

Class Formation in Canada: Some Recent Studies

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to bourgeois order. Slum children were consigned to Canadian farms first and foremost to save them from immorality, insobriety, and indolence. Of course, the ideological emphasis on hard work, self-reliance, and independence among the labouring poor has a modern echo in Thatcherism and Reaganism, and the weight of this recent literature on child-saving must give us pause. It suggests that such a response to the dislocations of capitalist industrialization in Britain and Canada was too often brutal, insensitive, and, paradoxically, disruptive of the one social institution revered by the child-savers — the family.

CRAIG HERON

Class Formation in Canada: Some Recent Studies

FOR SOME YEARS NOW the winds of change have been sweeping through the staidly conservative corridors of Canadian working class history. A revisionism that draws upon the contemporary resuscitation of Marxist historiography is bringing Canadian history into the creative mainstream of social history elsewhere and several recent books show distinct signs of a fertile familiarity with intellectual currents from across the sea and south of the border. It would seem that these tendencies have created alarm within certain elements of the Canadian historical profession — which has not possessed much of a Marxist tradition — and the practitioners of revisionism have had to contend with a fiercely political response masquerading as scholarly discussion.¹ Ultimately, of course, such distractions are of relatively little significance and can in no way diminish the contribution this revisionism will make to the re-construction of Canadian working class history. In common with other parts of the English-speaking world, a major concern of that re-construction has been the question of class formation. All of the books under consideration here reflect the necessity to grapple theoretically and conceptually with the relationships between culture, class, work and politics. And if the answers arrived at are in some respects problematic, this merely reflects the uncertainties that characterize the questions wherever they are asked.

Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer address the process of class formation most centrally, although in slightly different ways. Palmer's *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860-1914* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979) reflects the "culturalist" influence of E.P. Thompson in its identification of the struggle within the culture of the working class as the place where class is made. And this leads him into fascinating discussions of the associational life of the workshop

1 Kenneth McNaught, "E.P. Thompson vs. Harold Logan: Writing about Labour and the Left in the 1970s", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXII, 2 (June 1981), pp. 141-168.

and the wider moral economy that marked the Canadian working class until the end of the 19th century. In *Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism, 1867-1892* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980), Kealey consciously follows Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in his attempt to furnish us with a Canadian counterpart in which the working class figure as actors in the dialectical interplay of culture, politics and industry that composed the process of class formation. But Kealey's emphasis is ultimately more political than Palmer's and the internal dynamic of labour politics occupies much of his wide-ranging attention. In the final analysis however, the similarities between Kealey and Palmer are more important. Both see the period between c. 1860 to the early 20th century as a time of transition whose major dynamic consisted in the breaching of what Palmer calls the "culture of control" by the new political economy of rationalized management. There consequently emerged a class politics and organization manifested most clearly by growing trade union organization, the solidaristic appeal of the Knights of Labor and the glimmering vision of socialism.

Palmer and Kealey locate the roots of that transition in the breakthrough into industrial capitalism in the 1850s; Palmer is particularly good on defining the labour process characteristics of the initial phase of manufacture and Kealey is superb on the industrial and political economy dimensions of the period in Toronto. Both also identify the early 1870s and particularly the nine hours strike led by the Toronto printers as marking the end of this initial phase, the beginning of a national trade union movement, the first crackings of the producer alliance and the initial stirrings of a distinctively working-class politics. Both seem to agree that it is to the labour process that we must look for the dynamic development of working class consciousness and Palmer in particular is quite explicit in stating that attacks on the craft culture of control forced the making of a Canadian working class. Kealey devotes more attention to the politics of the transition but the absence of any dramatically new political configuration in the 1890s makes the concluding episode of his account anti-climactic. Indeed, both Palmer and Kealey leave unanswered the key question that follows from their analysis: why did socialism fail to emerge from the intense conflict and militancy that they demonstrate existed in this period? How could producer ideology reproduce itself so easily after 1872 in the form of partyism? The attention both devote to the Knights of Labor seems to provide the *de facto* explanation — especially in Kealey where the personality squabbles, tensions and sectionalist rivalries are recounted in detail. But one senses at this point a retreat into the conventional focus upon internal labour politics which coexists uneasily with earlier effort to break into new areas. Palmer is not obliged to confront this problem; his focus upon the decline of the autonomous workman, the new division of labour and the triumph of scientific management allows him to chronicle the ultimately successful struggle by capital for control over the labour process. But here, too, there is a void; for if the period was transitional, one would like to know what kind of culture replaced that of the autonomous work-

man. Both emphasize the adaptability of cultural institutions like the Orange Order and other voluntary associations that survived from the preceding moral economy, but how precisely they were integrated or diminished in the new mass culture of the early 20th century is not addressed.

Both Kealey and Palmer are concerned primarily to uncover the autonomy of working class life and activity, to explore anthropologically the details of class existence. At times, one feels, they elevate this discovery beyond explanation and employ categories like "culture" and "class" more as descriptive terms than analytical categories so that the contingent relationships between "culture", "economics", and "politics" are not made clear from these books. The relationship between the associational culture of the workplace and social voluntary associations, for example, is plausibly assumed rather than demonstrated. The interplay of class remains more an abstraction than a core analytical organizing principle. The conceptual looseness in these accounts may be illustrated by the usage of the notion of transition. The idea of transition clearly implies a movement to a new plane of activity that can be more fully demonstrated for economic organization than it can for culture and consciousness. Even more, the character of the pre-transition phase tends to be left undefined except as a unitary culture of control and independence which was complete and unchanging until it fractured into the uncertain, sectionalized culture that seems to have characterized the post-transition period. Within the period of transition itself, the linearity of labour process change is not qualified. Some trades — the printers, for example — were able to successfully adapt to changing market and industrial structures and, by surrendering local autonomy, retain their culture of independence. Others, like coopers, saw their craft status destroyed by the same kinds of forces that printers were able to control. Both Kealey and Palmer regard the unity of the transition as residing in the de-skilling of craft. This period, it is assumed and implied, marked the final demise of "craft". But a consideration of Wallace Clement's *Hardrock Mining: Industrial Relations and Technological Change at Inco* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1981) leads us to consider the difficulties with this.

Clement's study demonstrates how until very recently the labour process in mining retained many of the characteristics of the petty proprietor phase of the initial frontier development — although it is not at all clear that nickel mining ever passed through that stage. Commercial capital soon dominated market relations and rapidly crowded out the early risk-taking individual entrepreneurs; but capitalist influence over the actual production process was more tentative and could hardly be otherwise when men saw their foreman perhaps once or twice a day. The independence of the miner, whether hard or softrock worker, rested upon this universal feature of the industry and formed the bedrock of the militancy that characterized the group everywhere. Of course, independence was subject to the influence of market forces which it was increasingly beyond the ability of miners to modify by restriction of production. But the parallel control by capital of the production process has become a potential reality only in the

last 20 years as changes in techniques, allied most notably with computer technology and the deployment of a new generation of machines within the mines, threaten to revolutionize the division of labour in a manner without precedent in the industry. New training programmes, for example, formulated and controlled by management are emerging to create highly specialized classes of labour without the mobility or breadth of task knowledge of previous generations. In short, Clement argues, the craft of mining is now being destroyed and replaced by a labour process populated by de-skilled, highly specialized machine operators.

Clement has written a very interesting book, touched as the best industrial sociology now is by a sense of history — another result, one might note of the spreading influence of the Marxist tradition. He recognizes that the labour process is a social process, that the use of technology is essentially a product of the political economy of capital and labour and possesses no autonomous force of its own. But there is, perhaps, not enough of an historical sense to the book or, rather, the wrong sort of historical sense. Clement suffers from what one may call the Braverman syndrome: the tendency to see “craft” as some sort of ideal construction, unchanging in time until it is destroyed irrevocably by capitalist intervention.² This syndrome is historically specific only in the most absolutist sense and contains the danger of identifying every change in the labour process as the end of craft skill. It is true that mining is something of a special case in the sense that it has not experienced waves of innovation and alteration that fall short of the cataclysmic: at the other end of the spectrum is the case of the boot and shoe workers where the fracturing of “craft” was spread over many decades. But the point remains that the paradigm informing Clement’s book is one of a labour process that remained unchanged until the present day and, as a consequence, there is no sense of how the frontiers of control or the composition of “craft” changed back and forth over time. It is clearly true that a new stage in the mining labour process is now underway — not merely, one should note, in Canada, but also in British coal mining where computer technology is about to make centralized production monitoring a reality. But this is not the first application of rationalized managerial control to mining: in Britain, the shift from bord-and-pillar to long-wall represented an earlier stage and the variety of techniques that Clement details between the older and new mines in Canada suggest the same is true of nickel mining.

Changes in the division of labour, whether associated with machinery or not, do not possess the finality often attributed to them. The de-skilling process is fractured and incomplete, and produces a new configuration of skills which then form the basis for a re-constituted “craft” control. The printers are a particularly apposite example of that: they have survived at least two previous waves of de-skilling and only now appear about to succumb to the complete replacement

2 Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974).

of their craft basis by the computer.³ And if we are to regard the late 19th century as the critical breakup of craft control, how are we to accommodate the continued presence of some sort of "craft" amongst, for example, the miners? What this suggests, of course, is that de-skilling is not completed at a certain point but rather is a process of making and re-making. Given the close association between the productive process and the composition of class, the same applies to the process of class formation. And this brings us back to Kealey and Palmer whose sense of a transition is defined by the same unilinear demise of the autonomous workman. The fractured incompleteness of this development, the problematic of what it was transitional to, haunts both Kealey and Palmer's books especially at the political level and for which an explanation is lacking. At one point Kealey notes the combined and uneven course of economic development but does not carry this through to explain, for example, the transformation of producer ideology into bargained partyism.

On the other hand, it is obviously true that certain periods are marked by the clustering of changes whose tensions and conflicts resonate throughout the cultural and political structures. There are periods of crisis, when the social and political bases of consensus are undermined and the business of politics is dominated by the search for a new basis of legitimacy. Although the notion of crisis is absent from Palmer and Kealey's books, it is obvious that the years from c. 1880 were such a crisis period in the way that the pre-1870s was not. In this sense Canada was clearly in transition but there was nothing peculiar to Canada in that. A final problem with the Kealey-Palmer analysis is that it does not explain the Canadian peculiarities of either the process of class formation in that country or the nature of the working class that resulted. Toronto and Hamilton workers responded to industrial capitalism in much the same way as workers elsewhere. There are striking parallels of detail with Britain, even down to similar events in the same years, and the same is probably true of the United States. The last great hours-of-labour disputes occur around the same time; bakers were on strike in London shortly after their compatriots in Hamilton; Juntas controlled the Canadian and British labour movements in the early 1870s; less surprisingly, perhaps, trade union legislation in Canada followed closely upon the British pattern; even the Taff Vale decision stretched across the Atlantic and was used in the same way; similar changes were occurring in union government structures, although under a slightly different mix of stimuli; the same elements characterized the "new unionism", although there was something of a time lag in Canada and not a perfect comparison between the newly militant groups. Only the Knights of Labor formed something of a contrast which finds no parallel in Britain. The point is not that the parallels themselves are of

3 Although there is considerable evidence on this theme in Sally Zerker, *The Rise and Fall of the Toronto Typographical Union 1832-1972: A Case Study of Foreign Domination* (Toronto, 1982), the main focus of this informatively nationalistic account is on the subordination of the Toronto union to the American-dominated International Typographical Union.

much significance but that they suggest how this stage of productive reorganization was an international phenomenon, even in countries not engaged in the response to industrial capitalism. Where then did Canadian peculiarity lie; what kind of working class was created in Canada and what was different about its emergent class structures and organization?

These questions are not answered by Kealey and Palmer and it is perhaps unfair to suggest that they should be, but they are prompted by a further consideration that flows from the approach to these two stimulating books. Since Thompson's classic statement of class formation in England, most scholars have followed his lead in focusing upon the internal dynamic of working class culture as the location of class struggle and as the agency of the "making" process. The latter is increasingly problematic. Focusing upon productive relations as the source of class formation means ultimately that we have to expand our definitions beyond the autonomy of working class culture. In particular, the roles of employers and the state have to be entered into the process in a way that goes beyond mere oppositional obduracy. There has been a tendency (to which this reviewer has also contributed) to accentuate what was at the same time the most exciting and the weakest part of Thompson's formulation — that "the working class made itself" — instead of asking how the other party of the couplet — "as much as it was made" — was to be fitted into the process. One consideration of enormous importance in this respect, and one which has always created problems for Thompson, is how to integrate the agency of the state into the process; what, in other words, is the relation between class formation and political economy?

Although Kealey has much of interest to say about politics, the issue of the state is the central focus of Paul Craven, *'An Impartial Umpire': Industrial Relations and the Canadian State, 1900-1911* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980), a masterly study of the political economy of industrial relations at the turn of the century. The nature of the Canadian state and its politics were conditioned by its early reliance on a staples economy and the ambiguous nature of its colonial heritage. To move away from the former by developing the home market and industrialcapital risked alienating the predominant mercantile fraction of the ruling class. Two consequences followed: in the first place, protectionism and later the National Policy were sold to the working class in the form of a cross-class producer ideology which from the 1850s established the legitimacy of the working class as a factor in politics; second, the state was seen as the essential arbiter of class relations much earlier than it was in Britain and in sharp contrast to the United States where manufacturers tended to engage in collective, self-help voluntarist associations to further their ends. Thus, unlike Britain, and from the moment of its organized emergence labour, in its turn, assumed its right of access to lobby the state. Thus, during the 1870s the quite unsavoury and open bidding between the two parties for labour support was on a completely different scale from the secretive and furtive bribery of a few labour leaders by the Liberals in the British election of 1868. When the bargain struck

with the Tories in Toronto in 1878 was shown to be hollow, labour quickly and easily demonstrated its independence and put up the first working class candidate. Neither independent labourism nor socialism ever got off the ground in Canada, however, and Paul Craven's book suggests the relationship between this and the particular structures, institutions and traditions of the Canadian state.

Beginning with the Conciliation Act of 1900 and culminating in the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act of 1907, a body of practice and legislation endowed the Canadian state with a wide-ranging responsibility for the arbitration of industrial relations. Craven argues convincingly that the genesis of this development lay in the response of the state to the new political economy of the late 19th century. The dilemma posed by the breakdown of the previous balance of social forces and the emergence of a new stage of productive relations and social organization was common to all industrial nations at this time. What is important is not so much the fact that labour legislation in Canada was more advanced than in either the United States or Britain, nor that Canada was the first to appoint a cabinet-level minister of labour, but that the form assumed by the state in relation to labour was the product of specifically Canadian history and development. The contrast of Britain here is especially striking because it was only under the intense pressures of the First World War that the British state abandoned its aloofness from industrial relations and even then the acceptance of responsibility was partial; and in the United States the state still assumes few formal responsibilities in this area. In Canada, however, there were strong precedents for the conception of the state as a place where divergent interests could be reconsidered; it had earlier performed such a role in the tension between mercantile and industrial capital over fiscal policy, and neither capital nor labour possessed inhibitions about lobbying or invoking state aid. In the mother country there was nothing embedded in culture or practice that allowed the state to be viewed as an open, accessible, or impartial, umpire. Possession of these attributes provided the Canadian state with much greater flexibility to respond to the challenges of a culture in conflict, and the wide area of manoeuvre was fully exploited by William Lyon Mackenzie King who built upon past precedent to create and expand a state-sponsored industrial relations system.

King was the key person in the story and Craven is particularly sophisticated in his treatment of the Liberal politician as an "organic intellectual" who could respond creatively to a crisis of legitimacy thanks to his immersion in the social gospel and new economic history of Arnold Toynbee and the neo-classical economy of W.S. Jevons which acquainted him with the new duty of the state to foster order, efficiency and the community interest. The state as guardian of the "public interest" was the core of King's social philosophy. On his appointment to the Department of Labour in 1900 he worked vigorously to expand the hitherto limited functions of the department and assumed unasked the role of mediator in the general interest. "Essential industries" (mainly utilities) were a

special target of the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act and the only area where the voluntarist and conciliation bias was abandoned in favour of compulsory arbitration. In practice, the identification of the state as community guardian meant that equitable treatment of capital and labour was impossible because the only interest of the public — at least as defined by King — was dispute resolution. Issues that impeded this end (and particularly in this period recognition disputes) were seen as obstacles to be bypassed rather than confronted. Similarly, bargaining tended to be replaced by mediation and Craven makes the point that this historically has been the case on the railroad system where the “public” interest was most critical and most evident. In a sense, how well the specific Act of 1907 worked is hardly the point: Craven makes it quite obvious that King frequently ignored the investigative limits that supposedly confined the state’s function. More central were the custom and practice that King built up of using the state as an “impartial umpire”. In reality, it was no such thing; King’s mediation of the western coal strikes was used to weaken the syndicalist union, and to strengthen the “partyist” leadership of the respectable United Mine Workers; but even so he did nothing to secure recognition. Similarly, and most notoriously, mediation in the Grand Trunk Railway strike of 1910 consisted of King devising compromises and then selling them to the union as hard-won concessions from the flinty C.M. Hays.

Part of the (Canadian?) peculiarity of the system was the way it perfectly reflected the re-formulated liberalism of late 19th century social progressivism. There were no hints of corporatism in the house that King built; it was very significant that he did not develop various precedents for setting up permanent machinery of conciliation but retained an ad hoc flexibility which rested upon the unsystematic mediation of the Minister. How far this reflected the prior character of the Canadian state as a liberal reconciler rather than a corporatizing synthesizer of competing interest groups, or how far it reflected King’s own ideological predilections is unclear. Nor, does Craven sufficiently locate the significance of this period for later industrial relations structures; he ends somewhat artificially with the resounding defeat of the Liberals in the wake of the Grand Trunk strike in 1911. Nevertheless, these are minor quibbles: as a study in the political economy of industrial relations this is a model that industrial sociologists and historians everywhere could well attend to, for it surely demonstrates the relevance of political economy to class formation.

The Canadian working class was formed in response to industrial capitalism in the context of a political economy that already contained the ingredients for its integration and, unlike the British working class, it did not have to struggle, manoeuvre and bargain to gain political respectability. Politicians and industrial capitalists like Isaac Buchanan rushed, as it were, to greet this new beast instead of circling warily around its cage, darting in occasionally to test its uncertain temper. Indeed the very question of integration hardly arose and did not have to be fought for: the political culture posed few obstacles; only the culture of control had to be dissolved. The crisis of legitimacy threatened by the demise of

the culture of control and the rise of working class militancy could be resolved by smoothly adjusting the continuities of the state to the realities of change. Taken together, then, Kealey, Palmer and Craven point the way to an understanding of the process of class formation that transcends the boundaries of each individual book and they deserve to join the growing number of works that promise to move us beyond the limits of E.P. Thompson's original formulation.⁴

RICHARD PRICE

4 Aside from E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), the following recent books may be noted for their useful contributions to the study of class formation: John Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974); Dennis Smith, *Conflict and Compromise: Class Formation in English Society, 1830-1914* (London, 1982); David Gordon, Richard Edwards, Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers* (New York, 1982); Craig Calhoun, *The Question of Class Struggle* (Chicago, 1982); Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1979).