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CLARE PENTLAND AND THE LABOUR PROCESS

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"An original and independent thinker" were the terms used by a colleague to describe Clare Pentland. They are terms, also, which serve to explain why he has had such a profound influence on the recent generation of labour and economic historians; and perhaps why such recognition and influence developed slowly after the completion of his landmark thesis, *Labour and the Development of Industrial Capitalism in Canada* in 1961. Certainly, the influence of the thesis was restricted because, although it circulated widely in photocopy form, it was never published, not because of a lack of interested publishers, but because Clare did not consider the work fully completed. He was, in this regard, a perfectionist. Unfortunately, protracted illness interfered with his research plans and he died before he had the opportunity to re-work the manuscript.

That is one part of the explanation. The thesis represented just the initial chapters of what was to be a longer work. Only the insistence of his supervisors induced him to submit what he considered an incomplete work for his degree. What he had intended to do was a complete social and economic history of Canadian labour before Confederation. It is this scope which, to my mind, is the key to understanding the contribution that Clare Pentland has made, his insistence that the proper study of labour must include the whole *process* by which the working class and its pre-capitalist progenitors were propagated, shaped, molded, disciplined, skilled, allocated and rewarded; and by which working class organizations developed to fight back in the (often fruitless) attempt to control the workers' own destiny.

The making and shaping of the working class was, in Pentland's view, a dialectic process. His approach shows the influence of the Marxist tradition of scholarship (rather than the predominant staple approach of Canadian economic history as Professor Kealey notes in his article below), although, because of his independence of thought, he resisted being "typed". He had, in Baran's terms, the commitment of the intellectual, to search for understanding wherever it might lead.[1]

One prominent example of this dialectical approach can be found in the titles of two of his most widely read; earlier articles: "The Role of Capital in

Canadian Economic Development Before 1875" and "The Development of a Capitalist Labour Market in Canada".[2] The co-dependence of labour and capital is immediately obvious. An even more explicit example occurs in his explanation of the waves of labour radicalism and quiescence that is central to his work for the Task Force on Labour Relations (the Woods' Task Force),[3] completed in 1968 but never published except in mimeographed form. (The article in this *Journal* "The Western Canadian Labour Movement, 1897-1919", is an extension and adaptation of a section of this study).

> Canadian experience has continually demonstrated another phenomenon observable elsewhere: that tensions in industrial relations increase or decrease as the "real" gap between employers and employed in capacity (as distinct from the constant gap assumed by the institutional structure) has narrowed or widened. Whenever workers have generally been advancing more rapidly than employers in sophistication — tensions have been more acute. When the real gap has widened, tensions have usually diminished.[4]

I am not yet prepared to accept this hypothesis uncritically, for in many respects it raises as many, or more, questions than it answers. (As his article in this *Journal* indicates, he never accepted my explanation either.) That is not the point. What Clare Pentland did in his work was to integrate all the components of the labour milieu — institutional, market, power, historical, technological and social — into dynamic models of conflict and change, which is the essence of the labour process. It is this that distinguishes him from the traditional school of American labour institutionalists to whom the whole *raison d'être* of institutions is to constrain and pacify conflict; and from the orthodox stream of labour economists wedded to their mechanical, depersonalized, a-historical, static equilibrium models.

Nowhere in his work is this integrative and dynamic approach more evident than in the Woods' Task Force study — indicated, not least, by its long and somewhat awkward title, "A Study of the Changing Social, Economic, and Political Background of the Canadian System of Industrial Relations". Its purpose was to set contemporary industrial relations on an historical stage.

> An effective industrial relations system — one that does a good job of marshalling the working population to get

> the necessary work done — is among the most basic requirements of any society that hopes to flourish. The system must do several things. It must get and retain an adequate labour force. It must train the labour force to a sufficient mastery of the techniques it uses. It must co-ordinate and discipline the efforts of its labour force by a reasonably consistent and acceptable set of laws and customs, based on mores that command substantial consent. It must provide systems of rewards and punishments that produce effective motivation.[5]

In a conceptual introduction, Pentland begins with pre-market systems, societies of chronic labour shortage which produced unfree (feudal and slave) labour systems. It is this relation between labour supply and industrial relations systems that led Pentland into demographic research (which Professor Deprez surveys in his article below); and also into his studies of the Irish and other ethnic and racial immigrations. It is the process of adaptation of the working class to the emergence of the capitalistic labour market and, subsequently, to purposeful economic and technological change which is his central concern. As fits this approach, his first concern is with attitudes — in alternative terminology, consciousnesses — where workers and employers are conditioned "by a multitude of occupational, industrial and regional interests",[6] leading to what he characterizes as rural, urban, small-town, company town and labour views. It is Pentland's contention that the contemporary problem rests in the failure of the industrial relation institutions with their foundations in these attitudes or consciousnesses to adapt to objective change in the economy and the labour force. Since he does not accept a mechanistic or crude materialistic view of change, this reflects a failure of policy resulting from imbalance of power and lack of understanding of the nature of the objective changes. It is to the analysis of the political economy of this failure in the 20th century that the bulk of his report is directed.

The Task Force study represents a continuation of the central investigation of his thesis, the labour process; albeit with a much heavier emphasis on the development of the institutional and legal framework of industrial relations. Again, what makes the work stand apart from the main body of institutional labour history in Canada is the concentration on the dynamic interaction between the economy, the employers, the unions, the state and technological change.

Kealey suggests that Pentland makes a significant break with Innis' staple interpretation by choosing to concentrate on the development of industrial capitalism in Canada rather than on the staple trades. I confess I have never

been exersized by the strident debate between the Pentland-Ryerson adherents and the Naylor-Creighton (?) school as to the primacy of industrial *vs.* merchant capitalist origins of the national policy since it seems to me that the interests of both were complementary. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Innis' preoccupation was not staples *per se* but rather technology. Likewise, Pentland spent a considerable part of his research on issues of technological change and productivity, normally as one might expect, as related to the human adjustment problems — a vital aspect of the labour process.[7] In this sense, he is in the mainstream of Canadian economic history.

Since Pentland's study was completed, Harry Braverman published his important and seminal study of the labour process in the 20th century United States, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*;[8] and while Braverman's detailed analysis of the organizational revolution that destroyed artisanal control of work and reshaped the labour force in contemporary forms has a very different emphasis, his conclusions do not differ in substance from Pentland's:

> the early decades of the twentieth century were featured by a profound re-orientation and transformation of Canadian industry which adjusted it to the market demand and technology of the twentieth century as this applied most obviously to Canadian resources....[9]
>
> ... it seems clear that "unskilled" employments (those with indefinite skill requirements and a heavy emphasis on physical effort) expanded considerably faster than "skilled" ones (requiring journeyman skill) in the first four decades of the century.[10]

Pentland's work goes beyond the scope of Braverman's, however, by investigating the effects of these economic changes on class consciousness, social attitudes and industrial relations institutions. This de-skilling of the labour force had a major impact on widening the gap, or at least the perceived gap, between the "fitness" of labour and capital to rule. This, Pentland argues, contributed to the stagnation of labour organization in the interwar period until the debacle of the depression caused a profound disaffection with the competence of capital to manage the economy.

Thus, in the war years of the most recent period (1939-1967) and facing a national emergency, institutions and attitudes did change only to be superceded by two decades of what he terms the "directionless state", when rapid technological, economic and social changes served to create new tensions to which industrial relations institutions have not adjusted due to the heavy hand

of cultural lag or institutional inertia. As he concludes, the central problem is not in creating institutions for the future,

> but the extent to which old laws and practices have become obsolete. The adjustments most urgently needed are not those for tomorrow, but ones that might reasonably have been made (yet were not made) some decades ago. Because they were not made, the unsuitability of some practices in terms of the kind of labour force that is developing and of new social criteria have become very marked by the mid-1960's.[11]

Baran and Sweezy have noted that in their study of contemporary capitalism, *Monopoly Capital,* they neglected the subject of the labour process:

> the consequences which the particular kinds of technological change characteristic of the monopoly capitalist period have had for the nature of work, the composition (and differentiation) of the working class, the psychology of workers, the forms of working-class organization and struggle, and so on.[12]

In his life's work, Clare Pentland has attempted to do that, not only for the modern era but for the formative period of industrial capitalism and even the pre-capitalist period. I have concentrated on his Task Force Report because it was his last major synthesizing work, broad in scope yet with many penetrating insights. Whether all of it will stand the test of further investigation is problematic. Nevertheless, he has provided a foundation for all subsequent study on the labour process in Canada.

For many of us, Clare Pentland will be remembered, not only as a scholar, but as a person — colleague, teacher, student and friend; one who took to heart Alexander Pope's instruction — "the proper study of mankind is man."

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Notes

1. Paul Baran, "The Committment of the Intellectual", *Monthly Review,* May 1961.
2. *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science,* November 1950; November 1959.
3. *A Study of the Changing Social, Economic, and Political Background of the Canadian System of Industrial Relations,* 1968.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 20. See also pp. 11-12.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

7. See for example "Productivity and the Shorter Work Week", *Trades and Labour Congress Journal,* Aug. 1951: "Physical Productivity in Canada, 1935-52", *Economic Journal,* June 1954; "Law and Automation: The Freedman Report", *Canadian Personnel and Industrial Relations Journal,* Nov. 1966; "Change in the Manitoba Economy" in *Automation and the Individual: Proceedings of the Manitoba Conference on Technological Change;* Winnipeg, March 1968: "Implications of Automation for the Employment and Training of White-Collar Workers in Manitoba", unpublished manuscript for the Manitoba Economic Consultative Board, 1965; and "Human Adjustment to Technological Change: The Case of Manitoba Rolling Mills", unpublished manuscript for the Department of Manpower and Immigration, 1968.

8. Harry Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital,* New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

9. Pentland, *op cit.*, pp. 44-5.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 400.

12. Quoted in Braverman, *op cit.*, p. IX.

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