

Historians in Search of a Framework

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IN “THE LIBERAL Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History” (*Canadian Historical Review*, 2000), Ian McKay recommends a Gramscian approach to Canadian history as means to revive Canadians’ flagging sense of large themes in our national story. To say that the article has attracted attention would be an understatement. At its 2009 meetings, the Canadian Historical Association celebrated publication of a book of commentary: *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution*, edited by Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme (University of Toronto Press, 2009). What follows are my remarks at the CHA panel, with some brief additional thoughts.

This book is very welcome. Ian McKay’s two essays, the very good Introduction by Professors Ducharme and Constant, and the contributions by speakers at the McGill conference that helped generate *Liberalism and Hegemony* are eminently discussable. It is true that Canadians have lost the sense of national history. Jack Granatstein and his colleagues made an attempt to revive it with their Organization for the Study of National History of Canada (today the Organization for the History of Canada), but they have not been entirely successful. Now McKay is proposing a radically new approach; who can fail to be interested?

I have two observations. The first is provoked by McKay’s reliance on the political thought of Antonio Gramsci. Can a turn-of-the-century Marxist illuminate our understanding of, let us say, the Constitution Act (1867)?

I do not think there is any question but that arguments by good theorists can be helpful, whatever their provenance. There is a dimension of political philosophy that asks perennial questions, transcending ideology. “Engaged scholars” are as likely to provoke insights as those who profess disinterestedness.

My second observation is this: It is not his dependence on Gramsci that impairs McKay’s account of Canadian history but his ignorance of facts on the ground. His prodigious output consists primarily of summaries of the work of others. He shuns the primary sources.

I

In the early 1970s I went to the University of Toronto to study with Allan Bloom. I took his graduate seminar on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* and applied to write my doctoral thesis on a topic in political philosophy. Unfortunately, I was enrolled in the Department’s Canadian stream and as I shortly discovered, was expected to adopt a Canadian topic. I could have wept.

At that point Mr. Bloom gave me the instruction that guides my research to this day. I was to explore a “great text” in Canadian political history, studying it as one studies the great texts in the Western canon.

A great text in Canadian political history! It was a novel idea.

I raced through a general history - very likely Kenneth McNaught’s *Penguin History of Canada* – to discover that there is one Canadian document that is commonly referred to as “famous.” It is only sometimes said to be “great.” The usual modifier is “famous.” I announced that I would write on Lord Durham’s famous *Report of 1839 on the Affairs of British North*

America and the Department was pleased. The arrangements were made. Peter Russell was to be my advisor. Gerald Craig of the Department of History, and editor of the Carleton Library's abridged edition of the Durham Report, would serve on the committee.

I began reading: "I entertain no doubts as to the national character which must be given to Lower Canada. It must be that of the British Empire; that of the majority of the population of British America." I had known something of Durham's reputation before I began but was taken by surprise at the abruptness of the argument. Durham was arguing for the complete obliteration of the French Canadian way of life. In his Introduction to the abridged edition Craig remarks: "We can easily find glaring weaknesses of fact and argument in this noted and notorious state paper." So it seemed!

But Bloom had left instructions for the student who finds herself in such a situation: persevere. When you come across what seems to be an odious argument in a notable text, an argument that appears to spring from prejudice or ignorance, persevere. Pay attention, read sympathetically. Make the best case you can for your author. And rejoice! You may have before you a sterling opportunity to step out of the framework of thought typical of your time, previous education, and experience.

I persevered. I read Durham's arguments for the reform of the British Parliament and his electoral campaign speeches. I read the speeches of his hero, Charles James Fox. And then, because there were among Lord Durham's associates on the Canada Mission men who were indebted to critics of parliamentary democracy like James Mill and Jeremy Bentham, I read those thinkers. I read *The Edinburgh Review*, the Whig and Radical journal of choice. I read Edmund Burke, Montesquieu, William Blackstone. In short, I immersed myself in eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century arguments for and against the parliamentary system of government. It was an invaluable education.

My chief acquisition was a question, the one that shouts from the pages of *Lord Durham's Report*. Supposing the British Constitution to be the great boon that British Whigs believe, does a population have to be British (culturally or ethnically British) in order to enjoy its benefits?

I wrote the thesis and published the book. It is still selling.

And then I discovered Pierre Bédard, first leader of the French party in the legislature of Lower Canada and founding editor of the political newspaper, *Le Canadien*. I regard Bédard as Canada's greatest political thinker, our greatest constitutionalist. And after that the way opened; as the years passed I came to see Canada's national history as a long avenue of "texts," primary documents, informing and rewarding the persevering student.

Over the years I have learned the facts about Canadian personalities and events. I know the outlines of the Canadian story. And I am glad. But I am primarily engaged in a search for arguments of broad - one might say universal - interest. They arrive in my thoughts as questions: do you have to be English to enjoy the benefits of the English Constitution? Is liberal democracy suitable for all peoples? Does residence in a liberal democracy destroy particularity? Both Durham and Bédard argue that the contestation of political elites for public office secures the people's liberty. What institutions promote this contestation? Does education play a role in maintaining it? Does a liberal democracy require a particular kind of education?

II

It is astounding how much of the secondary literature Ian McKay has read! He suggests at one point that Canadian historiography is collapsing under its own weight; apparently even he with his tireless appetite for journal articles finds it difficult to keep up. But with reliance on secondary sources, fresh perception fades. In books written out of books, mistakes multiply.

Here are two examples of McKay's shallow approach. Both are from his original article, and appear in *Liberalism and Hegemony* in lengthy notes to page 633.

First, he argues that "The Fathers [of Confederation] were convinced that they did not need to attain the approval of the mere human beings for the political order they were designing for individuals."

The assertion does not stand up to examination of the texts. The Fathers made every effort to attain the approval of the populations that would be governed by the new constitution. In the debates on Confederation in the British North American legislatures the question was not *whether* to consult the people, but *how* to consult them. Legislators argue that "There is no legitimate government without the consent of the governed." "No one can be governed without his consent." They ask whether a majority vote in the provincial parliament suffices as evidence of popular assent. Some contend that a referendum is required. For selections from these debates, see Ajzenstat, Romney, Gentles, and Gairdner, eds., *Canada's Founding Debates* (University of Toronto Press, 2003), especially chapters 11 and 12. And see the French edition published by the University of Laval, under Guy Laforest's direction.

Another good source is G.P. Browne and Janet Ajzenstat, eds, *Documents on the Confederation of British North America* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009). This volume contains

documents pertaining to the drafting of the Canadian Constitution at the Quebec Conference of 1864, and includes correspondence between the colonists and the Colonial Office showing beyond all doubt that early in the constitution-making process the Colonial Office had come to the conclusion that “the people” of each colony should be consulted, and that a majority vote in each provincial parliament would suffice as evidence of consultation.

Second, McKay continues: “This exercise in liberal state formation [Confederation] was sold to French-speaking Lower Canadians as a divorce from Upper Canada that would guarantee their distinctive language and religious traditions.” He appears to be saying that the English speakers in British North America deceived the French; they put one over on them. It was not so. Correspondence with the Colonial Office from 1858, the documents from the Quebec Conference, and the debates in the Canadian Parliament (1865), point to the idea that it was George-Etienne Cartier who led the campaign for federalism. He drew up the first draft of the division of powers as we have it in the Quebec Resolutions and in the British North America Act. Cartier “sold” federalism to Macdonald and Brown.

French and English leaders worked together. French Canadians are not junior partners in Confederation.

III

The advantage of reading thinkers like Gramsci, I would argue, is that they encourage the historian to remember the human propensity to dominate others, and the lengths to which ambitious individuals will go to circumvent the common good. Questions about the personal motives of the Fathers are

certainly in order, but McKay seems to think that a list of personal and partial motives concludes the argument. Study of the documentary history shows that although, as legislators, Canada's constitution-makers were duly aware of their responsibility to constituents and province, and as individuals had an eye to their own role in the politics of the nation that was emerging, they also knew that their work would stand for "all time." They were founders. The phrase, "for all time," recurs often. They knew that they were not designing a constitution for Tories alone, or English speakers alone.

You do not have to turn to Marxists for lessons about the baseness of human nature. You find the same teaching in the British Whig tradition. Think of John Locke, William Blackstone, Edmund Burke. As one legislator argues in the Province of Canada debates: "we have not relied on republican notions of virtue." British tradition acknowledges the powerful role of crass personal ambition; it acknowledges the role of class interests. Parliamentary government works because it harnesses base motives. It enables ambitious men and women to satisfy their desire for political power, but – note – it provides the reward of office only to those who accept the contestation of parties and freedom of political dissent. Thus potential oligarchs accept the people's decision in an election not so much out of a feeling that the people's decision is right or even because they think it right to accept a popular verdict. They do it because they know that if the tide of political opinion swings their way, they will in their turn be able to invoke the legitimacy that attaches to the people's voice.

McKay, relying on Gramsci without consultation of primary texts, gives us a national history characterized by struggles for domination. What the texts reveal is the long and sure development of institutions promoting liberty and equality.