Identity, Work, and Resistance in High Places: A Study of First Nation Mohawk Ironworkers

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Abstract
Over the past 20 years there has been a growing interest in critical perspectives on workplace resistance (e.g., Braverman, 1974, Buroway, 1979; Nord & Jermier, 1994. Some of that research has focused on everyday forms of resistance in organizations (e.g., Prasad and Prasad, 1998, 2000, 2001), where resistance is deemed to be less a symptom of some “deeper pathology” than a “sensible choice made by knowing men and women” (Prasad and Prasad, 2003, p. 135). More recently (Prasad & Prasad, 2003), there has been strong interest in applying postcolonial ideas to understanding resistance, in particular Bhabha’s (1994) ideas of “mimicry”, “sly civility”, and “hybridity”, as unconscious forms of resistance that arise from the cracks, fragmentation, and inconsistencies in colonial discourse.

According to Prasad & Prasad (2002), “Postcolonial theory is based on the assertion that the project of Western colonization of the rest of the world was based upon the social and cultural construction of a fundamental ontological distinction between ‘the West’ and the ‘non-West, with the latter occupying the position of the West’s other, and serving as the social point for distilling the opposites of all those moral, ethical and aesthetic attributes that gradually accreted to constitute the very core of the West’s own self-image” (p. 61). According to Said (1979), the non-West provided the West “a contrasting image, idea, personality, experience’ (p. 1-2). As Prasad & Prasad (2002) emphasize, based on the work of Achebe (1989: 3) “colonialism sought to constitute the West itself by setting up the non-West as ‘a foil to Europe, as a place of negations…in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace would be manifest.’” (p. 61)

A list of the West/non-West dichotomy includes, for example, active/passive, adult/child, Center/Periphery, Civilized/Savage-Primitive, Complete/Lacking, Developed/Backward, Liberated/Exploited, Masculine/Feminine, Modern/Archaic, Nation/Tribe, Scientific/Superstitious, Secular/Religious, Subject/Object, Superior/Inferior, Vanguard/Followers, White (European)/Non-White (non-European) (Prasad & Prasad, 2002, p. 62). Yet the relationships among these dichotomies have often been ambiguous.

As Prasad and Prasad (2002) note, “Even though colonialism sought clearly to identify the non-West as inferior and undesirable, the non-West was also regarded in the colonial discourse as a highly desirable and prized object of Western possession. Similarly, although colonialism sought to define the non-West as weak and effeminate, it simultaneously viewed the non-West as a grave threat capable of destroying the Western world. Further, while colonialism was spurred by the moral imperative to ‘improve’ the non-West in the West’s own image, paradoxically colonialism also evinced an intense desire to preserve the
‘authenticity’ of the non-West, usually in terms of safeguarding some changeless essence of non-Western cultures” (p. 62).

From within the tensions and inconsistencies in colonial discourse and dichotomies between West and non-West, powerful forms of local resistance, sometimes unconscious, can arise. For example, similar to Fanon’s (1967) study of French colonials in Black Skin, White Masks, “mimic men”, according to Bhabha, were those Indians during British rule who were capable of learning English and taking on English “opinions, morals, and intellect” (McLeod, 2000: 54) without becoming English. As a result, according to Bhabha, they had the power to “menace the colonizers because they threaten(ed) to disclose the ambivalence of the discourse of colonialism which the use of stereotypes anxiously tries to conceal. Hearing their language returning through the mouths of the colonized, the colonizers are faced with the worrying threat of resemblance between colonizer and colonized….It is a source of anti-colonial discourse in that it presents an unconquerable challenge to the entire structure of the discourse of colonialism” (McLeod, 2000: 54-55).

This paper examines what happens when a First Nation people in North America becomes expert in a skilled occupation which is not only well paid and highly valued but which mimics those qualities of the West that are most cherished. It examines how this form of mimicry serves as a basis for creating an ambivalence of identity that enables them to live more freely within a colonial system.

In this regard, this paper examines the First Nation Mohawk ironworkers, referred to by some as “Skywalkers” (Hill, 1987) who, since the construction of an iron bridge from Montreal to Kahnawake in 1850, have been employed as ironworkers in the construction of tall buildings, bridges, and other large construction projects throughout North America and Canada. While this work has been an important source of employment and income to First Nation Mohawk people of the United States and Canada for 150 years, at the level of identity, it has also mimicked many highly positive qualities normally attributed to the colonizers – courageousness, skill, masculinity, competence, superiority, and height (or working in high places). This mimicry has served the Mohawk ironworkers in a colonial context by helping to create an identity that could “slide ambivalently between the polarities of similarity and difference” (McLeod, 2000: p. 53), making them less prone to being controlled and stereotyped.

The paper also examines ways in which the Mohawk ironworkers have striven to preserve this identity in the face of continuing efforts to stereotype by, in part, using disclaimers and irony in describing their work. For example, it is interesting to read the many apparently self-deferential comments that Mohawk ironworkers have made about the nature of their work, as if to counteract the inclination in colonial discourse to romanticize these “Skywalkers” or attribute their success in high places to any “in-born native” traits. In one interview, a Mohawk ironworker was quoted to say that, contrary to what many people believed, ironwork was just “a job”, a dangerous job, and that, like everyone else, he was afraid to work at such heights. Yet, in another quote, a different ironworker spoke of the beauty of “mountain building” in constructing these buildings and of being able to see so much of the land that his ancestors once freely roamed (some of which remains in the Federal courts as land claims). Calling the construction of tall skyscrapers (the epitome of modern Western technology and society) “mountain building” (an obvious reference to importance of Nature in religion and folklore) is ironic to say the least. It emphasizes the role of First Nation people in this creative endeavor – the building of modern skyscrapers – yet turns it into an act of Nature
with themselves as important agents. This act of resistance would not have been possible, in my view, had their identity not been located somewhere between colonizer and the colonized, between mythological Skywalker and highly skilled, nuts-and-bolts construction worker.

Lastly, the paper will contrast the First Nation Mohawk ironworkers’ notion of “building mountains” with the notion of “conquering mountains” typified by over 100 years of high altitude mountaineering in the West. Where the process of working in high places to build man-made (Western) “mountains” has served to unfix or free the identity of First Nation Mohawk ironworkers, the colonial project of conquering mountains has served the West (and the Western imagination) by locating and fixing Western identity in colonial ideals.

Mountaineering for the West has such powerful connotations for identity – perseverance, skill, success, courage, know-how, masculinity, to name a few. Yet it is only by conquering – some might say, consuming – the mountain that these traits are proven to others and oneself. Saying that you have climbed K2 or Everest or McKinley serves as an imprimatur, a status symbol that suggests your worthiness and skill as a Westerner. It is an act of completion for many, for restoration of narcissistic wounding (Elmes & Barry, 1999). By contrast, building mountains for First Nation Mohawk ironworkers, means something entirely different, yet benefits from the Western association of bravery and skill with working in high places.

References