

Louis Riel and English Canadian Political Thought

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I want to propose an outline for English Canadian political thought in the present moment. This outline is based upon an understanding of philosophy as rooted in the culture of a people and as articulating the hopes imbedded in this culture in a manner relevant to understanding the human condition. Such hopes, in turn, are forged through the history of social, economic and political experience. Suffering and hope are knitted together in human experience. While philosophy addresses the universality of the human condition, it can do so only by working through the particularity of experience. This particularity takes form when moulded by philosophy into a characteristic tradition of political thought.

I will begin by sketching the established understanding of English Canadian political thought as a specific interplay of diversity and unity.¹ I will then look at one recent formulation of this understanding to show that it overlooks the imperial dimension of this specific interplay in the constitution of Canadian civil culture, noting in comparison how also a recent account of empire based on the experience of the United States misunderstands the productive and positive role of the borders that create diversities. With the name of Louis Riel—the great Métis leader of the two North-West Rebellions—I personify the critique of empire that contemporary English Canadian political thought must address in formulating the relationship between diversity and unity. The conclusion outlines the present task for Canadian political thought through the non-hierarchical relation between communities that a thorough critique of empire requires.

I

The common origin of Canada and the United States in the English political tradition, combined with the difference in the manner in which each achieved a break with the British Empire, is significant for a contemporary critique of empire. The significance of the

American revolutionary break, under the influence of 18th century political ideas of natural right, and the consequent influence that this revolution has had on all new world nations, has meant that Canadian political culture has often been articulated in contrast to the pervasive enlightenment individualism and a-historism of the United States.

It has been commonplace to describe the different character of Canadian identity from the United States with reference to the greater communitarian component of Canadian political culture. Whether this communitarianism is attributed to the influence of a non-revolutionary political tradition, Loyalism, a harsh winter climate, French-English accommodation, it is widely accepted that, “America reflects the influence of its classically liberal, Whig, individualistic, antistatist, populist, ideological origins. Canada ... can still be seen as Tory-mercantilist, group-oriented, statist, deferential to authority – a ‘socialist monarchy,’ to use Robertson Davies’ phrase” (Lipset, 1989: 212). The communitarian emphasis has been matched by a particular manner of dealing with cultural diversity. Canadian philosophy has been characterized by what Leslie Armour has called a “rationalist pluralism” in which “either a plurality of views can be justified or a new synthesis of apparently conflicting views can be found” (1997: 4). This has also been called by the same philosopher and his collaborator Elizabeth Trott a “philosophical federalism” defined as “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” (1981: 4). Probably because of a weak national identity, Canadian culture has tended to assume that there is no one overarching identity or community that effectively could subsume the plurality of communities. Thus, multicultural policy, everyday practices, and philosophical articulations tend not only to have a communitarian bias but also to assume a plurality of relevant communities. Armour has concluded that “what we have in common cannot be expressed through a single community

... this pluralism is related to our communitarianism” (1981: 109). The Hegelianism of classic Canadian philosopher John Watson (1847-1939) already asserted that totality is a product of moral reason which requires a plurality of communities for its expression (Armour and Trott, 1981: chapter 7; Armour, 1997; Trott, 2000). This particular mixture of identity and diversity is from a comparative viewpoint the core feature of Canadian political culture around which debates and disagreements have swirled and which has demanded articulation in Canadian philosophy.

A recent analysis by Michael Dorland and Maurice Charland revisits this established *topos* in order to argue that Canadian communitarian and diverse political culture is rooted in the role and nature of law (2002). But ignoring or downplaying the process whereby the limits of civility have been established in historical events characterizes the history too benignly, unnecessarily constrains what currently seems possible, unwarrantedly universalizes the result of the history, and misinterprets the specificity of Canadian culture by failing to address the motive, or origin, of its dynamism in representing difference. The persisting disorder of Canadian history is perhaps most apparent during the Riel Rebellions which show “the difficulties of the dominant legal regime’s acceptance of pluralistic legal subjectivities, which its very logic paradoxically keeps bringing to the fore” (Dorland and Charland: 154). The Métis differentiated themselves from both Indians and whites. The Manitoba Act (1870) recognized a new civil status of ‘half-breeds’ and their land title, though in the form of alienable private property which extinguished the French river-lot system, while at the same time affirming Federal sovereignty. The close of the later 1885 Rebellion and the hanging of Riel confirmed this result.

Riel tested the limits of of the legal civil culture and, I argue, showed that it represented only the official culture guaranteed by the stamp of Empire and not the whole of Canadian

culture and history. Riel may well be the absent father of Confederation and progenitor of multiculturalism (Dorland and Charland: 154), but it seems that he is acceptable within Canadian civil culture only to the slight extent that the Métis claimed, and were recognized by Ottawa, to be, or be willing to become, rights-bearing Englishmen and has been banished to exactly the extent that they claimed an original self-constitution. Clearly, the articulation of the identity and diversity of Canadian culture by Canadian philosophy must attend to the concept of ‘empire’ whereby the limits of official culture were established and claims to independence were shunted aside by both law and force. This much we owe it to the stubbornness of Riel to keep before our minds.

II

We must also ask: From what origin arises the *motive* for making claims that require the extension and revision of the cultural tradition whose continuity has been established by Empire? The issue here can be clarified with reference to Dorland and Charland’s account of the women’s suffrage movement. They argue that “irony can be a lever into civil discourse, allowing those who have been excluded ... [to force] it to live up to its manifest content. Irony has thus been the preferred Canadian rhetorical idiom” (Dorland and Charland: 313). Consequently, Canadian political debate has been mainly about whether it was already time to yield to progress or still too soon—a rhetorical figure of official Canadian political culture which has persisted to this day.

This Tory-Whig (conservative-liberal) alternative exhausts the ‘civil’ political spectrum of official culture, but it cannot speak about the continuity from Empire to Commonwealth to nation-state to nations-state that has prevailed by stamping out the outside that has threatened to disrupt ‘progress’ inside the Empire. This inside-outside spectrum opens a

space for civil culture precisely because ironic self-performance sits at the extreme of the negation of the past. What, then, brings this extreme into existence? Can it be derived from its opposite, a faith in a realized, or nearly realized political good based, ultimately, in the rights of Englishmen? No. If it is a genuine and substantive opposite, as opposed to a merely logical negation that would yield a straightforward cynicism with regard to the national political culture, it must contain substantively different features. In the debates around the BNA Act, the North-West Rebellions and the women's suffrage movement this substantive difference was often provided by the influence of Enlightenment doctrines of natural law from the United States that, even while being rejected in that form and transformed to enter into Canadian civil culture, depended on it as a motive. This influence need not always take the form of natural law doctrine, nor need it come from outside in a geographical sense, but it must come from 'outside' the established discourse in order to provide a motive for transformation. A tradition-bound and tradition-extending conception of civil culture cannot account for this motive, which it takes always as a simple given, as if it were obvious. In other words, without the disruptive independence of Riel official Canadian culture would not have been as responsive to difference as it has been.

When it is not investigated how the limit that defines official civil discourse is drawn, both the outside motive for 'progress' and the 'official-ness' of official culture become invisible. Thus, alongside the centrality of law to Canadian civil culture we must recognize the inability of law to definitively resolve the problems which it inherits and colonizes from social struggles, an inability which persisted through the Royal Proclamation (1763), the Quebec Act (1774), the Constitution Act (1791), the Act of Union (1840) to the British North America Act (1867) which constituted Canada as such but didn't resolve the issues which, as we all know, have persisted until our own day not simply as 'normal politics' but as

constitution-making. The inadequacy of official culture consists precisely in its washing-out of the spirit of independence, a washing-out that never finally succeeds, and thus an official culture periodically in crisis.

Without such a motive external to the civil culture there can be no irony but only those in 'too much of a rush' toward progress. But ironic participation, and struggle for participation, requires the prior experience of the civil culture as a limitation. If Riel is the outside of Canadian civil culture, women's suffrage is the outside come inside and thus represents the *motive* which drives official culture 'forward' and the ironic means by which it does so. The difference between the outside and the inside is constituted by the prior existence of 'woman' as a citizen-identity such that the political issue becomes one of transformation not radical founding or independence. The absence of such a prior, though limited official identity, is what consigns the great Métis leader to the alternative of madness or military defeat. But what if they had won? Is not this possibility, though never realized, also part of what defines Canadian culture as what it is?

I conclude that Canadian civility achieves the representation of difference by ignoring the inventive 'outside' of official culture. Official culture proceeds through the erasure of the outside, the claim to independence, that is required by continuity with the Empire. It should serve to show that another, better, attempt would begin from the land-based disruption of historical continuity that also inhabits Canadian culture. This is why I have previously defined the development of Canadian culture as "political continuity articulated through the public intervention of the federal state and a sense of break, of difference, elucidated through relationship to the land, nature, environment" (Angus, 1997: 114).

III

Through this understanding of the erasure of the outside we can define the limits of civility that have been established by empire, but we have not yet approached the motive for independence that animated the struggle against it. This issue is apparent in Canadian culture in the relation, and difference, between Riel and the woman's suffrage movement. Neither of these can be properly understood, nor included within Canadian culture, by the story of continuous unfolding of the rights of Englishmen. Similarity: A previously existing identity without independence. Difference: The extent to which such independence is, or can be, sought within the existent institutions of the Empire or subsequent nation-state.

If we refer to the founding document of the Métis, the *Declaration of the People of Rupert's Land and the North-West* (1869), there are two important assertions that together ground their claim to independence. First, they point out that they have been abandoned by their previous 'government' the Hudson Bay Company and, without their consent, subjugated to a foreign power (Canada). Second, they point out that they have defended their land from neighbouring Indian tribes and are "firmly resolved in future, not less than in the past, to repel all invasions from whatsoever quarter they may come" (Proclamation of the Provisional Government, Dec. 8, 1869: 906). Their ability to repel invaders does not itself constitute a sufficient right to self-constitution but, they assert that it is "admitted, that a people, when it has no government, is free to adopt one form of Government, in preference to another, to give or refuse allegiance to that which is proposed" (Proclamation of the Provisional Government, Dec. 8, 1869: 904). I doubt that such a right is as generally admitted as it is asserted, or, at least, that empires when claiming dominion over 'all lands that touch such-and-such a sea,' and so forth, are likely in practice to recognize such a right. It appears that between the absence of government and ability to defend itself, on the one

hand, and the claim to self-constitution and independence, on the other, there is a connection that was perhaps too self-evident to proclaim in this context: self-defence shows that they have successfully *inhabited* the land. It is this inhabitation that grounds their existence as a people and thus their *right* to choose their own government. This connection was asserted directly in another document. “We possess to-day, without partition, almost the half of a continent. The expulsion or annihilation of the invaders has rendered our land natal to its children” (“To the Inhabitants of the North and the North-West.” Fort Garry. 70/04/07: 78). Inhabitation of the land allows one to pass it on to one’s children to whom it becomes a native land. These children, whatever the origins of their parents, become a people through such inhabitation over generations and it is this which grounds their right to self-government.

The claim that Canada’s history has been oriented around ‘community and diversity’ originating in the encounter of English and French and continuing through various regional, racial-cultural and gender struggles up to the present politics of identity does, as far as it goes, sketch the main features of official culture. But it misses the motive for the movement, or ‘progress,’ of official culture because it ignores the process by which certain available alternatives (which I personify with the name of Riel) were repressed and kept ‘outside’ and cannot explain the motive which drives official culture but only accept it as a simple given. It understands civility only as civil peace and order and fails to understand the inherent tendency to complacency, banality and silence that the continuous history of rights-bearing Englishmen saddles us with. That in Canadian culture which breaks with this complacency is indebted to those who, like Riel, claimed independence ‘outside’ and provided the motive ‘inside’ for critique. Thus, the civil version does not represent Canadian culture outright. Canadian culture extends beyond official civil culture characterized by tradition and

continuity to the experiences on the land which motivated a break with tradition. History represents the official and conservative component of Canadian culture, while geography, traversal and inhabitation of the land, is the place of its disruptive, radical component. This disruption takes the form of a will to independence of identities formed under Empire but not of a self-constitution of those identities themselves. Consequently, the rendering of Canadian culture in terms of the adequate representation of difference is a taming of its disruptive outside and the making of an apology for the continuance, through mitigation, of Empire. It is the experience of the land that is both the disruptive alternative to Empire and also the 'progressive' motive for the formation of a civil culture. While this experience leans on various doctrines available at the time, such as natural rights, its primal character is not dependent on any such doctrine. It is equally, indeed more, drawn to the pre-Enlightenment, ancient doctrine by which the land belongs to those who work it and those who work it belong also to the land—an identity rooted in the inhabitation of a place which empire must necessarily repress. This archaism survives within Canadian political culture even though it is expelled from official culture.

IV

If I have succeeded in showing that the official version of Canadian culture that claims a successful representation of difference is lacking due to its origin in, and the persistence of, empire, I can perhaps turn to an influential recent account of empire to show the nature of the political invention of Canada.

In their historical narrative of the American empire, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri attempt to demonstrate that the United States was torn between a tendency toward returning to a classical European imperialism and an overcoming of itself toward a deterritorialized

Empire (2000). This came to a decision point in the early 20th century in the opposition between Roosevelt and Wilson. Wilson's proposal of "the idea of peace as product of a new world network of powers" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 175) extended the U.S. constitutional project beyond its borders and laid the foundation of the new Empire whose constitution resides in the United Nations. This decision-point was reached because, as they say, "the great open American spaces ran out," "open terrain was limited," "the open terrain had been used up," closing off the "boundless frontier of freedom" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 172, 174, 406).

At the climax of their politico-cultural discourse about the origin of the Empire's concept of sovereignty, Hardt and Negri resort to an apparently unambiguous geographical closure. Not a geo-political or geo-cultural space, but a simply geographical space is the only one that can "run out" or be "used up" in this way. The politico-cultural discourse is brought to a decision-point because of an entirely non-political, non-cultural, geographical determinism. The open land just ran out. They do not consider that it might have been displaced—onto the space race as 'the final frontier,' for example—and still today be a constituent component of U. S. political culture. They do consider that this space was not actually open, but inhabited, though they discount this feature since "this contradiction may not properly be conceived as a crisis since Native Americans are so dramatically excluded from and external to the workings of the constitutional machine" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 170). The frontier was, according to Hardt and Negri, "a frontier of liberty" because "across the great open spaces the constituent tendency wins out over the constitutional decree, the tendency of immanence over regulative reflection, and the initiative of the multitude over the centralization of power" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 169). It is this expansive liberty that the Yankees have been so kind as to export.

One should notice here not only the theoretical incoherence of closing a politico-cultural discourse with a geographical determinism, but the inadequacy of the account of closing itself. To say that the great open spaces ran out is to assume that it was somehow impossible for the expansive tendency to turn either north or south when it hit the Pacific Ocean. The Rio Grande and the 49th parallel are geographical markers, but they are not a geographical closure to the U.S. expansive tendency in a determinist sense. They are geo-political and geo-cultural borders. The account of the constitution of these borders as borders requires politico-cultural, including military, explanation. The lack of such explanation in Hardt and Negri's theoretical narrative is not a mere absence. It takes us to the core of the failure of their concept of empire.

Restrictions to movement are assumed to be, and clearly marked as, repressive. The notion that a restriction of movement, such as an external border to the U.S. expansive tendency, might not be repressive, might be the opportunity for something else to exist, is unthinkable. This is characteristic Yankee ideology. It is for this reason that I have previously defined the United States not through the supposed empty (geographical) frontier but through the (politico-cultural) Munroe Doctrine. "The United States names itself 'America' since its outward rush is not self-limiting but would extend as far as the natural limit of the continent. The frontier thus continues itself in the Munroe Doctrine, in which Americans claim the right to interference in all the affairs of the continent" (Angus, 1997: 128).² The frontier is a politico-cultural project, as is its closure. The closure is demanded by the existence of other politico-cultural projects south of the Rio Grande, north of the 49th parallel, and among the Native Americans. It is unthinkable in Hardt and Negri's theoretical narrative that this restriction of movement might be seen as enabling by these other political projects—that the outside might not be merely an outside but a limitation, a border, which

lets difference appear. It is this which limits their theoretical perspective to one within U.S. expansionism; it never looks at such a politico-cultural project from the outside. In other words, the border is theorized from only one side, from which it appears as an unaccountable closure, an irrational limit to the expansion of freedom. From the other side, this border appears as a necessary halt to expansionism so that our different, particular politico-cultural project can appear in the world. Such a perspective is made unthinkable in Hardt and Negri's account due to the unaccountable switch from a politico-cultural concept of space to a merely quantitative one. It thus constitutes an unexamined assumption within the theoretical narrative. This would cast in another light the often-remarked fact that what has been called 'postmodernism' has a particular relation to the United States.

I conclude: U. S. political culture is based upon an unbounded rush to colonize its outside. Canadian culture begins from erecting a border against the imperial project and centres upon the representation of difference, but in its official version erases the outside that provides the constitutive motive for the representation of difference.

V

It is an established historical interpretation of English Canadian philosophy that it defends a substantive conception of the common good alongside a recognition of the public legitimacy of a plurality of ethical-religious traditions. I have argued, however, that it must also incorporate a critique of empire and the claim to independence in homage to the stubbornness of Riel. The conceptual core of this homage is a 'border' that sets a limit to expansion. Thus I suggest that an English Canadian political thought that can adequately formulate the relation of identity and diversity must be both multi-cultural and post-colonial. The concept of democracy itself contains and promotes a substantive and constitutive

common good, which, nevertheless, cannot be articulated separately from the substantive and constitutive goods inherent in the traditions of various partial communities existent within the polity.

A discourse can be said to be multicultural insofar as the cultural tradition upon which a given political action draws for its legitimation is not the only relevant cultural tradition upon which a responding action can draw. A discourse can be said to be postcolonial insofar as the institutional tradition within which a political action occurs is open to debate about the rules on which it is based, not only the practices that refer to the rules.

The understanding of multiculturalism as a plurality of publicly relevant cultural traditions can be expanded to include the somewhat distinct notion of a post-colonial political action in order to clarify a certain component of the plurality of legitimating traditions. This plurality—which has been present in Canada since its colonial inception and has, at least to some degree, always found official recognition—can be domesticated through the colonial assumption that one discourse is the only *legitimate* basis for the adjudication of competing claims. The post-coloniality of a political action consists in the recognition that the plurality of traditions each contribute to political discourse and therefore legitimates a plurality of traditions to which political action may refer to provide a meaningful context in intervening in public discourse. Post-coloniality thus refers to the impossibility of hierarchizing the plurality of traditions. My intention in highlighting this component of contemporary democratic theory was to justify a certain interpretation of Federalism as the history of processes of inclusion of particularities into a proposed universality (Angus, 2002). Thus, to understand Federalism as a tradition of diverse accommodations rather than submission under a homogeneous set of institutional arrangements. It is upon this tradition of accommodation of particularities that a post-colonial democratic practice can orient itself.

The centring legacy of Canadian Federalism due to its origin in the British Empire, and its continuing imperial relation to internal nationalities through conquest, has been displaced—though certainly not overcome—through the history of specific acts of accommodation to particularities. Empire allows the other to speak but controls the rules of interaction between speakers such that the context, or the rules of interaction, is itself monopolized. Radical democracy therefore contains an emergent concept of federation that must not only address the question of ‘the right of the other to speak’ but also the question of the ‘legitimate tradition(s)’ within which such speech will be interpreted. Aboriginal speech, for example, has been present in Canada since its inception, but the Canadian nation-state has never ceded it an equal right to construct the rules of interaction. Speech that is barred from touching the rules of interaction becomes a ‘minority’ speech precisely through this bar. It is relegated to being a content, whereas imperial speech not only provided content but also a tradition which decided the definitive interpretation of the act in question. In principle, post-coloniality thus refers not only to the presence of a plurality of traditions in a given context but primarily to the inability of any one of these traditions to monopolize the rules.³

The multicultural and post-colonial political subject is constituted by two ‘levels’ of identifications. Instead of identifying directly with the nation, the subject identifies with a sub-national group such as a linguistic, ethnic, gender or regional identity, and *through this identification* identifies also *in a particular way* with the nation. The nation is thus constituted by its internal plurality. If, within this internal plurality, no group or tradition can monopolize the rules of political discourse, if the rules of political discourse become as open to negotiation between groups and traditions as political decisions themselves, then the critique of empire authentically has come to constitute the relation between identity and diversity.

VI

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. Empire is continued 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 or context is established by one of the parties: 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 such a failure allows the description of the self-other relation in these terms becomes an apology for empire. 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 or context within which this dialectic has historically been confined. The critique of empire is thus condition for the relation of self and other to itself constitute the rule or context of interaction. The rule or context 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. This is the task of a contemporary

English Canadian political thought that strives to articulate the hope imbedded in the structuring conditions of Canadian culture and history.

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Footnotes:

¹ By the "established understanding of English Canadian philosophy" I mean that understanding as established by the detailed historical and philosophical work of Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott (1981). While I accept their historical thesis regarding the specific character of the relation between identity and diversity in the dominant English Canadian Hegelianism, I take issue with their attempt to apply that understanding to contemporary Canadian philosophy and culture, singling out the absence of a concept of empire. By implication, I thus regard their historical work as insufficiently critical, though this implication is not pursued in this essay. My criticism should in no sense devalue the enormous importance of that ground-breaking and original historical work. The historical thesis is present not only in English Canadian philosophy but also throughout social science

and the humanities and is thus of importance far beyond the discipline of philosophy in the narrow sense.

² The reference in this quotation to the “natural limit of the continent” does not make this argument a geographical determinism because its natural quality has been rendered politico-cultural by naming it ‘America.’ The apparently natural limit is thus a geo-cultural inscription of a political project.

³ If no single tradition ‘owns’ the context, then every speech act functions in a double fashion: as a statement in a given debate and as a ‘representative’ of the tradition which gives it meaning, such that this representation constitutes a claim to interpret the context of interaction. For this reason, I have argued that such a speech act becomes a constitutive paradox (Angus, 2003).