

The Canadian Nation(s), Philosophy, and the Critique of Empire

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If Canada hasn't exactly come into vogue, it certainly is garnering more international attention now than previously. This attention centres primarily around English Canadian literature and the political institutions and culture addressing issues of regional and cultural diversity—multiculturalism and Federalism. While it is easy to be cynical about the suggestion that multiculturalism might become Canada's most recent export,¹ since the 'peaceable kingdom' is more of a myth than such comforting stories suggest, it is nevertheless the case that philosophy and politics in Canada has for decades (at least) centred on the relationship between identity and plurality. If export there must be, it is more important to export the deep debate there has been about such issues rather than the relatively shallow institutional responses to them. I will argue a position deeply critical of the assumptions behind such institutional responses, a position which raises philosophical and political issues through a response to Canadian history and culture.

1. Plurality and Nation

In their comprehensive history of English Canadian philosophy from 1850 to 1950, Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott claim that its dominant tendency has been a specific kind of Hegelianism that they characterize as a philosophical federalism.

Dominantly in English Canadian philosophy reason is used as a device to explore alternatives, to suggest ways of combining apparently contradictory

ideas, to discover new ways of passing from one idea to another. Only rarely is it used as an intellectual substitute for force—as a device to defeat one’s opponent, to show his ideas to be without foundation, or to discredit his claims to philosophical thought. There is, in short, a kind of philosophical federalism at work, a natural inclination to find out why one’s neighbour thinks differently rather than to find out how to show him up as an idiot.²

The specific characteristics of Canadian Hegelianism include a defence of the public legitimacy and relevance of a plurality of moral-religious traditions, an interpretation of the dialectic as tolerance and compromise, and a skepticism toward the absolute, at least as an accomplished historical fact, in favour of seeing it as an inclusive moral goal. Such a philosophy is, they argue, a species of “rationalist pluralism” that is skeptical that a single community possesses the truth entire but accepts that it expresses some part of, or perspective on, the truth.³

Such a rationalist pluralism suggests, unlike a more orthodox Hegelianism,⁴ an importance of medium-level political identities—such as ethnic groups, religious denominations or voluntary associations—between the individual and the state. Thus, Leslie Armour sums up that “we have grappled from the beginning with the idea of a plurality of communities which may, despite their plurality, legitimate some of the same institutions; and with the idea that, even where there are different institutions, they may express some common principles and some common strategies. We have often thought about the idea—though we have often worried about it too—that these common principles and strategies might embody a single nation.”⁵ Reflection on the relation of identity and diversity in this spirit has been the dominant tendency of English Canadian philosophy and is what has

become attractive to some outside of Canada who apparently have fewer available resources to conceptualize this relationship.

One aspect of this tradition that has been underlined by Elizabeth Trott is that, in order for two opposites to be regarded as dialectically related and thus amenable to synthesis, they must contain some common element or metaphor that provides a “central locus from which reason-giving concepts are derived.”⁶ In the absence of such a common metaphor, diverse moral-religious traditions threaten to become simply different and unrelated rather than resources whose dialectical relation makes a unity from, and in, diversity. Thus, she argues that “promoting similarities is as essential as sensitizing to differences” and concludes that “if Canada is merely a set of many cultures, then there is no locus for debate or conversation. Fragmented into particulars, it will cease to exist.”⁷ The argument for the public relevance of diversity need not imply utter fragmentation (as many critics of multiculturalism today claim) but can, and must, go together with a common locus that binds them into relationship within a national tradition.

This dialectic of self and other within a common locus is the core Hegelianism of Canadian philosophy which Armour and Trott not only discover as the dominant tendency up to 1950 but also propagate in their interventions in contemporary debates. Without contesting the results of their considerable historical research, I want to suggest that such contemporary interventions distort various philosophical contributions by forcing them into a Hegelian framework. Specifically, Trott characterizes both Linda Hutcheon and myself as Hegelians because we utilize the concept of ‘border’ in our work.⁸ But Hutcheon writes “the postmodern irony that refuses resolution of contraries—except in the most provisional of terms—would appear to be a useful framework” and claims that it has “translated the existing Canadian emphasis on regionalism in literature, for example, into a concern for the

different, the local, the particular—in opposition to the uniform, the universal, the centralized.”⁹ The qualified suspicion of synthesis here might sit well with a similar caution in Canadian Hegelianism, but to characterize the relation between local particularity and uniform universality as a dialectic is to ignore the “contingency, multiplicity, fragmentation, discontinuity” that Hutcheon finds in English Canadian postmodern fiction.¹⁰ In my case: “Wilderness is not experienced as something to be transformed into civilization, but as a limit to the civilizing project, both an external limit—an outside—and a limit of depth ... [which requires] acceptance of a kind of abandonment, abjection.”¹¹ If we were to add Arthur Kroker’s analysis of the Canadian mind as “a restless oscillation between the pragmatic will to live at all costs of the Americans and a searing lament for that which has been suppressed by the modern, technical order” and Dennis Lee’s “savage fields” as “the strife of world and earth” the imposition of a Hegelian dialectical form seems even more arbitrary.¹² It is rather the case that the debate is now drawn between those that hold to a Hegelian synthesis and those for whom deep polarity is the form of the relation between opposites—which doesn’t deny that they are indeed each other’s opposites and thus in some sense are related through a common locus. For the thinkers of polarity, the instituting *polemos* in Canadian history is the centre-periphery relationship instituted by empire. The critical question is the transformation of the radical outside of the periphery into the tame dialectic of official culture.

2. Empire and Dependency

Canada has been a dependency of three empires: French, British and now American. Economic, social and cultural development in a dependency, even a ‘first-world’ dependency, is structured by its relation to a centre from which the dominant priorities of its

existence flow. From the Paris fashion that spurred the fur trade to Washington's post-9/11 security priorities that have re-structured the port of Vancouver, the demands of the centre have structured the development of the periphery. If one wants to understand a country like Canada, one has to begin from the centre-periphery relation intrinsic to an empire. This fact was recognized by Harold Innis in his staple theory of Canadian economic development.

[T]he economic history of Canada has been dominated by the discrepancy between the centre and the margin of Western civilization. Energy has been directed toward the exploitation of staple products and the tendency has been cumulative. The raw material supplied to the mother country stimulated manufactures of the finished product and also of the products which were in demand in the colony ... The general tendencies in the industrial areas of western civilization, especially in the United States and Great Britain, have a pronounced effect on Canada's export of staples.¹³

However, while dependency is rooted in economic relations, it is not confined to them. In the first place, the settler population requires and demands the products of the imperial centre such that there is an early interchange of finished goods for staple resources. Beyond this, cultural ties to the centre structure the entire way of life in the periphery.

To think of the development of Canada through the relations of dependency established by empire means, first and foremost, that space is a primary factor. Centre and periphery are linked by a distance. It is the traversal of space that distinguishes the development of modern capitalism in a dependency. Marx noted two sources of the European capitalist economy—the growth of craft workshops into manufactures due to the freeing of bonded labour and the capturing of productive processes by merchant capital. Both of these factors are internal to European development itself such that the transition from feudalism to

capitalism can be captured as a history. While dependent development certainly has a history, the spatial relations of centre-periphery are more significant. Indeed, such spatial relations connect and link social formations that would be seen as belonging to different historical epochs in a European model. The native economy of the fur hunt was linked to Paris fashion in a spatial relationship such that a so-called primitive economy was linked to advanced consumption. This is not a single example but the dominant structuring fact. External, space-based development implies the encounter of the most modern tendency with an archaic, ahistorical one. Canadian culture still exemplifies this polarity.

Space must be traversed. It is precisely such traversal that accomplishes the linkage. Space must be understood, consequently, not as an *a priori* structure of experience but as a experience of traversal in the first place by the human body and secondarily through the technological means that expand and transform the capacities of the human body.

Transportation is the first fact of centre-periphery relations. Runners-of-the-woods, canoes, ships, steam engines, railways: through these technologies the history of a dependency can be written. No wonder that technology has been a major preoccupation of Canadian thought. Transportation has to a large extent now been succeeded by communication such that the traversal of distances can be accomplished by messages without bodies.

The dominant flow of such messages is from centre to periphery. The periphery is engaged in a constant struggle to express itself, a struggle made necessary by the amassing of historical and archival weight at the centre while constantly re-structuring the periphery to cater to the needs of the centre in the present moment. The periphery archives itself with difficulty and forgets its own history, which must be continually re-discovered and communicated against the dominant flows of information. Canadian Studies is on the rise

everywhere but in Canada, where the government regards it as but a comparative advantage in the current free trade wars.

Innis recognized, though, that innovation often occurs at the periphery.¹⁴ Such innovation may fare badly given the historical weight of the centre, but it proposes a unique blend of archaic experience and spatially-induced contemporaneity. To think from the periphery, to commit oneself to the articulation of the experience of a dependency, means to struggle against the assumption that such experience is merely the footnote to a longer, more established, history. This assumption relegates our experience to being at most a particular content for forms of thought previously developed elsewhere. Indeed, this notion that ‘reality is elsewhere’ is a defining cultural condition. No wonder there is a permanent identity crisis. An assumption concerning the relation between universal and particular underlies this condition. Universal schemes and structures of experience are elaborated elsewhere—the great narratives of Athens and Jerusalem, heroic modernity, or disaffected postmodernity—while we make small corrections and additions based upon the particulars of our lives. To think from the periphery requires that one reverse this assumption, perhaps escape it, in order to propose not only corrective particulars but universal models. Our task: to see Europe as a particular case of our story, to write the myth not propose another character for a tame dialectic. If this is Canada’s instituting polarity, it signifies a lack if it is not evident in both philosophy and politics.

3. Conclusion

While the relation between culture and philosophy is complex, a philosophy which claims to be Canadian in the sense that it represents and interprets Canadian culture and

experience must have something to say about the crucial and formative experience of empire, because “significance is lost when the history of philosophy is cut off from history in general and when the connection between Canadian philosophy and Canadian culture is ignored.”¹⁵ The secret of Canada is the unofficial dream of self-rule at the periphery that unfolds in tandem with the critique of empire. It is kept secret through the perpetuation of the lie that the empire, then the nations-state, sets the neutral rules whereby its parts interact, a lie whose philosophical expression is the specific form that the Hegelian dialectic has taken in Canada. The tendency of official culture is to cover up its opposite in a land-based ethic, to substitute historical continuity for the break represented through inhabitation of the land.¹⁶ This tendency is carried over into philosophy by the taming of the radical otherness of land-based self-rule into a self-other Hegelian dialectic. The task for a polemical interpretation of Canadian culture is the development of a philosophy of independent parts through a conception of universality that does not subsume parts by giving them the rule, but subordinates the rule itself to a negotiation between parts. Only this would prevent the Métis from having to defend themselves from the red-coats. It may be this critique of empire which Canada now needs to give the world.

Footnotes:

¹ See, for example, the overview in the publication of the Association for Canadian Studies *Canadian Diversity/Diversité canadienne*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Winter 2005.

² Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott, *The Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada 1850-1950* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981) p. 3-4.

³ This short summary is based upon Leslie Armour, “Canadian Ways of Thinking: Logic, Society, and Canadian Philosophy” in Allen Seager, Leonard Evenden, Rowland Lorimer and Robin Mathews (eds.) *Alternative Frontiers: Voices from the Mountain West Canadian Studies Conference* (Montréal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1997), “Canada and the History of Philosophy” in Terry Goldie, Carmen Lambert, Rowland Lorimer (eds.) *Canada: Theoretical Discourse/Discours théoriques* (Montréal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1994), “The Canadian Tradition and the Common Good,” *Études Maritainiennes*, 5, 1989, and Elizabeth

Trott, "Caird, Watson, and the Reconciliation of Opposites" in W. J. Mander (ed.) *Anglo-American Idealism, 1865-1927* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000), "Bradley and the Canadian Connection" in James Bradley (ed.) *Philosophy after F.H. Bradley* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996).

⁴ See James Doull, "The Philosophical Basis of Constitutional Discussion in Canada" and "Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Post-Modern Thought" in David G. Peddle and Neil G. Robertson (eds.) *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) and "Hegel and Contemporary Liberalism, Anarchism, Socialism" in J.J. O'Malley, et. al., *The Legacy of Hegel* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).

⁵ Leslie Armour, *The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community* (Ottawa: Steel Rail Publishing, 1981) p. x.

⁶ Elizabeth Trott, "Multiculturalism, Charles Taylor, and the Idea of Canada" in Allen Seager, Leonard Evenden, Rowland Lorimer and Robin Mathews (eds.) *Alternative Frontiers: Voices from the Mountain West Canadian Studies Conference* (Montréal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1997) p. 4. See also, Elizabeth Trott, "Western Mindscapes: A Philosophical Challenge," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 2001.

⁷ Elizabeth Trott, "Multiculturalism, Charles Taylor, and the Idea of Canada," pp. 14-5.

⁸ Elizabeth Trott, "Western Mindscapes: A Philosophical Challenge," pp. 3, 7.

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 4, 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹¹ Ian Angus, *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1997; reprinted 1998) pp. 129-30.

¹² Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1984) p. 7; Dennis Lee, *Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology* (Toronto: Anansi, 1977) p. 11.

¹³ Harold Innis, "Conclusion from The Fur Trade in Canada" in David Taras, Beverly Rasporich, and Eli Mandel (eds.) *A Passion for Identity* (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1993) pp. 18-9.

¹⁴ Harold Innis, 2/1 in *The Idea File* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1980). Linda Hutcheon has also noticed this phenomenon in English Canadian literature in *The Canadian Postmodern*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Leslie Armour, "Canada and the History of Philosophy," p. 22.

¹⁶ See in this connection Ian Angus, *A Border Within*, pp. 111-8.