

Historical Influences on Contemporary Local Politics: The Case of Winnipeg

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Article abstract

This article argues that the claim that "the General Strike was the fundamental determinant in the modern political history of Winnipeg" is incorrect, not only because the claim cannot be substantiated properly with evidence, but because more extensive historical analysis suggests that civic boosterism is a better candidate for the accolade of "fundamental determinant" than the 1919 Strike. An alternative interpretation of the nature and significance of the Strike is provided, and civic boosterism is argued to be a good example of "the third face of power" proposed by Steven Lukes — that is, a dominant cultural value of a particular political economy. As such, the concept may have more widespread application as well as better summarizing the dominant influences in Winnipeg's civic political history.

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P.H. Wichern

Résumé/Abstract

L'auteur de cet article soutient qu'il est faux de prétendre que «la grève générale a été le facteur déterminant dans l'histoire politique moderne de Winnipeg,» d'une part, parce que cette assertion ne peut pas s'appuyer sur des preuves suffisantes et d'autre part, parce qu'une analyse historique plus poussée semble indiquer que le boosterism serait davantage un facteur déterminant que la grève de 1919. L'auteur donne son interprétation de la nature et de la portée de la grève et soutient que le boosterism illustre bien la «troisième facette du pouvoir» proposée par Steven Lukes, c'est-à-dire, une valeur culturelle dominante d'un système politique donné. Le concept comme tel peut très bien s'appliquer aux influences dominantes de l'histoire politique de Winnipeg et même être applicable à d'autres événements.

This article argues that the claim that "the General Strike was the fundamental determinant in the modern political history of Winnipeg" is incorrect, not only because the claim cannot be substantiated properly with evidence, but because more extensive historical analysis suggests that civic boosterism is a better candidate for the accolade of "fundamental determinant" than the 1919 Strike. An alternative interpretation of the nature and significance of the Strike is provided, and civic boosterism is argued to be a good example of "the third face of power" proposed by Steven Lukes — that is, a dominant cultural value of a particular political economy. As such, the concept may have more widespread application as well as better summarizing the dominant influences in Winnipeg's civic political history.

As important to a political scientist as the nature of the past is its relation to the nature of contemporary political phenomena. It is, therefore, important for those who concern themselves with historical phenomena and contemporary urban politics to evaluate carefully both the nature of claims made regarding such relationships, and the various possibilities regarding alternative explanations. This article attempts to fulfill these responsibilities in regard to the claim that "the General Strike of 1919 was the fundamental determinant in the modern political history of Winnipeg."¹ Although the evaluation made here focuses on the treatment of Winnipeg's history in relation to its present local politics, the analysis may be helpful in alerting scholars to general themes and problems in this important facet of local political studies.

This essay will argue that examination of all the available historical evidence reveals that the ethos of "civic boosterism" is a much better candidate for the title of "fundamental determinant" in Winnipeg's modern political history than the 1919 Strike, and that subsequent "Citizen-Labour" conflicts were always pursued within a consensus on the primary value of continued urban growth and the desirability of promoting private economic development as a basis for sound local government. Even the significance of the Strike as a symbol may be questioned, both on grounds of re-occurrence (the next

strike of civic employees in Winnipeg was by the bus drivers in 1976), and because it can be argued that the actual strike itself was a "cause" of subsequent patterns of local politics only in the sense of being a stimulus to formalize existing patterns of political behaviour by political organization. The remainder of this article explores various challenges to the Strike thesis, concluding with political economy concepts which better account for both the "civic boosterism" and Strike-related features of Winnipeg's political history, as well as the state of contemporary politics.

I

The basic argument of the Strike thesis is that the Winnipeg General Strike revealed basic class divisions and antagonisms which were organized and expressed in subsequent local politics by a succession of Citizen and Labour aldermen (along with organizations supporting them). According to J.E. Rea, and others who adopt this thesis, the Strike polarized Winnipeg civic politics by producing two groups who consistently opposed each other on a majority of issues being voted upon by roll call votes from 1919 to 1975. The research data used included the characteristics of the aldermen and their supporters, in addition to patterns of voting on all City Council roll call votes in every second year from 1921 to 1975 (as recorded in the Council *Minutes*).² In a previous article on this research, I reviewed the technical problems and limitations of the data used in that research.³ Among the

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problems regarding the polarized voting were the observations that Council roll calls had to be requested by Councillors, and only those so requested appear in the *Minutes*; that in current politics the infrequently requested, recorded, cohesive roll call votes mask general non-polarized patterns of interaction and decision-making — much more akin to “log rolling” than “class conflict”; and that there is good evidence for this pattern having prevailed both before and since the Strike. At a minimum, much more evidence than is presently available in the research being studied would be necessary to conclude that Winnipeg local politics since 1919 is adequately explained as polarized competition between two groups of political elites as a direct result of the General Strike.

The validity of the Strike thesis is open to question on more than just methodological grounds, however. Harold Kaplan has produced a recently published comparative study of urban political history in Winnipeg, Montreal, and Toronto from a systems theory perspective.⁴ In the course of his historical narrative (which summarizes his research from both primary and secondary sources), he notes that the Strike-based, polarized-party politics, “. . . image of Winnipeg politics, though widely accepted by local residents, was deceptive. The two parties fought a ritualistic-expressive war that had little to do with the real issues of municipal government; . . . this inter-partisan warfare did not reflect the real alignment of forces on more specific ideological and policy-level questions; and the partisan battles stood alongside, and did little to alter, the traditional, unreformed practices at city hall.”⁵ In other words, the Strike-based politics was largely “cultural level,” or rhetorical and ritualistic in significance according to Kaplan.

II

It is the thesis of this essay that there is a primary historical factor which has been obscured by the popularity of the General Strike explanation of Winnipeg’s politics. This factor is the civic culture (or “public ideology”) of local boosterism: the idea that a local community’s current welfare and future development depend upon active efforts to promote the local features, and attract growth industries and real estate development. In the case of Winnipeg, as well as other prairie cities, the nature, function, and results of urban growth orientations has been well documented, notably by Alan F.J. Artibise.⁶ The Rea data agrees that there was very little conflict between Citizens and Labour about the fundamentals and application of civic boosterism (or, for that matter, about working conditions of civic employees). Local business development has been seen as benefitting both business and labour, and especially real estate development which involves large amounts of capi-

tal, materials and unionized labour. The Strike and subsequent Citizen-Labour politics appear to have affected this orientation very little, or not at all.⁷ The Golden Age of this “triumphant growth ethic” in Winnipeg was the period which created the enduring framework of local public enterprises (including water, electricity, and steam utilities), and policies toward various aspects of a city’s life: immigration, social services, the Arts, and planning.⁸ The public works and enterprises expenditures necessitated an increasingly heavy debt load. By 1913, when general national economic conditions began to change unfavorably, the framework for future years was clearly set. A review of civic policies and activities since then only reinforces the conclusion of Artibise that in “most respects the years between 1914 and 1950 witnessed the playing of old themes in new circumstances.”⁹ This statement can also be applied to the next thirty years as well.

There is another historical element of Winnipeg politics which goes unmentioned in the Strike thesis treatment of Winnipeg’s political history: the local interest in “good government reformism.”¹⁰ It, rather than the General Strike, explains the origins of “Citizen’s” organizations and candidates in Winnipeg. We are again indebted to Artibise who colourfully describes the creation and successful campaigning of Winnipeg’s first Citizen’s group in 1884.¹¹ It was not in response to a “Labour” threat or Strike, but rather an attempt to improve fiscal management at City Hall. The same appears to be true of the reform enthusiasm and efforts during the 1890s as well as those more well-known adoptions of reform structures during the first decade of this century.¹² These reform groups and institutional changes appear to have been widely supported by the ethnic and labour aldermen as well as the general populace, as they still are today. In fact, one of the results of the turn-of-the-century reform enthusiasm was proportional representation which Labour championed in 1919 and which became part of Winnipeg politics in 1920, along with other modifications to Winnipeg’s civic electoral system.¹³

Winnipeg’s historic reform orientation continued in its modern political history in the creation of the Metropolitan Corporation of Greater Winnipeg in 1960 by the Conservative Government of Duff Roblin, and the creation of the new Unicity by the Schreyer New Democrats in 1971. Though it is tempting to assign ideological motivations to these reforms, especially the latter, it is clear from primary evidence that both metropolitan reforms were undertaken primarily within the reform context of effective metropolitan government, with little or no regard for the types of concerns expressed in the 1919 Strike.¹⁴

It has been noted above that the first Citizen organization was formed as a reform group in 1884. Though the title does not seem to appear again in Winnipeg until 1919, it is correct to note that groups of similarly-orien-

tated individuals flourished in the years in between. The idea of Citizen's election organizations, developing after 1919, was described by the Mayor of London, Ontario in 1913 as the manner in which the costs of running for local office (especially in city-wide constituencies) could be afforded.¹⁵ It must be noted that organized ethnic and labour groups ran candidates prior to 1919; some of these were elected, primarily from Winnipeg's north-end wards.¹⁶

III

What then were the nature and impact of the Winnipeg General Strike as historical phenomena? First, the Strike thesis obscures the historical nature of the Strike. It was a series of events, not one event. And it was set in an historical context of general and local conditions from which it should not be separated (and which made it a unique event, rather than an indication of class relations, struggles, etc.). We should note the continuing immigration into Winnipeg, the completion of the Panama Canal, the first World War, and the recessions starting with 1913-1914: all of these factors contributed to the end of the boom era of the previous years while increasing local pressures on enterprises and individuals alike.¹⁷ There was also during this period an increasing fear of "radicals", whether communist or anarchist, individuals or groups. Some of their ideas were discussed and/or advocated in well-attended gatherings in Winnipeg. News coverage of events and the reaction to the news during these years contributed to a unique (for Winnipeg) kind of "pressure-cooker" atmosphere.

Still, even in this atmosphere, and under these conditions, a more typical response was exhibited during the civic employees' strike in 1918. This strike demonstrated the power of organized labour, and at its height City Council passed (by one vote) a law denying its employees the right to strike.¹⁸ However, that position was dropped in bargaining, allowing settlement of the strike. In this strike, it is possible to see part of a process of developing labour strength, and the response of both labour and business. This process is at least as important as the Strike itself, and perhaps more so.¹⁹

The 1919 Strike itself collapsed, it should be remembered. It produced little or no change in the city government conditions or the dominance of civic boosterism: Rea himself concludes that businessmen "never once lost control of Council in the ensuing years."²⁰ What appears to have succeeded and remained from the events surrounding the Strike was the stimulus for individuals and groups to become more involved in politics (national and provincial, as well as local). This involvement appears to have arisen not so much from the Strike itself, but from the attempts to contest the 1919 civic elections as

the "Second Round of the Strike." On the one hand, it is clear that what resulted was a polarization of local political activity and the organization of groups to support candidates. It does appear that, on the side of business and commercial elites, an organization was created with the understood purpose of "keeping socialists and communists from taking over City Hall," along the lines of that suggested by the Mayor of London several years earlier (whether by direct knowledge or not). On the other hand, every one of the successive Citizen organizations has championed civic boosterism and development much more than anti-socialism. Furthermore, many of the central committee members have had property interests and dealings, and some mention has been made of kickbacks on civic insurance and other contracts. In other words, there seems to be much more to Citizen's committees' operations than a 1919 Strike thesis could hope to explain. Unfortunately, until recently the "core committee" members of Citizen's groups were not identified, and little has been written about their mode of operation.²¹

On the other hand, Labour has never been a cohesive, single organization, so far as I can discover — although those so designated have consistently voted similarly. There have actually been three traditions which developed: one of official endorsement by labour unions, then the C.C.F., and finally the N.D.P. There has also been a succession of communist or other groups who backed and elected candidates in Winnipeg's north-end. Finally, there have been individuals who were elected independently, but are included as Labour because of their voting. Using the term "Labour" gives the impression of a succession of well-organized, cohesive groups, but that has not been the case in Winnipeg's modern political history (including 1973 and 1975 during which Rea finds very high voting cohesion). As far as I can discover, the "fractured left" is a far more accurate description of the norm for most of the period since the early 1920s.

All of these facts seem to point to an interpretation of the Strike period as an important factor in the development of conflictual and polarizing politics by political groups in Winnipeg — but within a broader and more important tradition of civic boosterism and reformism, which "the Strike" has never effectively challenged. Therefore, the tradition of polarized local politics must be considered as of secondary importance in comparison to the boosterism ethos.

There is available a theoretical framework within which both of these historical phenomena, and their relationship to contemporary politics, can be readily understood using a political economy framework. I am referring to Steven Lukes' concept of "the third face of power", which refers to the strength of cultural beliefs, social views, and modes of thinking which became constraints on political activities and collective actions²². In the case of Winnipeg

(and most other North American cities), capitalist culture can be seen as manifesting itself in pervasive entrepreneurship and civic boosterism. This was, and still is, a *sine qua non* for successful local political activity, and is expected by the general population, regardless of class or ethnic characteristics.²³ Anyone not supporting local economic growth and development is “beyond the pale.”

Another part of the capitalist urban development culture is efficient and effective local government which provides a safe and nurturing climate for that development. Reformism contributes to this goal; general strikes do not. The Winnipeg General Strike is probably better characterized as a perceived threat to the social structures incorporating these beliefs. Therefore, the collective action was quickly circumscribed and carefully limited so as not to threaten the continued pursuit of the basic values of prairie capitalism. The ideas, values, and efforts of Labour or other activists in Winnipeg was largely subordinated by the cultural hegemony of these values expressed by Citizens, Chambers of Commerce, Boards of Trade, Urban Development Associations, and the major political parties.

As Artibise has pointed out, the fixation on civic boosterism was shortsighted in failing to address very pressing

local social problems and in not contributing to regional perspectives and political activities. In addition, it failed (and continues to fail) to use local potential for social and economic innovation. Though the class mobilization and conflict were greater in Winnipeg, the general result was not that much different from other cities—except perhaps on specific occasions in the 1930s when Labour aldermen or Mayors had particular influence, usually in helping to avoid the development of the crisis situation which nurtured conflict and violence during the Strike.²⁴

In summary, civic boosterism as a “third face of power” appears to be a much better candidate than the 1919 Strike as “the fundamental determinant in the modern political history of Winnipeg.” Analysis of the Winnipeg case suggests that care should be exercised in identifying particular events or readily identifiable patterns of class and partisan conflict as fundamental determinants of local politics. More attention should be given to generally accepted norms and values constituting a “third face of power” which may dominate local politics. Civic boosterism appears to be such a cultural norm of value, and to be highly—if not totally—pervasive in North American urban political history.²⁵

NOTES

1. This quotation will be found in J.E. Rea, “The Politics of Conscience: Winnipeg after the Strike,” Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1971), pp. 276-287. However, the thesis is most prominently stated in remarks accompanying research first reported as “The Politics of Class: Winnipeg City Council, 1919-1945,” in *The West and The Nation: Essays in Honour of W.L. Morton*, edited by Carl Berger and Ramsay Cook (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pp. 239-249. Further research was added in *Parties and Power: An Analysis of Winnipeg City Council, 1919-1975, Appendix IV, Report and Recommendations of the Committee of Review, City of Winnipeg Act* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Urban Affairs, 1976). Edited versions of this work have since appeared as “Political Parties and Civic Power: Winnipeg, 1919-1975,” in *The Usable Urban Past*, edited by Alan F.J. Artibise and Gilbert A. Stelter (Toronto: MacMillan, 1979) and as “Parties in Power: An Analysis of Winnipeg City Council, 1919-1975,” in *Politics and Government of Urban Canada: Selected Readings*, Fourth Edition, edited by Lionel D. Feldman (Agincourt, Ont.: Methuen, 1981). The Strike thesis, of course, fits into the broader social significance attributed to the Strike by historians with whom I’m not concerned here.
2. See material cited in note #1, above.
3. P.H. Wichern, “Winnipeg’s Civic Political History and the Logic of Structural Reform: A Review Essay,” *Urban History Review*, No. 1-78 (June, 1978), pp. 111-121.
4. Harold Kaplan, *Reform, Planning, and City Politics: Montreal, Winnipeg, Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 477-478. Kaplan expands on this theme in a more detailed examination of what he calls “cultural level politics” on pages 478-498.
6. Alan F.J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth, 1874-1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1975), and “Boosterism and the Development of Prairie Cities, 1871-1913,” in *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development*, edited by Artibise (Regina: University of Regina, Canadian Plains Studies, 1981). Also relevant is his “Continuity and Change: Elites and Prairie Urban Development, 1914-1950,” in *The Usable Urban Past* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1979), pp. 130-154. Curiously, despite citing Artibise as one of his sources (in an “essay” on sources at the end of his text), Kaplan fails to recognize the nature and significance of “boosterism” as it has been developed by Artibise and summarized here. For other examples of prairie urban boosterism, see the articles by Voisey, Gilpin, and Foran in *Town and City*.
7. As well as the materials by Rea and Artibise, I am referring to the primary and secondary works cited in Wichern, *Studies in Winnipeg Politics* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Department of Urban Affairs, 1976).
8. See especially Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth*.
9. Artibise, “Continuity and Change: Elites and Prairie Urban Development,” p. 130.

10. Kaplan, *Reform, Planning, and City Politics*, treats this historical factor in extensive detail, especially from the 1940s up to 1970, when his study ends. See pp. 498-603.
11. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth*, pp. 50-51.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-54 and following chapters.
13. See Wichern, *Studies in Winnipeg Politics*, and on this whole period, James D. Anderson, "The Municipal Government Reform Movement in Western Canada, 1880-1920," in Artibise and Stelter, *The Usable Urban Past*, pp. 73-111. See also James Lightbody, "Electoral Reform in Local Government: The Case of Winnipeg," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. XI; No. 2 (June 1978), pp. 307-322. He focuses on reforms of Winnipeg's ward system.
14. See Wichern, "Winnipeg's Civic Political History," for references. See also James Lightbody, "The Reform of a Metropolitan Government: The Case of Winnipeg, 1971," *Canadian Public Policy*, Vol. IV, No. 4 (Autumn 1978), pp. 489-503, where it is argued that Metro was a product of the dominant ideology in Winnipeg, while Unicity was an ideological innovation of the New Democratic Party (p. 491). Unfortunately, there are many pieces of evidence which do not support such an interpretation, some of which Lightbody mentions, viz. that Winnipeg City Council (and Mayor Stephen Juba) supported amalgamation (while some New Democrats did not), and that in the 1969 election campaign Ed Schreyer indicated the party's willingness to modify its pro-amalgamation stance (p. 497).
15. Artibise, "Continuity and Change," p. 89.
16. *Ibid.*
17. See Ruben Bellan, *Winnipeg's First Century: An Economic History* (Winnipeg: Queenston House, 1978), as well as Artibise, "Continuity and Change", pp. 132ff.
18. D.C. Masters, *The Winnipeg General Strike* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), p. 12. See also the excellent discussion of the background to the Strike in David Jay Bercuson, *Confrontation at Winnipeg: Labour, Industrial Relations, and the General Strike* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), chapters 1-6.
19. Kaplan, *Reform, Politics, and City Planning*, pp. 473-475, makes some of these same points.
20. Anderson, "The Municipal Government Reform Movement in Western Canada", p. 79, quoting Rea, argues that unlike other cities, Winnipeg elites had "significant opposition", though the opposition didn't gain control. I'm arguing that boosterism was not significantly challenged, although the dominant elites may have been challenged, and official public representation was given to both non-commercial elites and working classes in Winnipeg as a result of the Strike.
21. Apart from the work of Rea and Kaplan, there has been very little written about the succession of Citizen's Committees - how they were organized, etc. As far as I know, my own analysis in "An Election Unlike - and Very Much Like - The Others", in *City Magazine*, June 1978, was the first identification of "Core Citizen's Committee" members' interests. Names of individual members of the contemporary Committee were finally revealed in a series of articles run by the *Winnipeg Tribune* in August, 1980.
22. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: MacMillan, 1974) cited by Michael P. Smith, "Critical Theory and Urban Political Theory", in *Comparative Urban Research*, Vol. VII, No. 3 (1980), pp. 5-24, at pp. 15 and 17ff.
23. For example, a recent sample survey by a graduate student whom I advised found that Winnipeggers wanted contemporary reformist policies (historic building conservation, etc.) only *with* politics emphasizing economic growth and development. These attitudes were held as strongly, or more strongly, by lower class respondents, as compared to middle and upper class respondents. See A. Pyke, "Public Reformist Attitudes in Winnipeg", M.A. Thesis (University of Manitoba, 1980).
24. For two excellent discussions of the 1930's, see A.B. McKillop, "Citizen and Socialist: The Ethos of Political Winnipeg, 1919-1935", M.A. Thesis (University of Manitoba, 1970), and John H. Taylor, "Mayors à la Mancha: An Aspect of Depression Leadership in Canadian Cities", *Urban History Review*, Vol. IX, No. 3 (February 1981), pp. 3-14.
25. At the North American Comparative Urban History Conference (University of Guelph, August 24-27, 1982), in a paper entitled "Seizing Opportunities: Charlottetown and the Mentality of Expansion", Peter Rider claimed to have found an exception to the civic boosterism mentality ("the non-booster mentality of Charlottetown"). However, the discussant's critique of the paper seemed to me fairly persuasive in suggesting that the Charlottetown case simply demonstrated a different (due to different regional and local conditions) form of local boosterism: notably, a conservative local city-building strategy coupled with continuous appeals for massive transfusions of Federal assistance which would make local boosterism a more realistic possibility. Needless to say, these kinds of questions are well beyond the scope of this essay, but should be pursued.