

## **The Epistemic Status of Dependency**

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We live in a difficult time. Market economy rules the world triumphant; local cultures are subordinated and extinguished. If the rule of the market can be re-politicized, it will draw its resources from the survivals and extensions of such cultures. A time of crisis must look both backward and forward: recover its cultural formation from contemporary amnesia and push that formation to transform itself to address its new tasks. I make this demand of English Canada, that fragment of Canada whose national status is precarious and whose intellectual formation is largely unknown to its citizens.

### **1. English Canadian Philosophy**

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.”<sup>1</sup> The specific characteristics that Canadian Hegelianism adds to the Hegelian conception of a common good that

surpasses self-interest, 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.<sup>2</sup> Such a truth is, in Hegelian terms, a “concrete universal,” whose aim is the good of the community as a whole not of its parts considered separately. It thus contains a critique of a society whose social arrangements are dominated by the market (which is the simple sum of the interests of separate parts). English Canadian Hegelianism argues that the market, though a necessary part of society, must be subordinated to the common good of the community that is known in Hegelian terms as the state. Indeed, Armour argues that these characteristics are also evident in Francophone Canadian philosophy though in relation to the source of Catholic Thomism and Cartesianism rather than Protestant Hegelianism, thereby suggesting that it is their convergence due to the Canadian situation rather than their divergent European roots that is significant.<sup>3</sup>

Such a rationalist pluralism suggests, unlike a more orthodox Hegelianism,<sup>4</sup> an importance of medium-level political identities—such as ethnic groups, religious denominations or voluntary associations—between the individual and the state. Thus, 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.”<sup>5</sup> Reflection on the relation of identity and diversity in this spirit has been the dominant tendency of English Canadian philosophy.

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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 English Canadian philosophy which Armour and Trott not only discover as the

dominant tendency up to 1950 but also propagate in their interventions into 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 me as Hegelians because we utilize the concept of ‘border’ in our work.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> The qualified suspicion of synthesis here might sit well with a similar caution in English 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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. This is a difference that can't be mediated. 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.

Insofar as every political relationship can be described as a relation between self and other in a common context, the capacity to define the common context, or axis of comparison, is the key to the self-other relation. The empire from which Canada began is continued philosophically when the rule of interaction between cultures is determined independently of this interaction itself. Three models emerge immediately. One, a self-other relationship in which the rule or context remains unquestioned and unexamined. This often occurs when the imperial rule or context is taken to be obviously unsurpassable to the extent that it has become common sense. Two, a self-other relation in which the rule is established by one of the parties, thus dominating the context: in this case, the self addresses the other as the one who owns the rules of discourse within which the self-other relation takes place. This is an imperial and colonial relationship of domination. Such a relationship is operative in the first case (when the rule or context is unexamined) to the extent that failing to address the rule

that defines the context allows the description of the self-other relation to become an apology for empire. It ignores a main defining feature of the context of self-other interaction. The established historical interpretation of English Canadian philosophy as a self-other dialectic in which a substantive conception of the common good allows a recognition of the public legitimacy of a plurality of ethical-religious traditions is an apology for empire in this sense. Three, a genuine concept of a self-other relation must address the imperial rule that defines the context within which this dialectic has historically been confined. The critique of empire is thus the condition for the relation of self and other to itself constitute the rule or context of interaction. The rule would be amenable to no other legitimation than that worked out through the history of the self-other relation itself. This would be a post-colonial, post-imperial conception of a substantive public good encompassing diverse cultural traditions. It finds its origin in the same sources as English Canadian Hegelianism, but, by bringing to light and criticizing the presumption of empire to define the rule of interaction between communities, it promotes a more genuine self-other relation between communities. This is the task of a contemporary English Canadian philosophy that strives to articulate the hope imbedded in the structuring conditions of Canadian culture and history.

## **2. Empire and Dependency**

To address the influence of empire in defining the rule of interaction, we must leave the domain of established philosophy and turn to evidence more often investigated by

the social sciences. However, the aim is to incorporate this evidence philosophically though the idea of the rule that defines a context and not to reproduce the full historical influence of empire.

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."<sup>13</sup> 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 lived 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 does not assume a structuring role in both philosophy and politics.

### **3. The Task of English Canadian Philosophy**

While the relation between culture and philosophy is complex, a philosophy which claims to be English Canadian in the sense that it represents and interprets English 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.”<sup>15</sup> The secret of Canada, I want to claim, 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 embedded in 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. 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. It may be this critique of empire which Canada now needs to give the world.

The development and utilization of the concept of empire in Canadian social and political thought due to its origin in a dependent economy and nation has throughout its existence, even in conservative versions, contested the imperial assumptions of social and political thought in the United States and other imperial centres. This is not meant as special pleading nor as the adoption of a victim status. Moreover, it does not imply that Canada is in the same position as the most exploited nations of the world, for which reason it has sometimes been called a 'first-world dependency.' Rather, I want to suggest that Canada proposes to its social and political thinkers an epistemic issue which, when

thoroughly taken up, requires a critique of central assumptions in international, or imperial, thought.

Nor do I want to suggest that this epistemic issue is unique to Canada as such. It is unique only in the history and theoretic form in which the issue is taken up. Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea explained it this way; “problems like the ones Latin American philosophy raises about its identity seem only parochial, that is regional, and because of that limited to a relative point of view proper to a concrete man, and thus, alien to what is truly universal.”<sup>16</sup> Issues in dependent regions, whose articulation must pass through the publication centres of empire, are treated as ‘cases,’ whereas issues of human universality can be treated directly if one resides at the centre, that is to say, shares the assumptions that underpin empire. These assumptions cannot be simply dropped at will but require a critical interrogation. It is with regard to this critical interrogation that dependency has a privileged epistemic status.

To this extent, the epistemic claim that I am making for Canada could also be redeemed in Latin America or other dependencies. The point is that a new global critical discourse must go through the particularities of place to forge a universalizing dialogue. The epistemic issue is not a denial of universality in favour of an assertion of the plurality of empirical contexts. Universal concepts and claims are unavoidable in any theoretical discourse. The point is that such unavoidable universal claims often render relations of dependency invisible when they are articulated from the centre and imported into different situations. The predominance of imperial centres in the propagation of

ideas, even critical ideas, is central to this circumstance. An adequate critique of empire that can sustain an anti-hegemonic coalition against the neo-liberal market-oriented version of global empire requires a new concept of universalization that would not go directly from imperial instance to theoretical universality but from dependency, through the critique of empire, into relation with other localities, and toward a new universality. The epistemic status of dependency is in the implication of a critique of centrism. “A centrism consists in the subsumption of diverse experiences and contents under an explanatory scheme that is presupposed as universal although it incorporates elements that arose in a particular history. A return to concrete and particular experiences thus does not negate universality, but opens the possibility that a genuine universality might emerge through the displacement of centrisms.”<sup>17</sup> Critique of empire without an acknowledgement of dependency—that is to say, a critique of the epistemological and political assumptions inherent in centrism—remains an imperial critique.

The key issue is the dilemma between a particular and universal voice of address, which is based on the split between theory, or philosophy—which in the present context is international, or rather imperial—and cases, applications, examples—which are taken to be local, Canadian. Philosophy is not straightforwardly universal and international when considered from the viewpoint of its publication and circulation. Within the imperial centres one can move between examples and universals without interruption. In the periphery, examples count as exceptions which at most can modify the theory’s

application. If one attempts to universalize from one's experience at the periphery, one quickly encounters the limits of discussion as established by the centre.

While particular and universal modes of thinking and address theoretically can be reunited, this is a task, not our presently given situation. At present the Canadian anglophone intellectual must choose, for example, regarding each individual address, between publishing in Canada or publishing internationally. This choice determines the hegemonic body with which one will have to deal. Within Canada, there are organs of expression that deal with specifically Canadian issues. Outside Canada, there are theoretical organs of 'international' debate. Such debate occurs within the terms of the communicational body of empire and its centres such that those resident in the centres may move directly from their experiences to theoretical questions in which those experiences function as relevant examples. For them, there is no dilemma between particular and universal modes of address. For those outside the centres, their experiences do not function directly as examples for theory but are often classed as exceptions, particular cases without reasonable and relevant reference to theory. References to Canada in international debates, when they do not confirm the experiences of the centres, normally suffer this fate.

I do not mean to suggest that intra-Canadian bodies of communication are without hegemonic structure. To a large extent the Ottawa-Toronto-Montréal axis constructs a similar imperial dependency within Canada. This is not a problem with a single plane of analysis nor a single solution. There are many axes of dependency and forms of

marginalization. Each one must be taken to task in the terms appropriate to the constitution of the dependency itself. This would get us beyond the stale but pervasive confrontation between international postmodernism and Canadian nationalism toward an investigation of what can be called ‘multiple forms of dependencies,’<sup>18</sup> the manifold dimensions of exclusion, that can aid our various communities in designing local alternatives.

All real thinking requires an intense relationship between particular and universal. To the extent that empire impedes this relationship, it requires that the centre-periphery relationship be brought into thought and addressed practically by designing new bodies of communication. Such a practice implies a critique of empire, Eurocentrism, etc. Critique of empire implies a critique of this division, that is to say, a critique of the merely purported universality of centres and an open-ness to the universalizing aspects of the peripheral experience. The practice of critique is thus a starting-point in performing an intense relationship between particular and universal. Such a critical practice teleologically implies a non-centric, or anti-centric, or post-centric, form of thought. We can never adequately strive for such a post-centric thought without forms of expression that communicate the intellectual task to its public and develop forms of critique and debate that advance that task. To that extent, the philosophy of English Canada is not merely parochial but pertains to the contribution we might make to a genuine form of human universality.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> This short summary is based on 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).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the sources cited in the previous note, see Leslie Armour, "The Social and Philosophical Origins of Rational Religion in Quebec and English Canada" in Henri-Paul Cunningham and F. Temple Kingston, *Friendship and Dialogue Between Ontario and Quebec* (Windsor: Canterbury College, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> 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).

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Trott, "Western Mindscapes: A Philosophical Challenge," *American Review of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 2001, pp. 3, 7.

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

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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

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

<sup>13</sup> Harold Innis, "Conclusion from The Fur Trade in Canada" in D. Taras, B. Rasporich, and E. Mandel (eds.) *A Passion for Identity* (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1993) pp. 18-9.

<sup>14</sup> Harold Innis, 2/1 in *The Idea File* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1980). Linda Hutcheon notes the identical phenomenon in Canadian literature in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie Armour, "Canada and the History of Philosophy," p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Leopoldo Zea, "Identity: A Latin American Philosophical Problem" in *Philosophical Forum*, No. 20, 1988-9, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Angus, *A Border Within*, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 40-7.