

Unit 10: Video 2 Transcript

Q7: Discuss your research on street spectacles and displays of public opinion in the 19th century.

A: In the 19th century the streets of cities, particularly, or even large towns, became a place where people put on shows. They created spectacles. Very self-consciously often, usually organized, but not always. And they did so for all kinds of reasons: to celebrate, to protest, to register opinions, to affect political positions, to raise up their own status. There are many reasons people came out into the streets. But they did so very, very often.

We think sometimes of the 19th century as a time when the franchise was quite limited. Not everyone could vote. No women could vote. Aboriginal people couldn't vote. Only some men could vote in some places if they owned property, a very complex picture altogether. But we think of the limitations on the right to express your opinion, but if we look at these spectacles we come to see that all kinds of people could register their views, make their presence known, express themselves in the streets, often very colourfully. Various organizations had colourful silk banners; very often the wives of the leading men of the organizations would prepare these banners very, very carefully. And they'd be carried proudly by the men who were marching in the streets, and trying to get across some kind of message about who they were and why they were important. Why their views should be taken into account.

The Orange Order was particularly well known as an organization that wanted its views to be out there, and that had a marching tradition, that wanted to be seen in public, and they had some very, very colourful banners. They were also perhaps the best of all of the voluntary societies in having bands ready to play, accompany their demonstrations. So there'd be something lively to look at, lively music to listen to. There'd be the stomp of marching feet, and the public would come out to witness these occasions and take some kind of interest in them.

Sometimes people would oppose those who were marching and object to their presence in the streets. Sometimes forcefully by throwing mud or stones

at them or trying to block the procession from entering certain streets or areas or going past certain key buildings that were significant. This was particularly a situation for the Orange and Green in the 19th century, the Irish traditions of Protestants and Catholics who were used to taking to the streets. The Irish Catholics particularly [on] St. Patrick's Day, March the 17th; the Orangemen particularly on Orangemen's Day, the glorious 12th of July. And these were occasions when large numbers came out into the streets of either Green or Orange to show their strength in numbers, to demonstrate their support. And their opponents also came out and challenged that strength and tried to show that they weren't so influential or important.

Other organizations also took to the streets. Trade unions from an early time liked to show their strength and their respectability. They were very concerned in the 19th century not to be seen as part of the rabble, part of the lower class that couldn't be trusted. Instead they wanted to demonstrate that they were men with—who should be respected because of the skills they had, because of the productive work they did that enriched the community. They were men who were prospering from their work when they were properly paid, as they hoped they would always be. And so they dressed immaculately for the procession. Sometimes in clothing that signified their occupations, but sometimes just wearing their Sunday best in order to look as respectable as possible. They seldom met with conflict in the streets. Generally the public seemed to say the processions of the workmen are respectable, and they have a right to take to the streets in these ways on occasions.

Working men also took to the streets, though, during strikes, and very often they acted as picketers, trying to prevent businesses from functioning while a strike was under way. Very often in the 19th century the businessmen would hire strikebreakers, or what the strikers called "scabs," who would continue to work throughout the strike and try to defeat the strike by doing so. And it was the job of the strikers to prevent the scabs from getting into work or being productive. And so they would block entrances and they would shout at the scabs and insult them, calling them rats. You know, less than real men, disgusting creatures. And conflicts would sometimes erupt around these kinds of situations.

I've been looking at one strike in particular recently, a strike on the street railways of Toronto in 1886. This was a time when a private company operated the streetcars, and the streetcars were powered by horses still. And the owner of the street railway company would have nothing to do with trade unions. The Knights of Labor, one labour organization prominent in the 1880s in North America, tried to organize the street railway conductors and drivers into a union. And the owner said, I'll have none of that. He expected all his employees to sign an ironclad agreement saying they would never join a union. He wanted a union-free environment so he could run his company however he wanted. He didn't want any interference, any limitation on his power. And so the unionized workers went out on strike, a few hundred of them, and they tried to prevent scab workers hired by the company to operate the streetcars.

In the strike what's particularly interesting is that huge numbers of members of the public, all of them really, men and boys, came out supposedly to support the strikers. Great numbers of people in Toronto hated the street railway company. They thought it gouged the public. It charged too much money. Its service was erratic. Its service wasn't adequate in the suburbs and so forth. So this was an opportunity to get back at a company that wasn't at all liked. And these men and boys came out and they went nuts in the streets. The strikers were very concerned about their reputation and were very careful about behaving themselves, obeying the law, not getting involved in any violence. They certainly didn't want a riot to occur. But these other people who just showed up, who had no particular connection with the company or the union, weren't under those constraints. And they did all kinds of crazy stuff in the streets. One of their favourite things to do was to block a streetcar run by a scab. First by throwing all kinds of mud at the driver and the conductor who were outside on platforms in those days, so they weren't protected in any way by the streetcar. And then they'd grab hold of the horses and prevent the streetcar from going ahead. It was a sign of triumph when they detached the horses from the streetcar, and they'd take the horses back to the barn. And the crowds would cheer when that happened that, you know, the streetcar had been immobilized. This was a victory. But then the real victory came when the men would all gather around the streetcar and heft it up, turn it sideways and plop it down

crossways on the tracks. And that was a sign of the complete powerlessness of the company and the strength of the crowd. Their victory.