

### ***Post-centrism and Thought about our Location***

My remarks will be oriented not so much to scholarly publication in English Canada as to the background reasons why we need organs of publication, mutual criticism and debate based in this fragment of Canada. It will be about the publishing dilemma of the anglophone Canadian intellectual.

Let me begin by telling you a story which I must violate some of the conventions of scholarly reticence to tell. Recently, I submitted a paper to the major U.S. journal—or, as they say, international journal—*Constellations*, which is concerned with democratic political theory. The paper is admittedly not yet properly finished, but I have read it at three conferences in Canada and it has recently been published in French. The paper was turned down unequivocally by the journal with the remark that “the most interesting idea in the paper is the suggestion that “the legitimacy of established institutions must depend on the degree to which they are rendered so in widespread public deliberation” suggesting however that “the author appears to move in the direction of identity politics ... but unlike those such as Kymlicka and Young, seems unconcerned with the kind of undemocratic communalism that this approach—without safeguards—can produce.” Now, the “most interesting idea” to which they refer is to a preparatory remark inserted in a later draft to make it clear that I am not concerned with democracy as a piece of fluff covering institutions established without debate by the capitalist economy or the nation-state, but with a democracy that could make inroads on such powers. This is not an “interesting idea.” It is central to the substance of democracy as anything more than window-dressing and this is hardly my idea. My other failing appears to be that I did not refer to Kymlicka and Young and, especially, that I did not address the undemocratic potentials of communalism.

Now, it is of course possible that my paper was lacking in several respects and not worthy of being published. However, it is important that these processes of selection be brought into the light for scrutiny and there is some value in beginning from an actual case. I want to note, first, that the remark that was selected as “most interesting” was prefatory and not particularly germane to my argument as a whole. Second, and most important, the paper was assessed in terms of a failure to address the undemocratic potentials of communalism. I have no doubt that there are such undemocratic potentials and that they could be profitably addressed in a paper but that was not what my paper was about. Of course, it is also possible that this prestigious U.S.—sorry, international—journal has dropped the ball and chosen poor readers this time. But I chose this story because it is symptomatic of my experience as an English Canadian intellectual concerned with Canadian and world issues over the last thirty years. It is characteristic, not eccentric. Characteristic of what? Characteristic of the hegemonic definition of political problems within the United States. The notion that democracy is a basis for legitimation of major social institutions and should not assume them as given is regarded as an “interesting idea.” The major problem that any defence of a plurality of legitimate political traditions must address is the limits of such ‘tolerance’ in

undemocratic communalism. This is required, not simply one question among others.

These were the two main points that justified an outright rejection of the paper. At the very least, I was deprived of the helpful commentary that would allow me to improve the paper and revise it for a U.S. and/or international readership, thereby allowing in some measure a contribution to the agenda for contemporary democratic theory. The point here is that the requisites of discussion utilized by *Constellations* do not operate as such in Canada—nor, I would venture to add in other parts of the world. In Canada, the main problem about plural traditions is not where one's tolerance finds a limit, but how to develop a model of co-learning prior to that limit, which would also have an influence on the co-determination of that limit. It is not mainly about to what extent 'we' can tolerate 'them.' I venture that this is because we do not have a military that could police these limits. This is the danger of a hegemonic definition of democracy: its participation in the rallying of a population behind imperial power. This journal, based at the New School in New York, which styles itself as "an international journal of critical and democratic theory," and which has its origins in *Praxis* the journal of dissident Yugoslav Marxism, functions nowadays to police the limits of what is acceptable as democratic theory.

The point of the story is that the limits of international discussion derive from the United States and other imperial centres. It is crucial to have sites of expression that push and undermine these limits. I do not imagine that the U.S. is the only location that attempts to define hegemonic limits in this way. I only claim that it is the most important in the world and that it is crucial for English-speaking intellectuals like those of us in English Canada.

My story was meant to encapsulate a dominant experience throughout my thinking and publishing life. My work on Canada tends to become 'Canadian Studies' or 'Canadian cultural studies' whereas my theoretical, philosophical work proceeds without any reference to Canada. In my study I experience a continuous interplay between these two. That's not good enough. I don't experience a division at all. It is my reflection on Canadian problems that have often led to the articulation of philosophical positions. But those philosophical positions are generally published without any reference to Canada. The sections of *A Border Within* that sought to express the co-occurrence of the experience of Canada with the universal, philosophical task were the least remarked upon. I am not two people. I may not be one. I may be many, but I am not two. This division in my work is a consequence of the publishing regime.

The presupposition of the previous remarks is that scholarly communication, like communication in general, should not be understood as the discourse of a bodiless world-spirit, but as a material process. The organs of address and response are the body that enables communication. When considered as a material body, it is easy to understand that communication is thoroughly immersed in the hegemonic processes whereby certain addresses and responses are enabled whereas others are systematically made more

difficult or even impossible. This is not primarily a matter of direct censorship but of the systemic structure of the available bodies of communication—a systemic bias, one may say, that depends on where one must go to address and respond and what is considered reasonable and relevant within those hegemonic bodies.

I think that the key issue is the dilemma between a particular and universal voice of address, which is based on the split between theory—which in the present context is international, or rather imperial—and cases, applications, examples—which are taken to be local, Canadian. Theory 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 address theoretically can be reunited, this is a task, not our presently given situation. At present the Canadian anglophone intellectual must choose, 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 I have called a "plurality of dependencies," the manifold dimensions of exclusion, that can aid our various communities in designing counter-hegemonies.

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, my defence of the necessity of scholarly publication in English Canada is not merely parochial but pertains to the contribution we might make to a genuine form of human universality.