From Guardianism to Postmodernism: Historiography and the Interpretation of Canadian Political Culture

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Abstract This article seeks to go some way toward shedding light on a certain dimension of Canadian intellectual history, specifically that dimension wherein the changing theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of Canadian political culture is the core subject matter. Canadian political culture will be defined here as that collation of ideas, principles, thoughts and opinions which foster the establishment and continuation of a set of political structures and institutions which are liberal democratic at their foundations. With this as a guiding definition the article examines the “paradigm shifts” in the study of English Canadian political culture that have taken place from the days of “The Makers of Canada,” through the ascendancy of the “Fragment Thesis,” to the more contemporary postmodernism of the “Liberal Order Framework.” The foundational assumption of the article is that debate and discussion about the Canadian experience in such fields as political philosophy, intellectual history, party ideology, constitutional structure, legislative procedure, executive power, judicial authority and local governance will tend to be shaped by the historiographical paradigm which has been most successful in making itself the accepted “orthodoxy” in the academic and intellectual circles of the period.

The purpose of this article is to shed some light on a segment of Canadian intellectual history, in particular the changing theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of Canadian political culture. My definition of this phenomenon in what follows will be that supplied by James W. Ceaser who says that “Each nation, by definition, has a political culture” and that such a culture must be understood ultimately “by reference to the ideas that govern how people see the world and formulate their opinions.” For Ceaser, political structures and institutions do not so much embody specific ideas as they form mental habits. These mental habits will in turn determine whether those political structures and institutions flourish or fail precisely because they are the products of that which is dependent upon them. Thus political culture is “a set of philosophic ideas, capable of being embodied in the mental habits of citizens that can provide people with the means and the will to maintain their (political and institutional) freedom” (Ceaser, 1990, 145, 157, 176). Following Ceaser, then, my working definition of Canadian political culture will be that collation of ideas, principles, thoughts and opinions which foster the establishment and continuation of a set of political structures and institutions in Canada which are liberal
democratic at their foundations. Such a definition can open the way to questions of political philosophy, intellectual history, party ideology, constitutional structure, legislative procedure, executive power, judicial authority and local governance. In the light of the above definition the thematic and implicit question of the discussion is, “has there been true progress in the understanding of Canadian political culture, or has it been the case that for every two steps forward there have been one or even more steps back?”

John English helps to set the agenda here when he says that the “troubles for political history” began in the 1960s “when the traditional came to represent not authority but fustiness or even repression.” Up until that time, he explains, the tradition of Canadian historical writing had been pre-eminently “political” and the historian came to sight as “the guardian of the national tradition” (English, 1986, 1; emphasis added). Lorne Pierce’s “The Makers of Canada” series appeared in this period consisting of 21 volumes devoted to the “Choice Men” (Curtis, 1992) who made the Dominion (Osborne, 2002). These studies were authored by a group of distinguished “guardians” ranging from Stephen Leacock and John George Bourinot to Adam Shortt and William Dawson LeSueur.

But more recently, English says, historians have been “reluctant to accept the primacy of politics.” He attributes this tendency to factors such as “the expansion of the economy and of the scope of the modern state” (English, 1986, 1). These forces acted to make the private sphere the chief locus of human endeavor for all but a few. It was no longer assumed that in order to understand earlier times one would have to get into a frame of mind where the political takes precedence over the sub-political or economic and social dimensions of human activity. To be sure, such a term as “political” when used in an adjectival sense such as in the term “political culture” is decidedly broad or even vague, lacking as it does the precision of “political constitution” or even “political nationality” (Smiley, 1967). But however this might be, the word “political” has a different connotation from economic or social or even “societal.” One may say it includes the economic and societal but not *vice versa*. Yet for the “guardian” type of historian, the outcome of the disappearance of the “primacy of politics” was the inevitable loss of the “esteem of their fellow professionals.” (English, 1986, 1-3; See Berger, 1986; Schultz, 1990; Dawson and Dummit, 2009; and Wright, 2005).

English’s remarks suggest that if there were “troubles for political history” then in all likelihood there were also “troubles for political science.” One commentator observes in this connection that political science today “finds itself in the midst of a crisis concerning its conceptual foundations…not only because it has progressively become a purely empirical and descriptive science, but also because it is torn by a plurality of methods” (Volpi, 1999, 5). So addressing the political science “troubles” as well as those in history certainly makes sense if we allow with English that the Canadian intellectual debate from the 1920s through the 1950s had been marked by “close ties between Canadian political scientists and historians.” In English’s account, political scientists turned from political theory and historical analyses to the study of voting behavior, policy analysis, and other “so called scientific approaches to the discipline which were of limited interest and utility to historians” (English, 1986, 7). Thus the old *entente disciplinaire* dissolved. Needless to say the withering away of these ties was no small development in the study of Canadian political culture.

**Historiography**

We know then that the historiographical frameworks anchored in the history and political science disciplines have been in no small amount of flux. By
“historiography” here I do not mean a systematic “methodology” of specialized research. I refer rather to those approaches to Canadian political culture for which the Canadian past is the starting point of understanding both in connection with the present national circumstances and the ideational content of the Canadian mind. Thus it is meant to include historiographical work as pursued in professional or academic history insofar as it treats of Canadian political culture as well as the parallel efforts pursued under the aegis of political science.

The subject of this article then is the shifting sequence of scholarly “paradigms” in the study of Canadian political culture. (See Simon, 1981; Kuhn, 1996). By “paradigm” here I mean a frame of reference or an organizing intellectual structure within which the details of Canadian political and social experience may be interpreted. For example, a “Whig” paradigm would interpret Canadian history in terms of a series of high points—1791, 1841, 1867, 1931, 1982—at which points the advancement of the values of constitutionalism, liberal freedom and progress beyond prior stages could be measured (Butterfield, 1965). A Marxist paradigm by contrast would tend to leave such moments in the shadows in order to focus on the evolving relationship of an agricultural or a resource-based economy to one that is industrialized and the changing place of labour in that story (Ryerson, 1960, 1968). Allowing this as the general sense in which the term “paradigm” is meant the scholarly literature which I would like to address here includes both political scientists and historians who have contributed to the body of Canadian historiography available to scholars of any discipline.

I should stipulate here at the outset that this paper is English-Canada-“centric” in that it does not attempt to treat of the French-Canadian experience in any direct and separate way. Such an English-Canadian focus must by definition begin from a rejection of David V.J. Bell’s claim that English Canada is a “non-existent abstraction” (1988). By contrast with this claim John Ralston Saul has no doubts about English Canada’s existence as part of a phenomenon we call “Canada.” His point is rather to claim that to the extent this phenomenon is an outgrowth of Western civilization its political culture is of necessity “profoundly linear.” What he means by this is made more clear when he contrasts western “linearism” with the alternative which is to be seen in the Aboriginal historical experience which is “circular” (2012). It is not our purpose here to referee the debate between what Herbert Butterfield famously called “The Whig Interpretation of History” and Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous “Eternal Return of the Same” (Butterfield, 1965: Nietzsche, 1954, 269-270; 1974, 273-274, 1967, 548-549).

But what we can say is that for there to be either “linear” or “circular” elements or some combination of the two in whatever proportion in any phenomenon, that phenomenon has at least have the potential for existence. An acceptance of the existence of English Canada as a part of a “Canada” that is a real and genuine enough entity to provide some kind of ground upon which the claims of “linearism” and “circularism” might be refereed is the premise of Saul’s claim and I follow him to this extent.

But whatever may be the issue between Bell and Saul, the fact is that in contrast to the “guardian” historiography discussed by English, the “Bellian” view, if we may call it that, perhaps in pursuit of the pith and substance missing in the “non-existent abstraction” called “Canada,” has tended to fragment Canadian history into regional, class, ethnic, black, labour, women’s, gender, family, urban, rural and educational sub-fields. Within these sub-fields there can be even further fragmentation in pursuit of specialized knowledge in such areas as medicine, poverty, immigration and sexual orientation.
and practices (See Adams et.al. 2013; Macpherson, 2013; Sawchuk, 2001; Simeon and Elkins, 1974).

This paper, however, will not orient itself by regional, local, class, ethnic, gender or generally “pluralist” diversity. Rather it shall assume that English Canada is in fact a non-abstract reality and on this basis further assume that to develop an historiography concerning it is an inherently rational enterprise even if that historiography remains unspecialized in terms of regions, provinces and localities. The assumption here is that English-Canadian historiography, whether of the “history” or “political science” kind can be taken as Canadian historiography insofar as its general assertions and claims may prudently be accepted as rationally applicable to parts of the Canadian whole without specification. To reject this claim is as much as to say that there are no possible “universals” to be stated as far as the political entity know as “Canada” is concerned. This is further to say that there can be no universal Canadian historiography of any kind, whatever its paradigmatic framework. To deny that any universal propositions whatever can be made about “Canada” is to indicate ab initio that no real object existed for historiographical study in the first place. Such a stance must of necessity leave us with a tale of various “historiographies” pertaining to diverse locations once thought to be parts of a larger but ultimately illusory phenomenon known as “Canada.” Such an approach would rule out the following discussion as little more than an exercise in “mysticism” or “metaphysics.”

One might go so far as to suggest that by comparison with the newer “pluralist” or “identity” historiography, even post-war historians such as Donald Creighton (1952), J.M.S. Careless (1959), Kenneth McNaught (1967) and Ramsay Cook (1963) who devoted years of intellectual labour to one outstanding figure in the story of Canadian development come to sight as positively “Carlylean.” The goal of these studies was not necessarily to teach, as did Carlyle, that “Universal History (or) the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the history of the great men who have worked here” (Carlyle, 1840, 3; Nietzsche, 2010). Rather the aim of this biographical form of historiography was to provide a comprehensive account of the life and career of figures such as Sir John A. Macdonald, George Brown, J. S. Woodsworth and J.W. Dafoe respectively in order to achieve a balanced or “objective” view of Canada’s past. Meeting the highest standards of professional history rather than preaching that we should “love, venerate, and bow down submissive before great men (and) the everlasting adamant of Hero-worship (Carlyle, 1840, 23) was the intention. But the extensive knowledge supplied by these works about the life and work of some outstanding historical figure stands in stark contrast to the more “pluralist” form of historiography. The latter tends to be long on all kinds of “micro” details but short on a sense of the possibilities of human nature to which the non-specializing reader might be attracted. At the least it is a much shorter journey to Carlyle’s “Heroic Vitalism” from the premises of post-war biographical historiography than if we were to start from the newer, “pluralist” historiographical premises (see English 1977a, 19977b, 1989, 1992, 2006, 2009; Bliss, 2007, 2005, 1984; Grantastein, 1998; compare Henderson, 1929). These clear differences necessarily point to the question of whether there can be some kind of compromise between these two basic historiographical approaches. One effort in this direction was made by Alexis de Tocqueville who attempted to referee the claims of the “guardian,” “statesman” or “freedom of action” approach and the “social forces,” “group influence” or “determinist” view.

Tocqueville indicates his belief that at all times “one great portion of the events of this world are attributable to very general facts and another to special influences” (Tocqueville, 1945, 2:91-92). He notes that
the historians who seek to describe what occurs in democratic societies have a tendency to assign a great deal of emphasis to “general facts” and to discovering the causes of events in them. But Tocqueville is quick to add here that in so doing these observers are in serious error precisely to the extent they deny “the special influence of individuals.” The temptation to slight the place of individual influence on events is rooted, Tocqueville says, in the fact that it is not so easily traced as that of groups or classes (92). And it is Tocqueville’s special concern about group or class determinism in the writing of history that it can lead to a psychology of “fatalism.” This is the tendency to think that things can only go one way, regardless of human effort; that human choices can make no difference in the scheme of things; and that there is no such thing as a moment or opportunity in which decisive action or outstanding action on the part of one individual can affect the course of events (See Ceaser, 1990, 175).

For his part William James argues that the student of man and society must “accept geniuses as data” simply because the “causes of production of great men lie in a sphere wholly inaccessible to the social philosopher.” James does not doubt for a minute that the Great Man modifies the social environment in an “entirely original and peculiar way.” Thus he concludes that the “mutations of societies from generation to generation,” are in the main due directly or indirectly to the acts or the examples of individuals whose genius was “adapted to the receptivities of the moment” (James, 226-227). But James is quick to add that the “indeterminism” introduced to history by the “data” of the Great Man is not “absolute.” Not every “man” fits every “hour” and a given genius may come either too early or too late. The individual of “peculiar gifts” bears “all the power of initiative and origination in his hands” but the social environment also has it within its power to either adopt or reject both him and his gifts. For James both factors are essential to change (James, 226-227). Like Tocqueville before him James is here attempting to articulate a “middle position,” in his case between the claims of Thomas Carlyle on the one hand and those of Herbert Spencer on the other (See Spencer, 1873, 30-31).

There is an element in contemporary scholarship that seems to reflect Tocqueville’s concern about “individuals” in history here. I refer to the work on Upper Canadian history pursued by Jeffrey L. McNairn. McNairn is very interested in the thoughts of an individual mechanic from pre-Confederation Kingston. This sounds indeed like he is taking Tocqueville’s lesson about “rais(ing) the faculties of men” to heart. But McNairn’s procedure is fraught with “methodological” difficulties. This is because it assumes the validity of prioritizing the mechanic and neglecting another resident of pre-Confederation Kingston—a young Scottish lawyer by the name of Macdonald.

**Historical Heroes and the Kingston Mechanic**

In his account of the development of public opinion in 19th-century Upper Canada, McNairn is struck by the example of the anonymous Kingston mechanic who declared “I will not remain silent” and who “joined his fellow citizens in shaping that history.” At this point McNairn quotes Thomas Carlyle’s assertion that “the nation is governed by all that has tongue in the nation” (2000, 437). In other words, he quotes Carlyle in order to suggest that the student of history should not be overly impressed with the power, energy and brilliance of certain well-known individuals and be open to the words of the humble mechanic. But was it not Carlyle above all who insisted that the very bane of modern society’s mentality is its inability to revere and worship heroes, be they national or “international”? Carlyle’s *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* sought to make reverence for national and world heroes the substitute religion for a dying western Christianity (Bentley, 1944). The hero-worshipping
Carlyle may well have had a “soft spot” for humble mechanics, but he also had a soft spot for Luther, Napoleon, Mohammed, Cromwell, Johnson, Rousseau and other “Titans” of history. McNairn will have none of this because to be so impressed with historical “greats” as was Carlyle would be to leave other actors in the historical drama such as the Kingston mechanic in the shadows. McNairn’s attitude suggests why it is that the “Carlylean” dimension has been missing from Canadian academic historiography since the “guardian” days described by English. It involves turning Carlyle on his head and transforming him into a “democratic” historian rather than the most “elitist” historian one might possibly imagine. But whatever the proper interpretation of Carlyle, the economy of scholarship dictates that in the case of Kingston, Ontario, at least, time spent researching the Kingston mechanic and his cohorts will necessarily have to be taken away from that devoted to Sir John A. Macdonald. At some point a decision would have to be made about the comparative significance of the two possible research agendas.

We do not wish here to suggest that the “Kingston mechanic approach” has meant the disappearance of well-written and sophisticated political biographies. But these fine works, which can sometimes achieve a broad non-academic readership, frequently originate outside the walls of the academy, often from a seedbed of journalism (Gwyn, 2008, 2011). This situation might be explained by the fact that the more general readership sought by these works would find it difficult to spend their hard earned money on books focused on local mechanics or plumbers. Maybe this point is best put as follows: if a book buyer was interested in reading about residents of Kingston or Peterborough it is more likely he or she would be attracted to a book about a Kingston political figure named Sir John A. Macdonald or a Peterborough scientist-inventor named Sir Sanford Fleming before they would a book about a Kingston mechanic or a Peterborough plumber.

What is evident is that the “guardian” or “political” approach supplies something which cannot be offered by the Kingston mechanic orientation and that is an entrance into the historical space located between pure philosophy and the practice of politics. A figure like William Lyon Mackenzie, to take just one example, lived between the realm of certain ideas descended from the likes of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson and the political-legislative realm of Upper Canadian affairs (Mackenzie 1837a, 1837b, 1837c; McKay, 1937; Rae, 1968). The Kingston mechanic, however, would only occupy this space if he had been reading these authors and playing some kind of civic role separate from his occupation as a mechanic. Our conclusion has to be that it makes much more sense to focus on the thought of Mackenzie than to spend time seeking for the equivalent to his ideas of a Toronto (York) mechanic. The benefit of the “mechanic approach” is in its reminding us that insufficient attention has been paid to the contributions of liberal democracy’s “foot soldiers.” The cost of this approach is its diversion of our attention away from the influence of ideas that may have informed the purposes of the “William Lyon Mackenzies” of the world and from the relationship between these individuals and the ideas’ progenitors further up the philosophical “chain of command.” Leaving aside the question of locating any documentary record of the mechanic’s reflections on the society and politics of the day we would be entitled to ask whether, if found, they would be likely to shed as much light on the conditions of the society at the time as would the journals and publications of the “Mackenzies.” On the whole it would seem to make much more sense to spend time on the “Mackenzies” if one’s goal is to reconstruct the spirit of that particular time and place. This is because in some sense, the mechanic’s perspective may be said to include in that of Mackenzie rather than the other way around. In other words, it is from
the “Mackenzies” and “Macdonalds” so to speak that Locke and Burke et. al. are passed down to the Kingston mechanic, who may or may not be a partisan of one or the other figure (Keynes, 1935). Viewed in this light a focus on Mackenzie is purely a matter of efficiency.

But the approach adopted by McNairn detours around the presence in the historical process of the Mackenzie and Macdonald types—which is to say, philosophical statesmen—in order to get to the Kingston mechanic. But why not begin precisely in the middle region where Brown and Macdonald set up residence—which is to say, somewhere between the philosopher and the artisan and where the explanation for the opinions of the Kingston mechanic might be available? Why not begin in the world represented by Brown and Macdonald et. al. from which vantage point both the mountain tops of political philosophy and the valleys of the mechanics’ shops will be visible? (see O’Flaherty, 2012)

For this to sound like a reasonable “methodological” approach one has first to allow the existence of a special category of the statesman “type.” Further to this one has also to allow that this type’s thoughts are not radically limited by the prevailing opinions of the time and that many if not all the various contradictions and inconsistencies in his statements can be, with enough effort, reconciled at some level. It has to be allowed that this “type” was capable of confronting and answering the unchanging questions of politics and society—e.g. “Which is a more reasonable form of government, monarchy or democracy?”—and that his answers to these kinds of questions might be just as helpful or unhelpful in today’s world as they were when they were first provided and as those on offer by contemporary observers. Those unsympathetic to any sort of “guardianism” or “biographism” in historiography will claim that such an approach leads to a certain inability to “feel” the historical conditions of the time. The notion that sensitivity to the philosophical dimension of serious political activity is a sine qua non for true historical understanding is therefore rejected as methodologically unsound. But such a rejection precludes the scholar from entering into the truly political frame of reference. No “thought experiment” in recapturing the political-ideational message which the “Mackenzie types” intended to pass down to posterity can be pursued. For this a strong sense of “guardianism” or “Carlylism” is needed.

Characters Weak as Cardboard, Men Pushed from Behind

One scholar especially attuned to the problem posed by the demise of “guardian” or biographical historiography is Frederick Vaughan. He says of the “principal constitutional framers” of Canada, individuals such as John A. Macdonald, George Etienne Cartier, George Brown, Alexander Galt, Thomas D’Arcy McGee, Charles Tupper, Leonard Tilley, Christopher Dunkin and Egerton Ryerson, that they “walk through the pages of current histories as men with characters as weak as cardboard.” In these pages they appear as “men pushed from behind by the winds of the lowest personal motives; men never motivated by high virtue or noble ambitions.” “Very rarely,” Vaughan says, “are we permitted to see them as genuinely committed to the highest personal and political virtues” and very seldom, if ever, are we permitted to look upon them as genuine “greats.” The consequence of this situation Vaughan argues is that “Canada has become nation without historic heroes.” Indeed, “Our historians almost brag that we do not have a Washington or Jefferson or Hamilton.” For the student of Canada to seek for historic heroes, we are told, is “un-Canadian” (Vaughan, 2003, xi; see also Underhill, 1960). Vaughan for one is open to praising, if not glorifying, the Founders, not without qualification to be sure, but as a generally valid exercise. He wishes us to see the Founders as giving legitimate and
important answers to the questions of their day and, by implication, to our own. With respect to the enduring problems faced by liberal democracy scholars like Vaughan see political change as more likely to be wise and beneficial to the extent it represents a kind of extension or adaptation to changed circumstances of the Founders’ bedrock ideas.

The point of view indicated in Vaughan’s lamentations about Canadian historiography is very alarming to Susan Binnie. She feels that there is in fact a prevailing need to be protected from the kind of historiography Vaughan (and Granatstein) have pointed to as needed. Binnie would like to see historians adopt strategies “for evaluating both popular resistance to and the popular legitimacy of the legal order.” If they do so, then they might possibly supply a “corrective to… the “great man” focus of political and intellectual historiography” (1988, 60). Binnie does not cite any examples of the “great man focus” to which she is referring. We are forced to wonder why what is a “dead horse” to Vaughan is a threatening dragon to Binnie.

But Binnie might have a cause for concern in the meditations of Paul Romney on the tradition of historiography surrounding William Lyon Mackenzie. Romney explains that at the stage of his earliest exposure to Canadian history, while he was employed at the City of Toronto Archives, he was reading an article on William Lyon Mackenzie and was forced at that time to conclude that the article’s author was not open to his own subject matter. Romney explains: “I don’t mean that he wanted to make Mackenzie look bad; I mean merely that he conceived a dislike for him and jumped as a result to certain conclusions that the evidence, on close scrutiny did not justify.” Romney discovered that Mackenzie’s “debunker” was in good company. “I soon realized,” he says, “that he had not conjured his prejudice (if that’s what it was) out of thin air. There was, in the writing of Canadian history, a tradition of distaste for Mackenzie” (1999, 10). This element of “distaste,” alluded to by Romney in connection with Mackenzie, has been at work in the case of many if not all the other “Makers of Canada.” What Romney has to say about Mackenzie may equally be applied to the list supplied by Vaughan, e.g. John A. Macdonald et al.

Certainly one can see a great division or a lack of common ground between the views of Vaughan and Romney on the one hand and those expressed by McNairn and Binnie on the other. On the premises of Vaughan at least, and perhaps also Romney, if it has been decided to assess whether some historical personage deserves the appellation “Great Man,” then a careful treatment of his writings, speeches, correspondence and general output would be needed. These productions would not be reviewed as historical information only, but also as possibly showing that the figure in question was as much connected to, say, Aristotle or Mill as to his rivals of the day for political influence, high office or national prestige. Nothing could be further from the inclination towards the Kingston mechanic as a subject of research than this attraction to what those who at various moments sought and held political power actually thought about issues that may have confronted the community as much in their time as in ours.

The Strife Among the Disciplines

As we have seen, the pre-pluralist Canadian historiography involved a certain level of harmony between the disciplines of history and political science. We may note here in passing that Stephen Leacock of the “Makers of Canada” series, as well as being a historian, journalist and world renowned writer of short stories, was a long time professor at McGill University whose book in the field of political economy was a standard college text for many years (Leacock, 1906). But it is the case that since the Leacock era and even since the
outstanding historical biographies of the 1950s and 1960s professional specialization in the academy has pushed history and political science further and further apart. There has been a fracturing of the earlier comparatively unified politico-historical approach to Canadian political culture. This fracturing has proceeded to the point where there is no agreement on what the object of study should be—or even if there is such an object, if we are to follow Bell.

While allowing that the tendency of political science and history to be divided into “two solitudes” brings with it certain advantages, the view here is that when all is said and done, this trend has to be an obstacle to the optimum results in the Canadian studies field. In a better world neither the political scientist nor the historian would be in a position to “dodge” any of the major contributions to the study of Canadian political culture made in either discipline. More generally it remains the case that if political scientists are to get the best results, they should be historical “thinkers” even as their concerns must tend in a direction diverging from that of professional historians. If these historians were to become just as “theoretical” as the political scientists were to become seriously “historical” then perhaps there could be a *rapprochement disciplinaire* of sorts.

If historians have tended to ignore the trends in political science in recent decades, then political scientists may also be faulted if they have not read the work of professional historians at least sufficiently carefully to know the trends in that discipline. Political scientists have not generally ranked the work of Canadian historians highly enough to give them wide attention. H.D. Forbes’s 1985 reader entitled *Canadian Political Thought*, for example, contains only three selections out of a total of fifty from post-war Canadian historians (Shortt, Underhill and W.L. Morton) while the political theorist Gad Horowitz has three alone and the philosopher George Grant two. Forbes might well wish to adjust his collection in the new century, but as a political scientist working a generation or so ago he must have thought that the price of including the well known names of certain professional historians with their concerns was too high if it had to be at the expense of more genuinely “political science” thinkers. At that time the practitioners in the discipline of history must have seemed less than absolutely essential to the study of Canadian political thought as it was to be taught in the political science discipline of the time at least.

But for all this no political scientist worth his salt, not least Forbes, would claim for a minute that the works of G.M. Wrong, Harold Innis, Frank Underhill, J.M.S. Careless, Donald Creighton, W.L. Morton, Kenneth McNaught, Desmond Morton and Ramsay Cook lack relevancy to the study of Canadian politics. But how many historians have spent time studying Seymour Martin Lipset, Donald V. Smiley, R. MacGregor Dawson, Eugene Forsey, Alexander Brady, Peter Russell, George Grant, Paul Fox and Charles Taylor for example? Evidently there needs to be a principle of reciprocity operative between the two disciplines such that historians should feel some obligation to read Lipset, Smiley, Dawson, Forsey, et. al. and political scientists feel a like obligation to read Wrong, Innis, Underhill, Careless, et. al. To the extent the reading list for Canadian studies consists of “two solitudes” in respect of political science and history a fuller and richer understanding of that Canadian political culture is impeded.

Professor Jerry Bannister explains that as Canadian historians “moved away from political history, in the 1970s, the scholarly discussion became ossified into a debate over ideological labeling.” Janet Ajzenstat, for instance, approached “the central theme in Canadian political history” in terms of liberals, Tories and romantics and the wrestling of the Canadian fathers with the legacy of classical liberalism. But although Bannister is unsympathetic to those who would interpret Canadian history by

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means of what he calls “ideological labeling” he does observe that Ajzenstat has managed to exert “significant influence” on the field of Canadian studies as “one of the few scholars to bridge the divide between political science and history” (2009, 124-125). So there is at least one and possibly more scholars who may act as “bridges” between the “two solitudes.” However, Bannister does not expand on how Ajzenstat has accomplished this “bridging” maneuver. We do know that it does involve her acquaintance not just with the fundamental public documents of Canada but also with the thought of figures such as Locke, Bentham, and Tocqueville, to name only a few. Bannister’s vague acknowledgment of Ajzenstat’s bi-disciplinary contribution, while lamenting the tendency for scholars such as she to engage in all kinds of “debates over liberalism,” suggests he would rather that the discussion stay on the level of the “historical context” of the Kingston mechanic. One might say that Bannister is one Canadian historian at least for whom “Empiricist-Detailism” simply trumps the history of philosophy or intellectual history, when all is said and done.

**Quarrels Over Semantics?**

Like Ernst Renan before him, J. L. Granatstein has argued that “a nation is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories” and that the “essential condition of being a people (is) having made great things together and wishing to make them again” (Renan, Sec. III). For Granatstein history is the way “a nation, a people, and an individual learn who they are, where they came from, and how and why their world has turned out as it has.” History is the stuff of “memory, inspiration, and commonality.” The history we have should be such as we can “draw strength from it to meet our current and our future challenges.” At the end of the day “if we have no past, then surely it must follow that we have no future.” Granatstein had argued that in recent years Canadians have been deprived of a history that “binds (them) together.” (1998, “Preface”; Compare Nietzsche, 2010).

But for Bannister, Granatstein’s concern for the shared national memories is simply a case of the “perennial handwringing about the viability of Canadian history as a popular field of scholarly inquiry.” From where Bannister stands Granatstein’s “back to the future” case for “guardian” or “Carlylean” history can only lead to unprofitable and pointless controversies over what he (and Katherine Fierlbeck) call “labeling,” “semantics,” and “fragmentation.” At one point in his discussion Bannister defers to Fierlbeck, who reduces such questions as “whether Egerton Ryerson was really a liberal, rather than a Tory,” or “whether Canadian political figures were more concerned with classical virtues than with merely maintaining the prejudice of tradition,” or “whether participatory democrats were in fact demonstrably distinct from constitutional liberals” to what she calls “nuances.” However intriguing these “nuances” may be, Fierlbeck is concerned lest an obsession with “nuances” lead to “fragmenting the history of Canadian political thought into an endless multitude of discrete ‘traditions’”(Bannister, 2009, 123-128; Fierlbeck, 2006, 2005). There appears to be an echo of Max Weber here. At one point the German sociologist stated that students of the “historical and cultural sciences” were often motivated by an interest in “partaking of the community of civilized men (and women).” Unfortunately the meaning of “civilized” cannot be established by scientific method as it involves value judgments about human qualities. So there can be no guarantee that such studies will automatically lead to such a community (Weber, 1946, 140). So a major difference on a question of basic “methodology” remains between Bannister and Fierlbeck on the one hand and Vaughan and Grantastein on the other.

But it should be noted that Bannister and Fierlbeck refer to these divisions in the
history of Canadian political and social thought as something of a shock and a scandal when in fact they have been longstanding and are as Canadian as Grey Cup Sunday. Bannister indeed says that if there is a passion for “labelling” and fighting over “jargon” “the political spectrum (fragments) into quarrels over semantics” (emphasis added). But surely what Bannister means here is that the “labeling” approach has a tendency to fragment the academic spectrum into “quarrels over semantics.” No one could believe for a minute that at the root of the disagreement between Stephen Harper and Thomas Mulcair is a difference in their respective interpretations of the Canadian Founding as more “Lockean” or “Burkean” or “Fabian.” Bannister treats academic debates about historical and philosophical influences as though they were somehow political debates over public policy. But this is precisely what should be avoided in Weber’s view. “To take a practical political stand is one thing, to analyze political structures and party positions is another” (140).

One can make this point quite efficiently by simply alluding to the case of “The Three Mortons” (W.L., Desmond and F.L.). W.L. Morton was known as a “Red Tory,” Desmond Morton is a well-known New Democrat and F.L. Morton is a member of the Calgary school of “neo-conservatism” who in addition to being active in the academy has also been Alberta’s Minister of Finance and Energy. All three are as distinguished in the academic world as they are at distant points from each other on the political spectrum. More frequently than not, academic commentators simply do not agree on the substance or best direction for the study and understanding of Canadian political culture. It is so evident that there is little possibility of a general consensus on the framework within which to view Canadian political culture that there would seem to be little point lamenting the fact that scholars like Granatstein and Bannister are totally at odds with each other, even as each of them no doubt are at odds with other scholars in their field. There is no more consensus in Canadian historiography than there is in Canadian politics, and there is perhaps a considerable amount less.

Canadian politics has been and always will be fractious and contentious given the powerful interests at stake and the clash of the ideologies left to right generally affiliated with these interests. But what Bannister, Fierlbeck and others lament is that the academic discussion on how to study Canadian political culture is just as contentious. Bannister seems to be saying “drop the jargon” and we can all move to a ground of general scholarly harmony and put the fractious political world to shame. But then he allows that he himself is engaged in temporal hair-splitting by insisting that his “nuanced distinction between Loyalism and liberalism is a profitable way to approach Canadian history” (2009, 125). When one hears such lamentations about the “debate over liberalism” and the innumerable “isms” involved such as Toryism, Whiggism, conservatism, utilitarianism, fabianism, socialism, Marxism and Burkeanism—to mention only a few—one senses the hostility of the historian to the discipline of political philosophy. But as suggested above, if there was some sense of it being incumbent on historians to study more political philosophy and on political philosophers to study more history and “events” perhaps this disciplinary “alienation” could be reduced.

The Philosophy of the Social Sciences: Between Abstraction and the Facts

Allowing the reasonableness of what has been said above about the ebbs and flows in historiography over the last century or so what are the philosophical roots of the general divide between historians and political scientists as it has come to pass? Looking at the situation from the historian’s
point of view it is that the political scientist tends to deal in “ideals” and “essences” or even timeless truths, while the historian prides oneself on being “empirical” and focusing on factual “contexts” and specific “events.” Regarding each from the other’s point of view, the one beggars historical facts for the sake of grand generalizations and the other beggars broad conclusions for the sake of historical minutiae and small details. The parting of the ways, then, is to do with where the line between the important and the unimportant lies. Pure theory leaves out consideration of specific circumstances while pure “circumstantialism” can produce no general guidelines that may direct judgments as to historical choices and decisions. Obviously what is needed here is some kind of middle ground between general propositions and particular facts. As someone who describes himself as seeking “to recover something of the lost tradition of nineteenth-century historical sociology” Francis Fukuyama argues that the social scientist should aim at a “middle range theory that avoids the pitfalls of both excessive abstraction (the vice of economists [he might have said political scientists]) and excessive particularism (the problem of many historians and anthropologists).” He states that “there is no such thing as a pure confrontation with facts, devoid of prior theoretical constructs.” Indeed, those who think they are empirical in this fashion are “deluding themselves.” But it is also unfruitful, Fukuyama insists, for social science to begin with an elegant theory and then search for facts that will confirm it. “The correct approach to analysis,” he says, is to infer theory from established facts. This means that the proper place for theory is “after history” properly rather than before it (2011, 38, 25).

The problem addressed by Fukuyama is stated by James W. Ceaser as consisting in the fact that general ideas tend to distort reality in some degree by “comprehending the distinctness of different objects under the same concept.” Such a procedure accords greater similarity to things than actually exists. But at the same time it makes no sense to reject general ideas tout court. The best procedure, then, is not to deny the value of general ideas, but rather to recognize their limitations and avoid using them in “an extreme or abstract fashion.” We should avoid abstract principles generated out of “self-contained intellectual systems” but accept those based on the painstaking study of particular cases (Ceaser, 1990, 154).

Serious reflection on the problem at the root of the divide between Idealist-Essentialism and Pluralist-Eventism leads us to the conclusion then that scholars should avoid dogmatic a priorism in their preliminary “theoretical constructs” while at the same time using them to good effect by following their lead to sound empirical evidence. By the same token scholars should also eschew any idea that they can achieve a pure confrontation with the facts as though all empirical knowledge is not preceded by some non-factual frame of reference that directs the attention of the would-be “scientist.” It should admit its dependence on prior intellectual commitments as opposed to claiming an empiricism that pulls its starting point out of thin air—which is to say, ultimately from some unexamined elements of the zeitgeist. “It is certainly possible that the individual teacher will not entirely succeed in eliminating his personal sympathies” Max Weber says, but he or she should do their best (Weber, 1946, 40).

This dialectic between “abstraction” and “particularism” is very much at play in the work of Ian McKay and his rejection of what he calls the “Whig Idealism” of those sympathetic to English’s “guardian” historians or to Vaughan’s men of “noble ambitions.” His more “pluralist” approach claims to avoid the limitations of “abstractionism” by adhering to the facts available about the historical context while at the same time providing an overarching general theory called “The Liberal Order Framework.”
The Liberal Order Framework

Certainly when we read McKay’s arguments for the “Liberal Order Framework” we find ourselves in a radically new environment compared to the scholarly paradigms that have gone before. At the very outset McKay introduces the themes of the “disabling fears of nihilism” and the possibility of “a postmodern orgy of self-indulgence, subjectivism and cultural disorder” (2000, 623). Such language has not been heard in the various schools of Canadian historiography in prior times.

It is clear in McKay that certain specific modern philosophical influences are at work. And to be sure the names of Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, Immanuel Kant and Michel Foucault appear from time to time in the discussions of McKay and his school (Curtis, 2009, 1992a, 1992b, 1983). McKay avows that he would like to play Antonio Gramsci to Ajzenstat’s Benedetto Croce. The Ajzenstat/Croce thesis is that the “Lockean” civic institutions established by the Canadian Fathers provided an ample basis for Canadian national identity premised on a civic culture of liberalism. On this view these founders were legatees of Locke’s Second Treatise and its arguments for the state of nature, the social contract, the right to revolution, and individual rights (Ajzenstat 2007, 3-5, 6-9; Bannister 125). But if Gramsci found Benedetto Croce’s liberal historiography to be “a form of idealistic utopianism” that claims to be a “disinterested contemplation of the eternal becoming of human history” so McKay finds Ajzenstat to be an “idealist” who eternalizes “above the fray.” The proof of this claim lies in the fact that her new “Whiggish” stance “render(s) impossible an engagement with actually existing liberalism.” Ajzenstat’s “utopianism” produces “an intensely abstract and speculative history incapable of a sustained and rigorous engagement with actual events” (2009, 392). McKay simply denies transcendence as a possibility in saying that all we have at the end of the day are a temporal sequence of “events.”

For McKay then it is a “utopian quest” to seek for “philosophical essences and pure origins.” (2009, 393; See Barnes, 1962, 394 and Marwick, 1970, 21). But it seems a fair question to pose to him is whether the “hegemonic process of liberal state formation” is not also a “philosophical essence” or “pure” origin of the Canadian historical process. In other words, while being exceedingly critical of “Whig-Idealism” or “essentialism” does not McKay himself have to make an abstract pure essence of his “Liberal Order Framework”?

But McKay is quick to point out that a lot has changed in more than a century and a half and our world is not the world of the 1840s. “History” with a capital “H” has moved on and the mode of liberal reasoning we see at the time of the Report on the Affairs of British North America or the Confederation Debates has been superseded by the thought of Gramsci and Foucault, for example. But even allowing for the relevance of thinkers like Gramsci and Foucault to an English-speaking, colonial, Victorian culture, would not the assumption of an unfolding supersession by progressive thought of its own earlier stages take us just as much in the direction thinkers like T.H. Green, John Dewey, H.G. Wells and G.B. Shaw who go unmentioned in the “Liberal Order Framework” discussion as it would towards the thought of Gramsci and Foucault?

McKay’s approach to the development of liberalism is meant to be more historical in the sense of more pluralist, heterogeneous and relational, and more oriented to practical affairs than the approach of “Whig-Idealism” with its absurd essences. In other words, the development of the liberal state was not the result of a single line of intellectual development. Liberalism’s path cannot simply be identified with the spreading influence of one or a few seminal thinkers over the generations. McKay’s suggestion is
that the history of liberalism is not “linear” or “teleological” but rather a story of critical junctures involving practical responses to pressing political and institutional questions. But why should these be seen as mutually exclusive claims? Is it not possible that practical responses to pressing political and institutional questions at critical historical junctures could be influenced by the ideas of Locke, Burke, Bentham et al.? And is it not reasonable to suggest that this is a very likely possibility if there is clear evidence that the actors responding to these pressing political questions at crucial moments in history have read Locke, Burke, Bentham et al. at some point in their lives if not continually?

The Pluralist-Eventists like McKay argue that the Whig-Essentialists proceed in an ahistorical way because it is not really possible to separate the philosophical study of figures from the past from the study of the prevailing historical conditions of the time. Moreover, the thought of the individuals of the 19th century, or any other historical figures for that matter, is inevitably conditioned or even determined by the social values of the time period in which he or she worked. And it is most likely that these values were narrow, particularistic, unprogressive and illiberal, at least by the standards prevailing in our time. The precise grounds for why the Pluralist-Eventist position is not itself confined by the spatio-temporal limitations which have burdened all previous forms of thought are not provided.

The issue here is whether there is any element of “timelessness” in the work and thought of historical figures such as those who took the lead in founding what was to become the Dominion of Canada. If all political actors are limited by their various historical contexts, which is to say if all political ideas are contextually determined, then we cannot appropriate the political thought of the past for ourselves as our timeless legacy. The Pluralist-Eventists are skeptics, not to say “cynics,” about the possibility of analyzing of the political writings or “journalism” of the likes of Mackenzie, Papineau, Baldwin, Brown, Macdonald, et al. in a philosophical spirit. They do not really believe that what we might generally call “political theory” to be of the essence in understanding their deeds. This is because for this school of thought, ideas are not independently arrived at or freely and self-consciously chosen phenomena. The motive for actions or decisions is not to be sought in the ideas or in the articulated values of the actor or decision-maker. Historical actors may indeed provide public justifications for their choices in terms of the ideas of Locke, Burke or whoever. But at bottom they “use” ideas only as rationalizations for sub-intellectual interests. Thus it is that the “great men” are not the masters of the historical process. Rather, this process is driven by forces deeper than the ideas of the historical actors at the time can grasp. The great men of the past are not really “independent thinkers” so much as “exponents” of the ideological presuppositions that they just happen to have inherited.

It is evident that this Pluralist-Eventist approach involves a number of prohibitions of varying degrees of explicitness. The student of the Canadian Founders should not turn to such figures with the purpose of discovering whatever is true in what they have to say. He or she must not try to bring up past moral and political arguments for deployment in the present. He or she must not limit himself to the study of only “great” or dominant figures such as Macdonald and others.

Addressing the impact of McKay’s “Liberal Order Framework” (2000), A.B. McKillop notes that “Few works of historical writing have marked major points of interpretive departure for the field of Canadian history.” W.L. Morton’s critique of the Laurentian Thesis (1946; 1968) is one and J.M.S. Careless’s concept of “Limited Identities in Canada” (1969) is definitely
another. But it is certain that McKay’s “Liberal Order Framework” is a third in his view. Of the analytical approaches mentioned by McKillop, McKay’s is singled out as the one which “just might prove to be the most significant of the three” particularly because it “challenges the foundational political structures, processes, and assumptions upon which the Canadian nation was constructed” (McKillop, 2009; See Christie, 2009, Fecteau, 2009, Piquet, 2009 and Smith, 2010). Bannister assents to McKillop’s characterization of the “Liberal Order Framework” in an essay entitled “Rethinking the ‘Tory Touch’” (Bannister 2009, 123-128). Here he argues that McKay’s newer, more postmodern-pluralist approach has superseded and rendered nugatory the once mighty Hartz-Horowitz Tory-touch Thesis. We must hasten then to the “Tory touch” to see what it is that McKay is said to have so successfully buried that McKillop does not even mention it as a possible candidate for an “interpretive departure in the field of Canadian history.”

From the Hartz-Horowitz Thesis to the Liberal Order Framework

Chronologically speaking, the “Tory-touch” paradigm stands between the “guardian” paradigm of the early and middle 20th Century and the “postmodern pluralist” paradigm which has made its presence felt in the last generation (See Beiner and Norman, 2001). This thesis originally appeared as an academic article by Gad Horowitz under the title “Conservatism, Liberalism and Socialism in Canada” (1966). It was subsequently presented as the first chapter of Horowitz’s book, the title of which was Canadian Labour in Politics (1968). As the title of the book suggests, this approach contrasts with both the older “guardian” approach and the newer “pluralist-identities” approach in that it was especially focused on “labour” or “class” in the sense of the “working” population as the crucial historical variable. The “Tory-touch” thesis is sometimes called the “Hartz-Horowitz” or “Fragment Thesis” because the idea of European “fragments” germinating new political cultures in far flung parts of the world originated with Louis Hartz and was in due course applied to Canada by Gad Horowitz (Hartz, 1964). Horowitz argued that there is a “Tory touch” to Canadian political culture which is absent in the American context and he explained this fact by describing English Canada as a Loyalist fragment in turn thrown off by the “Whig” fragment of the new United States which had earlier been thrown off from Britain. Canada was tinged or “touched” with Toryism, which it was the business of the revolution of 1776 to expunge from the political culture of the new republic. This “Tory-touch” seeded a kind of “thesis-antithesis” historical dialectic, which generated an ideological development not possible in “One Myth” cultures such as that south of the border. The Tory germ present at Canada’s origins existed in a certain amount of tension with the bourgeois values at the bottom of the ascendant liberal political order. This creative tension made possible the opening of an historical door to a socialist “touch” in Canadian political culture, which distinguished English-Canada for all its North Americanness from the politics of the United States. Five or six generations after the United Empire Loyalists the Canadian socialist movement would emerge as the long-term political flower of the Tory seed planted after the American Revolution. Given this basic account, the Fragment Thesis can then seek to account for the existence of “Red Tories” on the conservative side of the modern political spectrum, who are a very different kind of conservative from those bearing that label in the United States, such as Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. “Red Tories” speak in terms of a “community of communities” and the need for the state to concern itself with areas of the economy which ideas are anathema to true American conservatives and their counterparts in Canada. Thus the political culture of English Canada has been distinguished from that of the United States by its social democratic

In the discipline of political science at least the Hartz-Horowitz thesis has been a major force in the study of Canadian political culture for the last half-century or so. H. D. Forbes sums up here:

Any overview of Canadian political thought or political culture must reckon with Horowitz's adaptation of Hartz, for it is one of the few things in the field that practically everyone has read and remembers … It has provoked continuing debate: there are historical studies of the Loyalists and of conservatism generally, content analyses of the Confederation Debates as well as more conventional studies of the political thought of the Confederation period, systematic comparisons of the political parties and their electoral support, even rigorously empirical studies of student attitudes, all designed to test the Hartz-Horowitz theory. Horowitz's 29-page article has eclipsed a 360-page book published the same year on roughly the same subject; it provides the framework for the most widely used textbook of parties and ideologies in Canada; and it has been mentioned in popular books by leading journalists. (Forbes, 1987, 287-288).

A decade prior to Forbes’s remarks S.F. Wise noted in his presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association that “every Canadian historian had to come to grips with Louis Hartz’s study The Founding of New Societies” (Bannister, 2009, 123; See Preece, 1977, 4). How many members of Wise’s profession followed his stipulation here is open to question. But for Forbes and Wise, at least, the arrival of the Hartz-Horowitz thesis represented a paradigm shift of no small proportions.

But paradigm shifts tend to appear differently through the lenses of political science and history respectively. The Hartz-Horowitz thesis seriously competed for influence with the Marxist and “formative events” approaches (Ryerson1960,1968; Lipset, 1988) for influence in the political science field for forty or more years. But as we have seen, it does not rate a mention in A.B. McKillop’s recent discussion of the influential approaches Canadian historiography over the same period (2009). The Hartz-Horowitz approach most likely remains unmentioned by McKillop because as an historian he was not so attuned to the movements in the field of political science as he was in his own “backyard.” McKillop’s overlooking of Hartz-Horowitz certainly suggests a need for more open lines of communication between the disciplines of political science and history.

For his part Ian McKay, discussed above, does not ignore the Hartz-Horowitz Thesis entirely (2009, 360). But the rapidity with which he skims over this is remarkable given the remarks of Forbes and Wise about its importance. McKay simply states that Hartzian attempts to transform the lack of “a unifying national myth-symbol complex” into a greater Canadian unity and which have tried to correlate “Canadianness” with an original ideological essence—such as a Tory fragment—“have proved empirically unconvincing” (2009, 360). He then immediately goes on to say that what “Canadians” did in fact share, whether they wanted to or not, was the “experience of an emergent continent-wide project of liberal rule” (2009, 360). This is the “Liberal Order Framework.”
However much McKay might be inclined to skim over the Hartz-Horowitz/Tory-touch thesis he is prepared to give the “Lockean” approach more time. In fact he devotes seven pages of discussion to the main proponent of this approach—Janet Ajzenstat—and engages in a much more detailed rejection of her claims than he does those of the much more academically influential Tory-touch (McKay, 2009, 388-395). As McKay would have it the debate is no longer between the Hartz-Horowitz Fragment thesis and the older progressive “Structure of Canadian History” approach of Kenneth D. McRae (1964). It is now a debate between the Foucauldian/Gramscian thesis of the “Liberal Order Framework” or “Long Liberal Revolution” and the Lockeian popular sovereignty thesis of Ajzenstat. The binary alternative of progressive liberalism on the one hand and the Tory-touch dialectic on the other has given way to a choice between Locke’s Second Treatise being accepted as the deepest core of Canadian civic culture (Ajzenstat 2007, 3-5, 6-9) and a “postmodern” pluralist interpretation of Canadian development.

**Multiple Liberalisms**

McKay’s new postmodern approach sees the founders of the liberal democracy as creating conditions for the issuing forth of a series of disjointed and competitive “liberalisms.” The new approach focuses on the conflict between dominant property liberalism and the various “minority report” liberalisms which hitherto remained inadequately assessed and analyzed as part of the historical narrative. The “multiple liberalisms” approach sees the “Liberal Order Framework” as a mixture of ideological presuppositions involving an inequality between the dominant liberal class and various racial, ethnic, and gender sub-groups.

McKay’s “Liberal Order Framework” then includes illiberal and ascriptive principles that may or may not have carried as much weight as the core liberalism itself. On the precise balance of forces here McKay is vague. McKay’s claim is that the “multiple -liberalisms” approach allows us to transcend the limits of the earlier debate. But even allowing this to be the case, does the “multi-liberalisms” approach not also apply to the philosophical “greats”? Are not these “greats” also keenly aware of the distinction between an egalitarian aristocratic form of liberalism and an egalitarian democratic form? But the postmodern-pluralist historians reject the idea of seeking for “multi-liberalism” in the great liberal philosophers of the past. Nevertheless we are entitled to ask whether some form of philosophical “originalism” is not unavoidable given that Canada has been shaped by its constitutional order and that this order was established at a certain time by certain knowable actors who had been operating on certain intellectual assumptions acquired from the long tradition of political thought. And surely the “Victorian liberal” point of view as held by, say, John Stuart Mill could be used as the basis of a critique of Gramscian-Foucauldian democracy just as much as the Gramscian-Foucauldian approach could be used to critique the “Victorian liberal” point of view, could it not? If we are to be balanced, historiographically speaking, then “that which is good for the goose must also be also good for the gander” has to be the operative principle.

Although McKay will allow that the new Lockean-Essentialist historians have shown “imagination” and “iconoclasm” to go along with their “emergent influence” they are nevertheless guilty of offering us a “rather naïve and simplistic master narrative.” In other words, if the historian does not concede that Canada was somehow deeply oppressive and unjust from the outset one is guilty of “naïve and simplistic” thinking. Even worse, this naivety and simplicity goes together with “conformity to a rigid ideology” for the sake of which the new Lockean-Essentialist historian will “abolish historical evidence.” What the 21st-
century Lockean-Essentialists need is very much to emerge from their mixture of naivety and simplicity on the one hand, and what has to be intellectual dishonesty if not professional corruption on the other, and to engage in a “critical dialogue” with the liberal order alternative. The “single-minded and unilinear approach” of the Lockean-Essentialists needs to be “complicated” by a due noticing of “counter-currents and nuances” (2009, 393).

McKay sees the new Lockean-Essentialist interpretation of Canadian history as resting on an aggressive “reading in” of political and philosophical positions, construed as transcendental essences, rather than providing convincing evidence that the Founders clearly defended them in theory and instantiated them in practice. McKay idly notes by way of response to this practice that “if Macdonald, Cartier and their comrades-in-arms in Confederation were indeed revolutionary equalitarians intent upon establishing a democratic public sphere, they were remarkably circumspect, not to say self-contradictory, in their strategies” (2009, 393).

One might allow such irony about Macdonald and his comrades on the grounds that the burden is on the Founders and not the “true” or “post-modernized” democrats to make their case. After all it was the Founders who built the political and constitutional structure of the modern state still known as “Canada.” The “multiple-liberalisms” approach, then, can raise doubts about the cogency, consistency, and intellectual viability of the thought of Canada’s founding principles. It makes the appropriation of earlier thought more difficult and certainly has a tendency to undermine its authority. Indeed, for those focused on the claims of the Kingston mechanic political change would only qualify as desirable to the extent it veered away from the intentions and assumptions of the Founders in the direction of an equality and diversity that was not part of their purposes. The Founders in their time were unaware of the special importance of addressing the claims of the Kingston mechanic and his brethren. On this view the Founders’ vision was so limited by their own social position and the material and practical interests which sustained it that they could not really have constructed a political order that would confer genuine advantages on the Kingston mechanic. McKay suggests that there is a need for “thinking in a far more revolutionary way about the abolition of private property as a precondition to any considerable resolution of the looming organic crisis of the planetary political order.” He broaches the possibility of a “popular front” which will transcend “merely corporative interests” and which will include “liberals, Marxists, anarchists and indigenous activists” in a struggle against such a prospect (2009, 419).

McKay, then, is one of those scholars who, in the words of James W. Ceaser thinks “justice and right are not today on the side of liberal democracy.” For these observers, Ceaser explains, liberal democracy is “defective and retrograde” and does not realize the highest values or norms of which society is capable. It follows from this premise that the task of academic scholarship is to work for the achievement of these higher values or norms. Liberal democracy might indeed be replaced in the process, but nevertheless we can only welcome “the new and more progressive options that lie before us” (1990, 3-4).

The obvious point here is that both the Lockean-Essentialist and the Pluralist-Eventist camps are talking past each other. There is no shared common standard by which to assess the justice and worth of the original Canadian framework. Without such an agreed-upon standard on the basis of which to assess the purposes of the liberal-democratic order there can be no agreement on how the institutional structures of a democratic political system should look. Obviously this opposition between the “apologists” for, and the “critics” of the Canadian Founding, between those thinking
in terms of the preservation of the Canadian liberal tradition and those mulling over the possibilities for social revolution, cannot be resolved when the standards of democracy invoked are not commensurable. Thus the historiographical debate comes down to apologetics for the Founding on the part of those who find the work of the Founders was as democratic as might reasonably be expected on the one hand, and critical attacks on their work by those who maintain that it was a long way from an adequately inclusive and democratic project on the other. Some divisions in the academy can be even deeper than those in Parliament.

**Conclusion**

All candid observers will allow that the public questions of our time, e.g., those over Quebec separation, western alienation, First Nations’ claims, multiculturalist accommodation, gay marriage and so on, did not just emerge in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s full blown like Athena out of the head of Zeus into the Canadian public consciousness. There is a train of historical development that has to be understood if there is to be any adequate accounting for why the contemporary public discussion has come in large part to revolve around these questions. But for us to become open to the past in this way it is not possible to begin with the assumption that the Canadian Founders were tested and found wanting in that they built a “Liberal Order Framework” that failed to solve or obviate the emergence of these questions. Thus Canadian liberal democracy has failed its people in terms of an equality and freedom that could have and so should have been established (Oakeshott, 1991).

As with all builders of political communities the Canadian Founders had to confront certain central political antitheses. Here we have in mind such oppositions as subsist between the right and the good, interests and virtues, tolerance and orthodoxy, the rule of reason and that of tradition, progress and stability, negative and positive liberty, self-determination and historical connectedness, legal procedures and substantive values. If it be allowed that these antitheses are not in fact simply historical phenomena which the Canadian Founders in their un-wisdom failed to confront and resolve, but rather are more in the nature of intrinsic elements of the human condition, elements which no political order “Lockean” or “non-Lockean” could ever hope to overcome, then we are less likely to approach the Founding with suspicion as to its just intent. We will be less inclined to fault the Founders as possessing no awareness of, or concern to seek the common good and so more likely to allow them to influence our thinking and values as their descendants and legatees, to keep the tradition they established going.

If we allow for the possibility that humanity’s fate in general and the destiny of modern humankind in particular, and with it that of the Canadian Founders is tinged with tragedy then claims that full-throated celebrations of the Founders’ achievements are not well-deserved will carry less weight. We are more likely to see them as marching into the darkness of the future in the spirit in which Sysiphus challenged his hillside, and as trying the odds according to their understanding of the historical situation. Looking back on the Canadian Founders with the 20/20 vision which hindsight permits we might conclude that while they might have failed to build the New Jerusalem in the lands retained by His Britannic Majesty after the American cousins behaved so obstreperously they were no less wise and good men for that. For those interested in the fullest possible understanding of the phenomenon of Canada, to lose sight of this fact would mean that the efflorescence of Canadian studies in recent decades might indeed be a case of taking two steps forward and one step back—or even vice versa.
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