regime, this was replaced by gossip and direct reporting to the missionary and to key Heiltsuk members of the congregation (Harkin 2005).

Methodism is, of course, the prototypical creed of the working class. As Thompson puts it: ‘Methodism was profoundly marked by its origins; the poor man’s Dissent of Bunyan, of Dan Taylor, and—later—of the Primitive Methodists was a religion *of* the poor; orthodox Wesleyanism remained as it had commenced, a religion *for* the poor’ (Thompson 1966, p.38). It was seen as a means for the poor to enter the lowest tiers of respectability in what would become the lower middle class, much as a sinner may expect to enter the lowest tiers of heaven. *Contra* Calvinism, both states could only be achieved through rigorous self-discipline and submission to hegemonic orders, rather than inherent grace. If we agree with Weber that Calvinism is the ideology of the entrepreneurial class (and, as such, resonates rather profoundly with traditional Heiltsuk beliefs, by which wealth is the overt result of the possession of sacred power), Methodism is the ideology of factory foremen and clerks (La Violette 1961; Weber 1976).

The appearance of Methodism in British Columbia owes much to the immigration of working-class Englishmen there in the mid 19th century (see Grant 1984; Scott 2005). For men such as Charles M. Tate, who emigrated from England seeking wealth in mining and other manual labor, the situation of the Natives was comparable to that of the unreformed working class he encountered in both England and British Columbia, vulnerable to the evils of drink, gambling, and prostitution (Harkin 1997, p.102). Methodism and the disciplined life it promised was an antidote to this, one which he had seen work effectively on himself. Thus, it was with honest zeal and a desire to save these poor sinners that he approached his preaching. Along with Thomas Crosby, a contemporary missionary who hailed from a working-class background in Ontario, these qualities made him very persuasive to Native audiences (Crosby 1914).

At the level of explicit discourse, the Methodist program was undoubtedly beneficial to many. One of my most elderly informants, who was in his nineties in the 1980s spoke with great pride of his successful career working in commercial shipping. Others spoke proudly of long hours at the cannery at Rivers Inlet, which clearly required the techniques of temporal and bodily discipline taught by Methodism. Indeed, the Rivers Inlet cannery provided a conundrum and litmus test to missionaries: on the one hand, the people were freed from the panoptic surveillance of the village, and so might revert to previous form. At the same time, like children set free, they had the opportunity to demonstrate

responsibility and self-discipline. At the more implicit level of Gramscian hegemony, Methodism dovetailed with the program of settler colonialism: Methodists were taught to respect all authority, whether religious, economic, or political. As Thompson says: 'Thus at this level Methodism appears as a politically regressive, or 'stabilising,' influence, and we find some confirmation of Halévy's famous thesis that Methodism prevented revolution in England in the 1790s (Thompson 1966, p.42). Methodism was surely no Liberation Theology.

It is not necessary, of course, to posit that Methodism was consciously used as a tool of oppression by anyone in authority; in fact, like the sources Thompson quotes, the British Columbia elite were mostly highly disdainful of Methodism and its 'rabble' (Thompson 1966, p.43). However, the government implicitly recognized the role of Methodism, and other Christian denominations, in producing docile citizens in that they funded church-run residential schools, Dickensian institutions that distilled the techniques of discipline, while preparing pupils for 'industrial' occupations (Haig-Brown 1988). In fact, Methodism fulfilled several key goals of the settler colonial state: creating docile citizens and workers, eliminating the social ills of the early post-contact period, and effecting ethnocide, the erasure of traditional culture and language.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how two forms of capitalist subjectivity were introduced to the Heiltsuk in the 19th century: one, early and easily, the other, later and harder. The first subjectivity—that of the trader-consumer—was adopted easily and freely by most Native groups in North America. The consequences would be unforeseeable and catastrophic, but they were also gradual and continuous with what had preceded. Commercial relations with Whites intensified, resulting finally in dependency. The second—the working-class subjectivity—required a renunciation of key aspects of Heiltsuk identity, such as equality with Whites, traditional spiritual beliefs and practices, gender categories, and so forth. It was this subjectivity, promoted in distilled form by Methodist missionaries but which attained a broader hegemony in British Columbia of the 19th century, which 'made' the Heiltsuk working class. It is important to point out that this ideological melding of Protestant theology and working-class subjectivity was far from uncommon among Northwest Coast societies, taking even more utopian forms in Metlakatla, Alaska, as Hosmer (1999) convincingly demonstrates.

To raise the specter of 'false consciousness' is to miss the point from an ethnohistorical perspective. For the Heiltsuk, bringing in the missionaries was a deliberate act, by which they hoped to take control of their own destiny and to play a role in the new, White-dominated capitalist system they saw developing. Unlike other tribes who were overrun by White settlers, the Heiltsuk remained sufficiently isolated to resist territorial displacement (although not territorial loss). This allowed them a degree of historical agency unavailable to many Indigenous people in North America.

Heiltsuk elders I interviewed in the 1980s stressed this aspect of historical agency as part of the DNA of the culture: to adapt, to seize new opportunities, and to be proactive. None that I spoke to questioned their ancestors' decision of a century earlier, and, indeed, most viewed Methodism as part of the package of 'traditional' Heiltsuk culture. The irony for the Heiltsuk, and indeed for many rural communities, especially Indigenous ones, was that they were a working class lacking work, in a remote area that interested the metropole only as a source of raw materials or as territory through which to run a pipeline (see Menzies 2015).

Author Bio

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