

Canada, Left-Nationalism, and Younger Voices

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We must somehow escape on the one hand from our obsession with the moment and on the other hand from our obsession with history.

Harold Innis¹

Now the record of the advanced capitalist countries demonstrates the remarkable resiliency of capitalism, that is, its ability to transcend particular contradictions. The likelihood that this will not indefinitely be the case depends not on the mere waiting for the contradictions to deepen and to ripen, but on the articulation of the socialist alternative, on the development of socialist strategies around particular contradictions, and on the building of a socialist movement...It follows that *a necessary first step for socialists in Canada is the identification of the contradictions inherent in contemporary Canadian capitalism.*

Mel Watkins²

The 1988 free trade election pitted two old foes against each other. Since at least the mid-60s Canadian political life has been overwhelmingly animated by heated debate between 'continentalists' and 'nationalists' about the economic, social and cultural direction of Canada within North America. The other historic issue of Canadian politics — the relationship of the Quebec nation to the Canadian state — has been intimately intertwined with the first, although each has its own set of internal dynamics and tensions. Left and liberal nationalists have consistently argued that the slow, steady drift into the American orbit

has subordinated Canadian sovereignty to US power and left the Canadian economy severely stunted — a producer of staple commodities for the American market. In contrast, the continentalist ruling bloc has contended, as much by blind faith and assertion as analysis, that the linking of the Canadian and American economies has been the essential ingredient in Canadian prosperity, and that it will continue to be so. Moreover, North American integration has been not only the appropriate economic choice for economic specialization in areas of comparative advantage, it has also underpinned the welfare state and enhanced Canada's international role as 'honest broker' between smaller nations and the American Superpower. This is the central division which has dominated modern Canadian politics, effectively marginalizing many other issues.³ And it has marked the political and cultural practices of the Canadian Left.

The Left has no doubt played the major role in intellectually and politically sustaining the 'nationalist movement', and keeping it on a progressive track for some two decades. It is therefore all the more startling that the organizational expression of this 'alternate politics', the New Left Waffle Movement, lasted a mere 6 years from 1969 to 1974 (and that is stretching it). The Waffle legacy is surely *cultural*, in the fullest sense of that word, influencing intellectual debate and political visions long after its dissolution. Indeed, the history and subsequent course of the Waffle illustrates one of Raymond Williams's most striking insights. That is, active social struggles connected to people's actual material position — even if the formation itself is only short-lived and narrow in organizational terms — can leave lasting, crucial residues in political life. This insight is absolutely central to the notion of *hegemony* as a contested intellectual and practical process permeating daily life:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover, it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually

to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own...counter-hegemony.⁴

The Waffle and Its Alternative Politics It was in developing such an alternative politics — a counter-hegemonic project if you wish — that the Waffle challenged the dominant ways of thinking about Canada and critically engaged what it meant culturally to be 'Canadian'. In doing so, the movement altered the terrain of Canadian politics. For those of us who came to maturity well after the movement ceased to have an explicit political form, this was readily apparent.

The intellectual ground of the right, with its triumphal account of Canadian history as the march of Great Men and its conception of Canada's political role as noble Middle Power brokering the Atlanticist Alliance, was no longer uncontested. It was possible to enter Canadian universities at the end of the 1970s and receive a much less complacent treatment of Canadian society. Through the by then standard texts of Levitt, Watkins, Clement, Gonick, Panitch, and, of course, Naylor, it was possible to explore an alternate and far more challenging, authentic conception of Canada. Indeed, an entirely different history was being told of a branch-plant economy, of imperial constraints on national determination, and of the valiant, often violent, struggles of working people for a more egalitarian society.

By the early 1980s these existed as axiomatic themes, as common in political meetings as in the classroom. They bore the distinct imprint of the Waffle's manifesto (if not always its direct linking of the struggles of independence and socialism). Canada was a 'rich dependency', skewed in its industrial development by a weak manufacturing base and massive staples exports to the US market. The weak Canadian capitalist class, and a state controlled by financial, staples and comprador capitals, could not be expected to alter this cumulative regression to dependence, and consequent balkanization, of Canada. Rather, an alternative project, to reclaim the economy prior to implementing socialist measures, depended on an industrial strategy backed by an alliance between national capitalists and Canadian workers. The precise terms of the industrial strategy, as be-

tween the contradictory objectives of strengthening national capitals and improving the lot of the workers, would be worked out as a series of compromises internal to the nationalist oppositional bloc. This is what we learned and what informed our politics — such as they were, given that there was no political movement to anchor them.⁵

The ability to analyze Canadian society critically, what Gramsci termed “liberation from the prison of ideologies in the bad sense of the word,”⁶ was a vital legacy that the Waffle and its intellectual offspring, the New Canadian Political Economy (NCPE), left to younger militants. Moreover, as part of the general revitalization of socialist politics across the capitalist world through the 1960s and 1970s, the Waffle legacy helped cast our intellectual and political horizons even wider. We observed with interest and sympathy trends in the European Left and the struggles of the South to throw off imperialism. This process, however, was not without difficulties and frustrations. The political impasse of the Left in the 1980s created a climate of cynicism and practical isolation. In this atmosphere, it was difficult to nourish commitment to a broader socialist community in Canada.

For students, however, there was at least a great deal that was intellectually exciting. As a result of the intellectual space built by the New Left, we could pour over Marx, Panitch, and Gonick alongside Dahl, Van Loon and Whittington, and Lipsey. Indeed, by the time we turned to reading Althusser, Poulantzas, Gramsci, and Anderson in graduate school in the 1980s, these texts had almost attained canonical status. We read them closely and turned our attention to the study of working class politics, asking new questions. What were the key processes of class formation? Was the postwar experience of corporatism relevant to all capitalist societies? Were the limits of social democracy exposed by the crisis of the capitalist state in the West? At the same time, new sources and new intellectual debates moved to the centre of radical social theory: feminist politics and the writings of Michèle Barrett, Varda Burstyn, Dorothy Smith, and many others; Foucault, Stuart Hall and Edward Said on the discursive practices constitutive of cultural, sexual

and racial identities; and a raft of new issues and concepts from Fordism to post-modernism, that seemed to be capable of providing insight into the radical shifts in spatial patterns and social identities occurring throughout the 1980s.

It is probably because of these broad intellectual shifts, as well as the lack of a political formation, that much of the New Canadian Political Economy began to sit uncomfortably. 'Newer voices' challenged the very assumptions of the NCPE. This was perhaps less true for the 'Metropolitan Marxists', largely grouped around *Studies in Political Economy*, in whose work it was possible to see common theoretical interests: i.e. 'class politics'; the articulation between gender and class; and the way in which the experience of the economic crisis and the impasse of Fordism in other countries could inform studies of Canada. Unlike the more 'Innisian based' political economy, which appeared wholly unreceptive to these urgent issues in social theory, it was possible to make 'structure and agency' comparisons with other states and societies based on the altered terms provided by the class-theoretic approaches within the NCPE. But even here an uneasy tension was communicated. Two of the most widely cited and justly praised pieces of the NCPE — the 1981 "Dependency and Class" essay by Leo Panitch and Rianne Mahon's 1984 book *The Politics of Industrial Restructuring* — were inspired by the need to increase the strategic salience of class within left-nationalist politics. Yet both remained trapped by the problem of having to solve the 'paramount riddle' — how to account for Canada's exceptional 'dependent industrialization'.⁷

The Anomalies Compound and Politics Unsettles: Welcome to the New World? By the end of the 1980s the limits of the 'new' Canadian Political Economy were becoming increasingly apparent. The world around us — and within — had changed. Several *structural* features are notable. The 'centre economies' of Britain and the US are, even more than Canada, being ravaged by 'de-industrialization'. 'Eurosclerosis' has been pushing unemployment levels in much of Europe beyond those in the North American bloc. The general internationalization of productive capital and

the lightning mobility of financial capital plagues nation-states and progressive movements everywhere. Canadian multi-nationals (especially financial and 'development' capitals but not exclusively) are a dynamic component of the new globalization. The growth of Canadian foreign direct investment in the US threatens to rival US levels in Canada in the early 1990s. The spectre of Japanese imperialism haunts the business capitals of America and Europe, and the potential leverage of the huge pools of financial capital in Japan poses a threat to any new socialist government. The dual pressures of economies of scale and economies of scope are forcing all sizes of capital to think globally (the exact opposite of the fashionable thesis of flexible specialization). In Canada, this increasingly means economic and political ties across the Americas. The case for the relevant political and economic comparison being the other advanced capitalist countries, a point already insisted upon by the 'Metropolitan Marxists', is now unassailable.

Just as pressing, and problematic, are questions of *agency*. The 'nationalist identity', which is fragmented and unorganized within civil society in Canada, is only one of many, and it has lost its place at centre stage through most of the 1980s as the collective identity piecing together diverse struggles. New issues structuring political life demand attention in Canada as elsewhere. What is the relationship between working class politics and other social movements? Do the social identities formed around gay rights, women, race, peace, and environment constitute specific, autonomous logics of collective action? What do the struggles of these agencies mean for overturning the private market, if anything? Moreover, can these agencies be condensed in an oppositional alliance — an alternate politics — that will rekindle the socialist project? Is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for re-establishing a general political interest only to be found in recognition of our common position as paid labour? Will the deepening of 'democratic-popular' struggles within the working classes expand their transformative capacities and give a new, socialist direction to the labour movement? These concerns keep pushing themselves forward, and they are only integrated with difficulty, with

ever increasing numbers of ad hoc hypotheses, into the core problematic of Canadian Political Economy. Either social theory will bend to the will of the NCPE or the terms of the latter will have to change to meet the 'new times'.

These theoretical differences find a parallel in political practice. The struggles of the 1970s opened a political space which has encouraged, to a degree at least, an 'independent left' politics to flourish in many popular organizations. This deepening of democratic struggles in feminist groups, solidarity work, green and disarmament forums, and gay and lesbian rights organizations, have given most younger militants their initial political experiences. And it has informed our commitment to respect the complexity of issues that socialist politics has had to incorporate. For those of us who are intellectuals, it has established our theoretical interests, for the most part, and made us acutely aware of the barriers 'to thinking' about these issues within a framework overdetermined by the 'nationalist moment' in politics. It also must be acknowledged that a certain frustration has existed, for those of us of an activist bent, because of our inability to forge a common political project or to locate the broader cultural institutions necessary to sustain an active socialist community. Here the fallout of the Waffle has provided a block. Tensions at political meetings, political codes, and even individual rivalries, often date back to some Waffle episode in which we had no part. Political imaginations remain limited to the *existing* constellation of political forces. Similarly, in defining a common collective interest, there has been an inability to find a vocabulary or ways of addressing issues beyond nationalist politics. A lack of trust between women and men, based on earlier political encounters, is still often pervasive. Finally, there has been a huge age gap, made all the larger by the differences of relevant political experiences. Those of us who are younger are fewer in numbers, and have come to maturity in harsher political times. Thus the ambiguous feelings: we have been *enticed* by the formative political and cultural experiences of the 'Class of 68' and the Waffle in particular, but also overwhelmingly *excluded* from its nostalgic codes, alliances and antagonisms.

The result of the altered intellectual agenda and political impasse is that the Waffle, and its alternate politics have begun to lose their appeal. A more rigorous assessment suggests we may yet have to shed more of the Waffle legacy if our 'creative organizational and intellectual capacities' are to evolve, and socialist ideas are to penetrate throughout society. Let us briefly consider the two most prominent legacies, one theoretical and the other political.

The 'rich dependency' thesis remains the core problematic of the NCPE, and the major theme of Canadian economic history. As witnessed through the free trade debate, it still provides the alternative political and policy responses for a broad swath of the Left. But how fertile is this? No doubt it can be argued that the NCPE forced us to examine more closely the specific contours of Canadian society, and helped avoid the abstract-formal theorizing characteristic of much of recent Marxist writings and politics. Yet virtually all theoretical positions, Marxist and neo-Weberian, have turned to closer examination of the specific institutional dynamics within national social formations (although the sudden fondness for neoinstitutional analyses often conceals a political move to the right). So, by itself, the study of the concrete is not unique. Moreover, the 'rich dependency' position has inexorably framed the specificity of Canada in a way that casts a 'faulty industrial structure' as the decisive issue governing economic and political struggles. A weak manufacturing capacity defines the 'Canadian problem' and 'industrial policy' as the solution. Posed in this way, it seems impossible to incorporate adequately the broader relations of power, and specifically the theoretical dilemma posed by *agencies*, without severely compromising the hard core of the problematic.

Indeed, as the new writings within labour and women's history so vividly illustrate, either the problematic is abandoned altogether, or some of the issues posed by the NCPE readdressed in a way that leaves very few of the original theses intact. In probably the most convincing (and important) books embracing the NCPE — Williams's *Not for Export* and Laxer's *Open for Business* — these difficulties leap from the pages.⁸ The role of *agency*, particularly of

subordinate classes, remains unclear. The critical issue of Canadian politics remains foreign investment levels, and other problems have their ultimate cause there. Examined strategically, they both logically end with a quite explicit case for an industrial policy to reverse Canadian dependency, whatever social class or political party might be ruling. Indeed, the 'new' industrial policy debate, the matching of high-quality production with progressive training policies, threatens to reinforce this cramped political vision by once again posing industrial policy as the solution to the 'Canadian economic problem'.

There is no shortcut around this theoretical impasse. The tell-tale signs of a degenerative research program are evident, and the necessity of actively exploring Canadian political economy in new ways is obvious. In attempting to grapple with the issue of 'agency and structure', the essays in *The Canadian State* had a common theoretical interest in 'class politics'; dependency was a subsidiary issue.⁹ The new 'openness' of debate provides a challenge to think things through again and complete the break. Unfortunately the NCPE problematic, with its close focus on dependency, staples production, and foreign investment levels, still maintains a strong hold on the writings of an older generation of intellectuals and on the 'common-sense' of activists across the Canadian Left.¹⁰ It would, however, be grand folly to suggest that these writings did not address serious matters and that they did not have results which would necessarily be *incorporated* in any adequate understanding of Canadian society. But if we are to broaden our agenda, theoretical and political, to fully include formerly subordinate issues — whether they be issues of class, gender, environment — the centrality of the 'national question' is precisely the political snare we need to escape.

The long, arduous struggles in opposition to free trade, led in admirable and dedicated fashion by a cadre of left-nationalists, also forces us to critically reflect on the impact of the Waffle. It has become common currency that the major problem of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) election was the lack of 'tactical voting' on the part of the opposition. This deficiency was only compounded by a badly conceived

strategy on the part of the NDP leadership, who downplayed free trade to highlight leadership. In numerous ridings, this split the anti-FTA vote between Liberal and NDP candidates and allowed Tory candidates to squeak through the middle and gain a plurality. In other words, the implicit 'Nationalist Popular Front' formed in opposition to the FTA — which went from the Liberal Party to the Communist Party and virtually all popular organizations — also had to have had a more formalized structure to ensure a constituency-by-constituency voting agreement. The touchstone of the nationalist opposition was the political conclusion that by voting to block continentalism and implement policy designed to diversify Canadian markets, the Canadian 'rich dependency problematic' would be resolved, regardless of which party might benefit in consequence. It is difficult not to suggest we are leaving many serious questions unanswered if left at that.

This is not to suggest that the FTA was not an extremely bad agreement that dealt a sharp blow to an array of democratic struggles within Canada. The anti-FTA struggle invigorated and brought together a disparate coalition of popular forces. It succeeded, albeit only briefly, in creating a 'general interest' around a 'nationalist collective identity', with the purpose of defending and maintaining social protections and the power of the state to intervene in the economy. But a straight polarization between a 'national-popular' coalition of the centre-left and a 'continentalist ruling bloc' of the right, as the tactical voting strategy implies, was difficult to envision. A general rejection of the neoconservative agenda did fuel the opposition. However, for tactical voting to work, the anti-FTA forces would have had to adopt an even more baldly liberal position to counter Tory arguments. This would have undercut the very oppositional voices giving impetus to the coalition. The strategy also would have reinforced the Liberal attempt to reclaim its crown as the 'Party of National Unity'. Yet the Liberal Party, as the Waffle and the NCPE taught us, has been the traditional bearer of continentalism. After a brief flurry of nationalist measures in 1981, it was headed down the neoconservative

road.¹¹ It is difficult to believe they offered much different in 1988.

A second common observation illustrates the same dilemma of the nationalist opposition. That is, it was difficult to challenge the Tories in debate and win positive support without an alternative social and economic vision. In fact, the political choices were posed in the traditional way: 'continentalism' versus 'industrial policy'. The latter was little different in content from what had been conceived in the 1970s. The lack of creditable alternatives denied tactical voting its material base (especially when national capitals shifted to support free trade and thus abandoned the centre ground around which the nationalist strategy pivoted). Indeed, few people were buying the industrial policy position, just as they were not in Britain, the US, and elsewhere.

Suggesting a different tack would have divided the coalition, the historical dilemma of Popular Frontism. Attempting to concretize the varied demands of the movements, making the compromises necessary to construct a coherent alternative, necessitated a political vision and a mobilization strategy beyond defensive nationalism (quite different from the challenging form nationalist struggles took in the 1960s). The Pro-Canada Network, a nationalist condensation of progressive forces, and not a nascent socialist one, is the institutional-strategic legacy of the free trade fight. Its creation is a positive development, one that socialists should readily support. But whether it can transcend the limits of nationalism to construct an alternate project, while at the same time clarifying its uneasy relationship to the trade unions and the NDP, is a decidedly open question.

Moving On: Politics Beyond Free Trade It is proper that we reflect upon the Waffle experience in these difficult times for socialists everywhere. If only briefly, the Waffle suggested an alternate radical politics and cultural practice, and the residues of that moment have informed subsequent intellectual and political practices. But, to borrow from Gramsci again, the 1980s saw the old dying and the new struggling to be born.

In the 1990s we must, once again, begin the enormous task of renewing the socialist project. The Canadian Left needs to reassess and develop its own contribution to a new internationalism; a contribution which recognizes that the old schisms between socialists are outdated, one which focuses on forging an agenda for the next stage of social struggles in Canada. Undoubtedly this project will be informed by nationalist aspirations; the affirmation and development of cultural and political space for national communities is an essential component of socialism. But any socialist project in Canada for the 1990s must also be broader than that. A 'war of position' will no doubt be carried into an array of agencies and organizations that will expand the capacities of subordinate groups to shape their own struggles and futures. Surely the struggle for self-government and social justice for aboriginal peoples must be of the highest priority in all our collective efforts. So, too, the struggles of women for reproductive rights and equality, and the struggle of social minorities for political inclusion form a vital current which needs to be concretized in political structures. Finally, global economic shifts, specifically the evolving consolidation of a hemispheric trading bloc, demand that we begin to forge concrete working class and trade union ties that span the Americas.

It is not hard to imagine these agencies. The remarkable gathering of popular movements in the Pro-Canada Network during the free trade fight, and now in opposition to the horribly regressive Goods and Services Tax, demonstrates the vast potential. But let's face it. The reaction of these same popular groups to the Meech Lake constitutional proposals revealed all too dramatically the limited ability of this 'minimalist' form of political organization to make positive political interventions. It is difficult, yet absolutely necessary, to move from the spontaneous gathering of these agencies within coalitions, fighting *defensive* battles around specific issues, to an *emergent formation*, projecting an alternative political vision. Indeed, the working out of the economic, environmental and democratic dimensions of a re-formed general interest and collective identity — the object of socialist intellectual and political practice — will

be a daunting task, made all the more difficult by the collapse of both the authoritarian-command system and social democratic reforms. As Raymond Williams submitted in looking *Towards 2000* and beyond his own past,

The real struggle has broadened so much, the divisive issues have been so radically changed, that only a new kind of socialist movement, fully contemporary in its ideas and methods, bringing a wide range of needs and interests together in a new definition of the general interest, has any real future.¹²

The extension of this array of struggles into the 'complex of experiences, relationships, and activities' that comprise social life — from the organization of day-cares and medical facilities to the control of work place structures to substantive constitutional and electoral reform — will necessarily inform this 'democratic project'. But will we have the political and cultural imagination to create a formation that brings these 'needs and interests' together and engages Canadian society? Here we will need to reclaim some of the political daring that emerged with the Waffle's alternative project. That might be the Waffle's ultimate legacy.

Notes

1. H. Innis, "A Plea for Time," *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951), p.90.
2. M. Watkins, "Contradictions and Alternatives in Canada's Future," in R. Laxer, ed., *(Canada) Ltd.: The Political Economy of Dependency* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1973), p.250, emphasis added.
3. Glen Williams and Gord Laxer have recently written (very valuable) books which rewrite history as if this particular political division was always the alignment of Canadian politics, and Canada's evolution from 'colony to nation to colony' the unfolding of this contradiction. There are also traces of this in Janine Brodie and Jane Jenson's path-breaking text, but they are more sensitive to the variable positions of social forces in different conjunctures, thus leaving the question more open and avoiding the historicism of the other two. See: G. Williams, *Not for Export* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983); G. Laxer, *Open for Business* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989); and J. Brodie and J. Jenson, *Crisis, Challenge and Change* (Toronto: Methuen, 1980).
4. R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 112. Formations are 'those effective movements

- and tendencies, in intellectual and artistic life, which have significant and sometimes decisive influence on the active development of a culture, and which have a variable and often oblique relation to formal institutions' (p.117).
5. It should be remembered that, in the early 1980s, the disillusionment with the New Democratic Party extended throughout the Left. This was especially strong among those of us from working class communities in western Canada who had to live with the constant retreats and double-dealing of NDP governments. As well, far left groups, such as the Workers Communist Party and the various Trotskyist factions, were already finished or deteriorating. They too represented another generation's politics, crystallizing in their practices past debates about national roads to power (often formed out of or in relation to Waffle positions). The Communist Party of Canada, of course, was still buried beneath the rubble of what we now politely call, 'the years of Brezhnevite stagnation'. This was a hostile, isolating world to face for those of us who *wanted* to get excited about left-wing politics, difficult enough in Canada at any time.
 6. A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p.344.
 7. L. Panitch, "Dependency and Class in Canadian Political Economy," *Studies in Political Economy* No. 6 (1981), p. 28; and R. Mahon, *The Politics of Industrial Restructuring* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), Ch. 8.
 8. Williams, *Not for Export*; Laxer, *Open for Business*.
 9. L. Panitch (ed.), *The Canadian State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).
 10. The debate is usefully re-presented in: D. Glenday, "Rich But Semi-peripheral: Canada's Ambiguous Position in the World-Economy," *Review* 12/2 (Spring 1989); and P. Resnick, "From Semiperiphery to Perimeter of the Core: Canada's Place in the Capitalist World-Economy," *Review* 12/2 (Spring 1989). The role of the NCPE in informing the free trade opposition is effectively detailed in: Ontario Federation of Labour, *It's Not Free* (Toronto: OFL, 1986); and J. Laxer, *Leap of Faith* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1986).
 11. In 1970 Kari Levitt provided a succinct summary of the Liberal role in this regard: "The continentalist tide has been running strong. It has been permissively assisted by successive Liberal administrations who opened the floodgates to massive American direct investment in the postwar period. Never has a country's control over the 'commanding heights' of its economy and over the policy levers of its fiscal and monetary controls been surrendered so swiftly, silently and hospitably." *Silent Surrender* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. 56.
 12. R. Williams, *Towards 2000* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 174.