



## Tree planting as neo-tribalism: Ritual, risk boundaries, and group effervescence

Kevin Walby<sup>a,\*</sup>, Dale C. Spencer<sup>b,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Winnipeg, Department of Criminal Justice, Centennial Hall, 3rd Floor, 515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Carleton University, Law & Legal Studies, Canada

<sup>c</sup> Department of Law and Legal Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6, Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Tree planting is an arduous form of summer work taking place in remote locations across Canada and elsewhere. Planters live in camps during the planting season and work in crews, pushing one another to put as many trees in the ground as possible. We rely on Michel Maffesoli's (1996) ideas on neo-tribalism to examine the group dynamics of tree planting camps and crews, and the emotions of participants, as well as proxemics. Drawing from interviews with tree planters, we conceive of the work of planting as well as celebratory camp revelry as ritualistic. These rituals generate mutual focus on and shared mood concerning risky activities. Outcomes are group solidarity and standards of morality – the basis of a neo-tribal risk culture – that communicate knowledge about how to encounter, experience, construct and attenuate risk while working in the bush. We conclude with a discussion of how this focus on group life, ritual and related emotions contributes to social theories of risk.

### 1. Introduction

Every summer in Canada, tens of thousands of people (mostly age 18–30) sign up to work as tree planters. Primarily during the summer months, the planters travel to remote areas where massive forests once stood. Bare, logged expanses of land have replaced the wooded areas, and logging companies hire planting companies (who in turn hire planters) to reforest. All summer, planters are trucked into remote locations, where they pitch tents, work long hours nearly every day all summer, through swarms of bugs, piles of felled trees, and swamps, all to hand feed small saplings into the ground in the hopes that the baby trees will grow. Planters are paid per tree, and as such, planters push themselves as hard as they can to make as much money as possible over the course of the season. The land that planters work on is filled with peril: sharp sticks and uneven land leading to twisted ankles, bears and bugs of all sorts, dehydration, and exhaustion. Trees grow to be harvested by logging companies, and tree planting companies essentially harvest the labour of planters. This is a “treadmill of production” (Schnaiberg, 1980) approach to tree planting, and planters are on the bottom rung, beating up their bodies in the bush, far away from the hustle and bustle of cities.

In this paper, we examine the groups that planters form during their summers at work, the solidarity that arises, the emotions involved, the rituals planters partake in, and how this contributes to their sense of self

and their perception of the world around them. We draw from Maffesoli's (1996) work on neo-tribes to explain these group dynamics. Maffesoli argues that it is the group – neither the individual, nor “society” – that is the primary unit for sociality in contemporary life, and that participation in these groups (or “neo-tribes”) energizes people, creating a group effervescence that is binding. This provides them with a persona to fulfill and contributes meaning to their life. Neo-tribes create a communal ethic through the “simplest of foundations: warmth, companionship – physical contact with one another” (pg. 16), even while at work. We apply Maffesoli's (1996) writings to the case of tree planting to explore issues of emotional effervescence, rituals, group feeling and proxemics.

Tree planting is an exciting experience for young people but it is also risky work. To extend Maffesoli's (1996) writings we explore how neo-tribes become oriented toward shared objects and rituals regarding risk taking, so that they become what Lash (2000) calls “risk cultures”. Like a neo-tribe, a risk culture is spasmodic and based on quasi-membership. Similar to Lupton and Tulloch (2002), we are interested in risk and everyday life, but instead of taking the individual and their biography as our focus we consider the emotional intensity of the tree planting group to act as a corrective to the risk literature which has tended to reproduce the problematic individual-society dichotomy (Beck, 1992, 1999; Giddens, 1990). Like Parker and Stanworth (2005), we are unsatisfied with the individuation supposition that underscores

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [k.walby@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:k.walby@uwinnipeg.ca) (K. Walby).

the risk society thesis (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1990). We argue that emotions concerning risk can have a solidarity-producing potential. We explain the relationship between rituals planters engage in as part of planting neo-tribes, and also examine risk boundaries (Monaghan et al., 2005) as limits of risk that are an affront to group rituals. Yet these limits are overcome because of the emotional bond planters have to their group. This article's significance lies in that it examines the complexity of risk in work activities not considered part of mainstream forms of labour, and the complexity of group formation in a world all too often characterized as purely individuated.

First, we explain the role of rituals and emotions in neo-tribes, and clarify Maffesoli's neo-tribal understanding of small groups, emotions and space. Second, we describe our method. Third, we draw from tree planter narratives about how people experience risk, group life, and their bodies and emotions in relation to tree planting crews as solidarity groups. We conclude with a discussion of how this focus on group life, ritual and related emotions contributes to social theories of risk.

## 2. Theorizing neo-tribalism and tree planting

Contrary to views that understand contemporary life as characterized by individualization (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2000), Maffesoli uses the metaphor of *tribus* to discuss how mass society has fragmented into smaller, interdependent groups. People perform certain personas in these groups, and the constitution of these groups results in a feeling of belonging (the affectual nebula) as well as the creation of heuristic communication networks. Communication occurs in overlapping networks of sociality, friendship, chatting and shared time spent on shared activities. Emotions serve to bind subjects in group formation (Maffesoli, 1996: 28; see also, Spencer, 2011). Maffesoli (1996: 162) avers that focus on neo-tribes, how they move, how they form and break up, is the footing for an interpretive sociology of vitalism that keeps pace with the frenetic energy and orgiastic qualities of everyday life. This group life exposes the error of the individualist doxa of the traditional individual-society dichotomy and shows the subject utterly needs the emotional community generated by subjects in groups. Research on small groups has found groups can generate an intense set of relations and “emotional climate” or atmosphere inside and outside of work (Julmi, 2017; Whittle et al., 2012; Anderson, 2009; Vraa, 1974).

Neo-tribalism is marked by “fluidity, periodic assemblies and dispersals” (Maffesoli, 1993: xv; St John, 2018; Xue et al., 2018). Groups are spasmodic, as individuals are always attaching to and deserting from the group. Members do not contribute equally to the group, nor do they experience the group feeling equally. For instance, tree planters are always coming and going from different camps and crews, and fulfill different personas within each. There are generalized and differentiated personas. The generalized persona is that of the determined, committed, assiduous resolute worker, and this applies to men and women, planters and crew bosses. Those who do not fulfill the generalized persona will not be able to handle this work. There are also differentiated personas, such as “highballers”, who plant the most trees per day and per season, and are well-honoured. There are also “rookies” and “schwacks”, who do not plant many trees or plant poor quality trees, and are consequently ridiculed. Nevertheless, these sorts of “symbolic characteristics” (Kriwoken and Hardy, 2018: 167) create an ecology that forms the sense of self and generates experiences of emotions (Spencer and Walby, 2013).

Neo-tribes offer an “emotional community” to those drawn to the group (Maffesoli, 1996, chap. 1). An emotional community allows for participants in the group a “process of identification” that engenders the “attachments” which facilitate “common bonds” (Maffesoli, 1996: 15). This is a “veritable re-enchantment with the world” for neo-tribe participants. Re-enchantment creates “networks of solidarity” based on shared experiences and emotions (Maffesoli, 1996: 72; Maffesoli, 2016; Dawes, 2016; Evans, 1997). The emotional community exists

temporally, but also defines a symbolic territory (also see Heath, 2004). Collins (2004: 48–49) calls this affectual nebula “group effervescence”. They share emotional experiences in relation to this activity. The outcomes are feelings of group solidarity, “shared sentiment” (Kriwoken and Hardy, 2018: 167), enthusiasm and emotional charging. There are participation boundaries for outsiders. There are many activities tree planters engage in during and after work that contribute to building this group effervescence.

The group orientation ritualizes the concrete practice through which an emotional community entrenches a sense of solidarity in participants. The group expends energy in (re)creating itself, and this expenditure takes place through rituals (Maffesoli, 1996: 16–17). As Maffesoli (1996) puts it, rituals are “repetitive and therefore comforting”. Rituals grant a sense of ethics and standards for conduct, and measures by which to judge those in the group as well as group outsiders. Maffesoli argues “through the variety of routine or everyday gestures the community is reminded it is a whole,” so that ritual “serves as an anamnesis of solidarity” (pg. 17). Moreover, ritual creates the symbolic aspects of the shared territory. Below we analyze the ritualistic risk taking and pleasure seeking that tree planters engage in and how these communicate the character of the group to the participants, in turn creating communal allegiance.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of neo-tribes is Maffesoli's notion of proxemics, which involves a focus on place and context. Proxemics is used to account for both the communication engendered by neo-tribal networks as well as the mutual aid that such communication facilitates (Maffesoli, 1996: 23; St John, 2018). As Maffesoli (emphasis in original, 1996: 141) puts it, “[M]utual aid in all its forms is a *duty*, the linchpin of a code of honour, is often unstated, regulating tribalism”. In addition, it is the moments of corporeal co-presence among network members that contribute to the durability of proxemical concatenations (Spencer and Walby, 2013). The binding by group effervescence and action through ritual demands transformations in how people view the world and ultimately themselves.

Maffesoli (1996) and those who have taken up his work (Kriwoken and Hardy, 2018; Bennett, 1999) have focused on consumer groups as neo-tribes and consumption (of music, of commodities) as the ritualistic practices engaged in. In this study of tree planting, we focus on a neo-tribe oriented toward voluntary risk taking as a mode of work. Groups of tree planters, based on quasi-membership that develop around common risk objects, with shared orientations toward those objects, form what Lash (2000) calls risk cultures. Tree planting is a neo-tribal risk culture in as much as it is oriented around a risky form of work but is still spasmodic in terms of group character. The risks in tree planting are numerous, and range from injuries during planting (sticks in the eye and through the leg, twisted ankles, tendonitis) to pesticide exposure, to animal attacks, vehicular accidents, and more. Because of its repetitive nature (imagine stepping, cutting the earth open with a shovel, bending over, placing a tree in the earth, packing the hole, 3000 or more times a day) planting is ritualistic (imagine 60 planters on a clear cut conducting the same motions in the same place all day, watching and competing with each other to make sure they are doing it right and keeping pace) and emotionally binding (solidarity is built through trying to keep up with each other, rivalry against other groups, and pleasure seeking on days off).

## 3. Methods and data

The research project uses open-ended interviews with 26 tree planters who have planted in locations across Canada to investigate

<sup>1</sup> Our framework has much in common with the literature on greedy institution theory, which examines how organizations that demand intense emotional, physical, and intellectual performance are able to generate voluntary commitment and loyalty from participants (Cox, 2016; Puddephatt, 2008).

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