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Michael J. Piva

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WORKERS AND TORIES: THE COLLAPSE OF THE CONSERVATIVE
PARTY IN URBAN ONTARIO, 1908-1919

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Michael J. Piva

One major question confronting labour and urban historians concerns the process of class formation. The major problem traditionally has revolved around basic definitions; whether or not class is defined objectively in terms of social-economic structures or subjectively in terms of class identification and collective behaviour. In Canada liberal historians have frequently criticized Marxists for their emphasis upon objective-structural criteria in defining class. It is a criticism all too often earned by Marxist historians in this country. Leo Johnson, for example, showing remarkably little regard for Marx himself, argues that:

to a Marxist scholar . . . class carries a precise definition which relates, not to the attitudes of individuals, but to their external material relationships centred on those created by the productive process.¹

Marx never wrote explicitly about the problem of class; his untimely death left Vol. III of Capital incomplete.² In other writings, however, he clearly argues that class cannot exist unless the individual members

¹Leo A. Johnson, "The Development of Class in Canada in the Twentieth Century", in Michael Horn and Ronald Sabourin, eds., Studies in Canadian Social History (Toronto, 1974), p. 214.

²The last chapter of Capital, entitled "Classes", contains a little more than one page, and then the narrative breaks off. See Karl Marx, Capital, A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. III (Moscow, 1971), pp. 885-886.

behave as a political collectivity.³ It is this subjective definition of class which dominates European Marxist writings, for as E. J. Hobsbawm insists, "class and the problem of class consciousness are inseparable".⁴ Similarly E. P. Thompson argues that class exists only when people demonstrate a "disposition to behave as a class". The problem, as Thompson points out, is that "consciousness of class identity is incandescent or scarcely visible".⁵ How does the social historian recognize collective behaviour of a class nature given the inadequacy of much of his data and his inability to freely generate new data? This paper will suggest one approach to the problem.

The rapid industrialization of the cities of Ontario between 1896 and 1920 had created a working class in the objective-structural sense. The election of 1919, meanwhile, might in turn be seen as an indication of the emergence of a working class in the subjective sense; the success of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) would indicate a "disposition to behave as a class" if it could be shown that class was a significant variable in the election.⁶ A detailed analysis of voting

³See for example Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (New York, 1963), p. 124; or Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the "Philosophy of Poverty" by M. Proudhon (Moscow, n.d.), p. 166.

⁴E. J. Hobsbawm, "Class Consciousness in History", in István Mészáros, ed., Aspects of History and Class Consciousness (London, 1971), pp. 5-6.

⁵E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English", in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., The Socialist Register (London, 1965), pp. 357-358.

⁶The literature on the 1919 election tends to avoid the issue of class. Contemporary observers, particularly Tory analysts, argued that

behaviour in the cities of Ontario, then, might prove useful as one indicator of class behaviour among workers.

Far too little attention has been given to the urban vote in 1919. The Conservative party had always been strong in the cities, and had the Tory vote held firm in urban areas, the government might well have been able to stave off the challenge from the United Farmers of Ontario (UFO). Yet in the end it was precisely in these traditional centres of Tory strength that the reversal in electoral fortunes was most glaring. Although Hearst had expected some UFO members to be elected, he "never dreamt that labour would sweep the urban centres as

class was a factor, but insisted that this was a peculiar and temporary phenomena. Conservative politicians insisted that their defeat was the result of the "wholly irrational state of the public mind at present". Arthur Meighen to Sir William Hearst, October 21, 1919, Arthur Meighen Papers, M. G. 26, H, Vol. 8, pp. 4137-4138, Public Archives of Canada. Frank H. Keefer, a Tory party worker, assured Sir Robert Borden that the protest would "like a disease . . . run its course". Frank H. Keefer to Sir Robert Borden, October 22, 1919, Sir Robert Borden Papers, M. G. 26, I, Vol. 114, pp. 62855-62860, Public Archives of Canada. This official Tory view is perpetuated in the literature by Brian Tennyson who argues that no significant criticisms were leveled against the Conservative government of Sir William Hearst, and that Hearst was defeated because "people were not judging politics by normal, i.e. pre-war standards". Brian Tennyson, "The Ontario General Election of 1919: The Beginnings of Agrarian Revolt", Journal of Canadian Studies, IV, No. 1 (February, 1969), p. 27. Peter Oliver, meanwhile, rejects this interpretation as too simplistic. Oliver focuses his attention upon the "inept" leadership of Hearst which had created dissension within the ranks and left the party vulnerable. Peter Oliver, "Sir William Hearst and the Collapse of the Ontario Conservative Party", Canadian Historical Review, LIII (1972), pp. 21-23. The official Tory, the Tennyson and the Oliver interpretations have two points in common. They either ignore or deny the permanence of class as an important variable, and they all assume that the political situation in 1919 was unique. All agree that the war had produced social and economic problems which created an atmosphere of unrest in the province. It is assumed that the pre-war roots of this unrest are relatively insignificant. It is precisely this point which needs to be tested.

they did".⁷ Hearst himself was defeated by an ILP candidate in the Sault. Brian Tennyson argues that the urban working class had been "conservative for many years under Whitney". That class supposedly deserted Hearst because of his position on temperance.⁸ Thus, according to Tennyson, prohibition led to the abandonment of the Conservative party by working-class voters, and this spelt disaster for Hearst.

Although the question of working-class support for the Whitney government prior to the war is open to debate, Tory electoral strength in urban areas is not. In 1921 there were 22 cities in southern Ontario with a population of 10,000 or more. Toronto consisted of 12 ridings, while Ottawa and Hamilton accounted for two ridings each. Counting these ridings separately, the Conservatives had won pluralities in 32 urban areas in 1911 and 29 in 1914.⁹ By contrast the Conservatives won pluralities in only nine of these 35 urban areas in 1919, six in the traditional Tory bastion of Toronto. The new ILP fielded candidates in 18 of these 35 urban areas and carried pluralities in ten. Six of the eight ILP defeats were in Toronto and Ottawa. The Liberals substantially increased their urban representation carrying pluralities in 14 of these urban areas. In only three cases, however, were Liberals able to win the election against ILP competition. A UFO candidate, meanwhile,

⁷Hearst to Meighen, October 24, 1919, Meighen Papers, Vol. 8, pp. 4139-4140.

⁸Brian D. Tennyson, "Premier Hearst: The War and Votes for Women", Ontario History, LII (1965), p. 121.

⁹In almost all cases prior to the war the successful candidate carried an overall majority. With the increase in multi-party elections in 1919 many successful candidates fell short of a majority.

carried a majority in St. Thomas, and an Independent-Soldier-UFO candidate won in Toronto. Thus the conservative electoral base in urban areas was shattered in 1919.

This paper will examine two problems. The election of 1919 in the major cities of southern Ontario will be analyzed to determine precisely what factors combined to defeat the Conservatives. Once this has been accomplished the three pre-war elections of 1908, 1911 and 1914 will be examined to determine to what extent the 1919 pattern deviated from the pre-war trends. This analysis will focus on the role of ethnicity, religion and class in an effort to isolate which variable was most important in determining voting behaviour in urban areas. What will become clear is 1) that in the major cities of southern Ontario class was more important in determining voting patterns than either ethnicity or religion, and 2) that the class patterns of voting in 1919 represent a culmination of pre-war social and political trends rather than a "political revolution" as claimed by the Globe.¹⁰

The statistics for elections used in this study are based upon the official returns submitted to the legislature and later published in Sessional Papers by the Chief Returning Officer of the Province. The figures presented here include only polls within the city limits in all cases except Peterborough in 1919. In that year the returns for Peterborough West did not distinguish between urban and rural polls, and as a result the returns for the entire riding were used. In the cases of cities which included more than one riding - Toronto, Hamilton and

¹⁰ See The Globe (Toronto), October 21, 1919, p. 1.

Ottawa - all of the urban polls were combined. The percentage of the vote cast for the Conservative candidate in each city provides the dependent variable. In a few cases cities had to be eliminated from the sample because of insufficient data. For example, in Kingston the Conservative carried the 1919 election by acclamation while in Windsor no conservative candidate contested the election.

The isolation of class as a variable presents several methodological problems. The breakdown of the work-force presented in the 1921 census is available only for cities of 30,000 population. However, one can establish the number of workers employed in manufacturing industries in each city for 1911 from the census returns and for 1919 from the Canada Year Book. For this reason the relative concentration of working-class voters in a given city was determined by calculating the percentage of the population employed in manufacturing industries. This figure does not include all workers nor does it reflect the percentage of the work-force employed in manufacturing. Yet methodologically this proves not to be a major liability since we are concerned with the relative concentration of working-class voters in a given city. It does, however, limit the analysis to the voting patterns displayed by manufacturing workers.

The census of 1921 was consulted to obtain the ethnic and religious balance in the cities of Ontario. The major weakness of the census material is the failure to distinguish between Irish Protestants and Irish Catholics in the aggregate returns. Until the manuscript census becomes available we will continue to labour under this handicap.

For purposes of analysis 22 cities are examined. This sample

includes all cities in southern Ontario with a population of 10,000 or more in 1921. Woodstock, which fell short of the 10,000 population mark by 65 persons, was included in the sample. Ethnic, religious and class variables in these 22 cities are then correlated with conservative voting to measure the degree of association. Association is measured by calculating the correlation coefficient, sometimes referred to as the Pearson r. The calculating formula for r is:

$$r = \frac{N\{XY - (\{X)(\{Y)}\}}{\sqrt{[N\{X^2 - (\{X)^2][N\{Y^2 - (\{Y)^2}$$

where N = the number of cities in the sample, Y = the percentage of the total vote for the conservative candidate and X = either ethnic, religious or class variables. When a perfect correlation exists the value of r will be either +1 or -1 in the case of an inverse relationship. Thus r values vary from -1 to +1. As the value of r approaches 0 the degree of association weakens.

Since few correlations in the social sciences are perfect the significance of r must be determined. This study applies the standard test for r when $N < 50$:

$$t = \frac{r}{\sqrt{1 - r^2}} \sqrt{N - 2}$$

Once a value for t is computed we may then consult a table for the standard distribution of t.¹¹ This study accepts as significant only r values which are significant at $\leq .05$; that is to say, a correlation between two variables is accepted only in cases where there is less than

¹¹See Dean J. Champion, Basic Statistics for Social Research (Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1970), Appendix A, Table A.5., p. 265.

a five per cent chance that the statistical association could have occurred randomly.¹²

We may begin our analysis by considering ethnicity. Non-British immigrants might have had strong reason to vote against the Tories as a result of the War Time Elections Act of 1917, which had disenfranchised in federal elections all non-British immigrants naturalized after 1902, and the general intensification of nativeism in the province during the war.¹³ Meighen's argument that opposition to federal policies helped defeat Hearst seems applicable here. The data, however, does not support this view.¹⁴

If we examine the correlation between relative concentrations of non-British, non-French ethnic groups in the urban population and conservative voting in 1919 we get a $r = -.236$ and a $t = 1.0013$ which is

¹²The use of the r correlation coefficient assumes interval data and linearity. All of the variables used in this study are at the interval level. Linearity may be tested by drawing a scatter diagram along with the X mean, the Y mean and the regression line \tilde{Y} . All of the variables used in this study have been tested and are linear in all cases where an association exists. There are no curvilinear associations with any of the data presented in this study.

¹³See Tennyson, "The Ontario General Election of 1919", pp. 34-35.

¹⁴Immigrants, most of whom had arrived after 1900, accounted for a majority of the non-British, non-French population in the cities of southern Ontario. But there is one exception to this rule. In Kitchener, previously Berlin, 69.6 per cent of the population listed their ethnic origin as other than the two founding races in 1921. Unlike Ontario's other cities, most of Kitchener's "foreign" voters, usually Germans, were native-born Canadians whose families had lived in the area for several generations. Indeed, the German community in Kitchener dates from the Loyalist period. Thus ethnic voters in Kitchener were quite atypical, and statistically their inclusion in the sample would be very misleading. For this reason Kitchener was eliminated from the sample in the calculations for non-British, non-French voting patterns.

not significant (See Table 1). The same pattern emerges when we examine the dominant ethnic group, the English. The use of the relative concentration of English as an independent variable produces a $r = .341$ and a $t = 1.5389$ which, again, is not significant. The Irish, meanwhile, present problems for analysis.

TABLE 1.--Degree of association between Conservative voting and ethnic and class variables in the major cities of southern Ontario, 1919.

| Independent Variable ^a | r | t | Significance |
|--|-------|--------|--------------|
| Non-British, Non-French | -.236 | 1.0013 | > .05 |
| English | .341 | 1.5389 | > .05 |
| Irish | .490 | 2.3848 | < .025 |
| Catholics | -.214 | .9295 | > .05 |
| Catholics, excluding Ottawa and Kitchener | -.084 | .3373 | > .05 |
| French ^b | -.729 | 2.6087 | < .025 |
| Working Class | -.609 | 3.2552 | < .005 |

^aIn all cases the percentage of the total vote cast for the Conservative candidate provided the dependent variable.

^bIncludes only eight cities in which the French-Canadian population was greater than 10 per cent.

The association between the Irish and conservative voting is fairly strong; in this case $r = .490$ and $t = 2.3848$. This correlation is significant at $< .025$. The same calculation for the association between Catholics and conservative voting, however, produces a very different pattern. In this case the r is negative ($-.214$) while a $t = .9295$ has no statistical significance. If we attempt to isolate the Irish Catholics by eliminating Ottawa, because of its high proportion of French Catholics, and Kitchener, because of its high proportion of European Catholics, from the sample the results change little. The value of r rises to $-.084$, and a $t = .3373$ has even less significance.

Thus there is no association at all between relative concentration of Catholics and conservative voting even when some effort is made to isolate Irish Catholics. This finding seems to contradict the strong association between Irish and conservative voting. The problem arises from the divisions within the Irish community.

Irish Protestants traditionally were identified with the Conservative party in Ontario. Unfortunately the census does not allow us to isolate the Irish Protestant population in the cities. Yet a working hypothesis that Irish Protestants voted strongly Conservative is consistent with the impressionistic evidence, the observed strong correlation between Irish voters and Conservative support and the absence of any correlation between Catholics and conservative voting. Strong Tory sympathies among Irish Protestants alone can explain the apparent contradiction in the electoral behaviour of Irish and Catholic voters.

Ethnicity was also important in determining the voting patterns among French-Canadians. This can not, however, be demonstrated in our sample because of the small number of French-Canadians in the cities. If we expand our sample to include all Ontario cities with a population of 5,000 or more in 1921, we find that in only twelve cities did French-Canadians account for more than ten per cent of the population. In three of these cities - Eastview, Windsor and Walkerville - no Conservative candidate contested the 1919 election while the returns for North Bay could not be determined. This left a sample of eight cities of which only Ottawa could be counted among our original 22 major cities. In these eight cities the correlation coefficient for French-Canadians

and conservative voting was $r = -.729$. This produced a $t = 2.6087$ which is significant at $<.025$. Thus French-Canadians voted strongly against the government, a finding consistent with their continued opposition to Regulation 17 in the primary school system. French-Canadians, however, represented only a tiny minority in the major cities of southern Ontario. Only in Windsor and Ottawa were there enough French-Canadians to affect significantly the outcome of an election.

The statistical evidence, then, indicates reasonably strong ethnic voting patterns only among French-Canadians and Irish Protestants. In both cases these communities were small minorities in the cities. Statistically there is no evidence that ethnicity or religion affected the voting behaviour of the major groups in the cities of southern Ontario.

Class was far more important in determining voting behaviour than ethnicity or religion. This can be seen quite readily by correlating manufacturing workers and conservative voting: $r = -.609$ and $t = 3.2552$. This correlation is significant at $<.005$. If we eliminate Ottawa from the sample because of its large proportion of French-Canadians who voted against the government for ethnic rather than class reasons, the correlation becomes even stronger: $r = -.678$ and $t = 3.8028$. This is significant at only slightly $>.0005$. Clearly it was the high degree of political polarization among manufacturing workers which spelt defeat for the Conservatives in urban Ontario. The question of the influence of the war on the class polarization remains to be answered.

The emergence of class voting behaviour can be observed by

analyzing the provincial elections of 1908, 1911 and 1914 in these same 22 cities, and again excluding Ottawa and Windsor because of their peculiar ethnic populations¹⁵ (See Table 2). As a base, the number of workers employed in manufacturing industries in 1911 provides an independent variable for the analysis. A correlation of manufacturing workers and conservative voting in 1908 provides a $r = -.108$ and a $t = .4610$, which is not significant. In 1911 Conservative candidates carried London, Kingston, St. Catherines and Belleville by acclamation. In the other 16 cities the calculations produce a $r = -.412$ and a $t = 1.6913$. This association is much stronger than in 1908 but is still significant at only $<.10$. In 1914 the same calculation for all 20 cities in the sample results in a strong association: $r = -.445$ and $t = 2.1083$. This t value is significant at $<.025$. The critical period in the process of class formation, then, occurred prior to the war; 1919 represents the culmination of trends toward class voting patterns in the major cities of the province.

TABLE 2.--Degree of association between Conservative voting and the relative concentration of manufacturing workers in the major cities of southern Ontario, 1908-1919.

| Election | r | t | Significance |
|----------|-------|--------|--------------|
| 1908 | -.108 | .4610 | > .10 |
| 1911 | -.412 | 1.6913 | < .10 |
| 1914 | -.445 | 2.1083 | < .025 |
| 1919 | -.609 | 3.2552 | < .005 |

¹⁵It should be noted that neither Ottawa nor Windsor were major manufacturing centres in 1919 relative to other cities. In terms of the proportion of the population employed in manufacturing industries these cities ranked 20th and 22nd respectively among the 22 cities in the sample.

The statistical evidence concerning voting patterns is quite strong, but before an acceptable hypothesis can be formulated the clear dominance of the Conservative party during the pre-war years must be explained. The observation that Conservatives won pluralities in 29 of Ontario's 35 cities - counting Toronto's twelve, Hamilton's two and Ottawa's two ridings separately - in 1914 as compared to only nine in 1919 belies any hypothesis which argues that voting patterns changed little.

The answer to the puzzle lies in the participation rates. In all cities in our sample except Toronto the participation rates in the four provincial elections between 1908 and 1919 were 70.6 per cent, 61.5 per cent, 65.4 per cent and 72.8 per cent respectively.¹⁶ In Toronto the figures on voting participation stood at 50.9 per cent, 34.4 per cent, 52.7 per cent and 54.8 per cent respectively. In urban Ontario low participation tended to work to the advantage of the Conservative party. In the four major manufacturing centres of Toronto, Hamilton, London and Brantford the conservative vote rose as the participation rate fell both between elections and between cities. For example, the participation rate in Toronto was always substantially lower than in other cities, and Toronto was a Tory fortress. Participation in Toronto remained exceptionally low in 1919, and, again, it was only

¹⁶The participation rate in 1908 does not include Galt as the local returning officer failed to report the number of eligible voters. Similarly the 1914 rate does not include Peterborough, while the 1919 rate does not include Guelph. The participation rate for Toronto, for the same reason, includes only ridings for which adequate information is available.

in Toronto that the Conservatives managed to hold their own winning six of the city's twelve ridings. It is equally interesting to note that in the ten cities in which the ILP won pluralities the participation rate was 72.7 per cent. This was in striking contrast to the cities in which the ILP candidate failed to win. Information on participation is available for only six of the eight cities in which the ILP candidate was defeated; in these six cities the participation rate was only 60.9 per cent. Clearly the major change in voting habits between 1914 and 1919 in urban Ontario was a general increase in the number of voters who exercised their rights.

The increase in participation may have resulted from the introduction of women's suffrage. It seems unreasonable to argue that women demonstrated markedly different voting behaviour than men in light of the consistency in patterns between 1914 and 1919. And there is no reason to assume that women were more or less sensitive to the class pressures in their society. Yet the opportunity to vote for the first time in 1919 may very well have led to a relatively high voter turnout.

To conclude, then, the changes in Ontario's social and political life between 1914 and 1919 have been somewhat exaggerated. Class was far more significant than either ethnicity or religion even when compared to voting patterns among French-Canadians and Irish Protestants; the correlation coefficient for the class variable is far stronger than for the ethnic variable in these latter two cases. In addition there is no relationship at all between concentrations of major ethnic and religious groups and conservative voting. The polarization

of the class voting behaviour, meanwhile, occurred between 1908 and 1914; the class voting pattern in 1919 is consistent with, if more intense than, the pre-war trend.

The critical period of class formation, in the subjective sense of class consciousness, occurred prior to the war. The primary catalyst in this social process was the rapid industrialization of the province accompanied by static or deteriorating living and working conditions.¹⁷ All of the major problems associated with the war years - inflation, housing and labour relations - emerged during the first decade of the twentieth century. The war intensified but did not create social problems. The major political manifestation of the emergence of the working class in urban Ontario prior to the war was voter apathy which greatly reduced the chances of ILP candidates prior to 1919.¹⁸

¹⁷See Michael J. Piva, "The Condition of the Working Class in Toronto, 1900-1921", Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Concordia University, May, 1975.

¹⁸The provincial ILP was first organized in 1907 and brought together several municipal labour parties. The first major breakthrough for labourites had come the year before when Allan Studholme carried Hamilton East in a by-election. Studholme continued to sit as the ILP's only MPP until his death in 1919. The Hamilton success was not repeated elsewhere as the provincial party existed in name only. Local municipal parties, however, continued to grow and by 1911-1914 were beginning to show some success in electing labour men to city councils and Boards of Education. Prior to 1917 the ILP competed with the Socialist and later the Social Democratic Party (SDP) for working-class votes. The first moves toward cooperation came in 1912-1914. In Toronto, for example, the SDP, the local ILP and the District Labour Council (DLC) formed a Joint Election Committee and succeeded in electing SDP leader James Simpson to the Board of Control. But factionalism continued to plague labour political action. In 1915 the Joint Election Committee collapsed, and Simpson failed to win re-election. By 1916 the SDP and the ILP decided finally to bury the factional hatchet. In that year a new ILP was organized on a federal basis similar to the British Labour Party. Although the old name was retained, the new ILP was quite different in

Thus, voter apathy helped obscure the political implications of social change in the cities. The statistically measurable tendency for workers to vote against the Conservatives did not threaten Tory hegemony because large numbers of voters failed to exercise their rights. But the Tories were already standing on shaky ground before Whitney's death in 1914.

The war burst upon a society already suffering from the social tensions of class antagonisms. The problems created by the government's wartime policies, particularly the failure to deal with inflation, intensified the sense of exploitation felt by workers.¹⁹ This diminished their political apathy. Relatively high participation rates in urban ridings completely undermined the Conservative party's electoral base because, with the exception of the Workmen's Compensation Act - which passed the legislature with the support of all parties - there was nothing in the Conservative record to attract labour support. The Workmen's Compensation Act could not offset the habitual indifference of both Whitney and Hearst to labour problems. Illustrative of the relations

structure as it included many non-trade-unionists as well as the SDP. Unlike the British Labour Party, the Ontario ILP failed in its bid to bring the unions into the party as direct affiliates. With the notable exception of the International Association of Machinists, the unions remained aloof and refused to affiliate with the ILP. Although there was close cooperation between city centrals like the DLC and the ILP, these Councils too failed to affiliate. In the long run this proved a fatal weakness. Labour political action would remain stunted until the 1940's when the Canadian Congress of Labour finally affiliated with the CCF.

¹⁹This can be seen in the testimony of both organized and unorganized workers before the Royal Commission in Industrial Relations in 1919. See Canada, "Royal Commission on Industrial Relations, Minutes of Evidence, 1919", Typescript in the Department of Labour Library, Ottawa.

between the Hearst government and labour was a meeting of March 1918. According to Hearst, he "gave them an absolute refusal of their demands; my announcement was met with a storm of boos and a quite hostile demonstration occurred".²⁰ Later in 1919 when he pondered his defeat Hearst failed to recall his previous stormy encounters with organized labour. Perhaps Hearst willingly fell victim to the Canadian Manufacturers' Association myth that organized labour did not represent the aspirations of workers. Not surprisingly, manufacturing workers voted strongly Labour in 1919. And where there was no ILP candidate they tended to give their support to the Liberals.

²⁰W. H. Hearst to Lt. W. I. Hearst, March 3, 1918, W. H. Hearst Papers, Public Archives of Ontario.