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Canadian Postcolonialism: Recovering British Roots

by Howard A. Doughty

> "Searching for the national identity is a kind of congenital art form in Canada"
> (New, 1975, p. 101).
>
> "Searching for a postcolonial identity now epitomizes such an art form"
> (Moss, 2003, p. vii.)

The field of Postcolonial Studies is one of the academic fashions that has arisen in an attempt to amend or replace radical theories of social power since the alleged discrediting of Marxism. Together with intellectual constructions like feminism, queer theory and other manifestations of postmodernism, it has won the attention of many academics who despair of grand narratives, logocentrism, historicism and progressive teleology. Possessed by pessimism and often babbling in tongues, these intellectuals "theorize" the agonies of the dispossessed while serving on tenure committees and publishing in the flourishing fields of obscure and often obscurantist journals both in "hard copy" and on-line.

Some trace postcolonialism's origins back to Edward Said's iconic **Orientalism** (1978) and locate its consolidation in the publication of the pioneering interpretation of "third world" literature, **The Empire Writes Back** (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1978). As far as postcolonialism is read as a study of culture and especially literature, this chronology is reasonable enough. To the degree, however, that postcolonialism concerns itself with political economy, I would be inclined to push the date back a little farther–perhaps to the 1970s (Cockcroft, Frank & Johnson, 1970, Frank, 1975, Wallerstein, 1979), or the 1960s (Fanon, 1968); if not all the way to 1917 (Lenin, 1960) or even earlier (Marx and Engels, 1971). Whatever the pedigree, however, postcolonial studies are generally concerned with the diverse relationships between European empires and their former colonies, commonly identified as the victims of imperialism. Thus, the United States, though composed of former British, French, Spanish and Russian imperial possessions, is not normally included in postcolonial studies since it now dominates its former master, the United Kingdom, and has become a self-conscious imperial power itself.

The Canadian case is more ambiguous. Postcolonialism, already an essentially contested concept, is especially conflicted where Canada is concerned. Canada has certainly had a colonial past, with parts of its territory having been claimed by one European

power or another since Giovanni Caboto (alias Jean Cabot, a.k.a. John Cabot) landed in Newfoundland in 1497. Canada, however, is unlike countries such as Peru, Congo, Iraq, India, and Malaysia whose indigenous populations were politically repressed and economically exploited during long periods of alien cultural domination.

As Emory University professor Deepika Bahri (1996) explained, there is a tendency to preclude settler societies from the postcolonial inventory "because of their relatively shorter struggle for independence, their loyalist tendencies toward the mother country which colonized them, and the absence of problems of racism or of the imposition of a foreign language." Some Québeçois might have difficulty with this analysis, but it could easily be applied to English (as opposed to merely "English-speaking") Canada. As well, it can be argued that the principal instance of racism in Canada is that which has been visited upon native Canadians in the form of "internal colonialism" with the postcolonial dominant culture performing the function of surrogate imperialist. As Cynthia Sugars (2004) has pointed out, like other "settler-invaded cultures," the application of postcolonial methodology is problematic because of Canada's "location within the industrialized West [and] because of its treatment of its aboriginal peoples and other minorities. [So], questions proliferate: Is Canada postcolonial? Who in Canada is postcolonial? Are some Canadians more postcolonial than others?"

By these lights, Canada might legitimately be struck from the list of postcolonial societies. At the same time, an only slightly broader set of concerns would make Canada, during a significant part of its history, a genuinely postcolonial society for, as Bahri continues, "the relationship between [Canada and] the mother country is often one of margin to center, making [its] experience relevant to a better understanding of colonialism." If this broader definition is adopted, the focus and the locus of the Canadian postcolonial experience can be understood largely in terms of the fate of United Empire Loyalists, United Kingdom émigrés, Canadian monarchists and imperialists, and those whose ambitions rose no higher than avoiding becoming Americans. Such experiences can be carefully described (see Skinner, 2005) even if they must be theoretically circumscribed.

From this perspective, the transformation of Canada from "colony to nation" (Lower, 1977) was not, at least for British Canadians, a matter of breaking the chains of domination but rather, of acquiring maturity and moving (figuratively) out of the parental home. If even a small amount of Oedipal rage was involved, it was difficult to discern. More frequent was the opinion shared by the likes of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, Stephen B. Leacock and the seriously delusional William Arthur Deacon (1933) who foresaw the continuance of the British Empire and Commonwealth with one important alteration, the shift in the centre of imperial power from London to Ottawa: "I believe that before the year 2000 Canada's world dominance will be as undisputed a fact as any commonplace of

history."

The link between the British past and the Canadian future was essential to the "identity project" of English Canada. It provided the possibility of a solution to the problem raised by the "modern view" of identity, which reflects "a need to identify with something of significance … to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable" (Hébert, 2001, p. 156). The postcolonial predicament for English Canadians was not so much defined by the overarching hegemony of Britain, but by its neglect. If anything, Canada may have overstayed its welcome as an imperial dependent. The main worry for many Canadians was less about the winning of freedom and national sovereignty, and more about the indifference that the mother country displayed over the frightfully prolonged process of separation.

Of course, for many Canadians, postcolonial status was effectively removed as early as 1945 and, for many more, it has never been an issue (at least vis-á-vis Great Britain. From Confederation to the end of World War II, it was commonly understood that Canada was composed primarily of two cultures, the French and the British (with a smattering of marginalized others such as Aboriginals and Asians whose continued existence was, though a bit of a nuisance, easily ignored in the larger historical narrative). This is plainly no longer the case. Massive and increasing immigration, mainly from Europe, Asia and the Caribbean, has irrevocably altered the Canadian demographic. About half of the current Canadian population has no history of loyalty to the House of Saxe-Cobourg-Windsor. The removal of the Union Jack from the national flag is no longer a serious matter of interest except perhaps to readers of the **National Post**. The venerable Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire is alien to the consciousness of most citizens who likewise retain no memory and therefore no loyalty to the British connection. (I have a photo of myself as a child, taken in the late 1940s, in which I am proudly carrying a Union Jack on "Dominion Day"; to most Canadians today, it would not merely be quaint, but farcical.)

The political and economic asymmetry that currently defines Canada is not in relation to its previous imperial centre but to the United States, thus making credible a play on Lower's title by suggesting that Canada has gone from colony to nation to colony. Yet, even this is debatable, since it is yet another aspect of the postmodern critical perspective to suggest that globalization in the form of multinational enterprises, universal technologies and instantaneous computer-mediated communications renders notions such as national sovereignty, cultural identity and state power indeterminate almost to the point of meaninglessness (though, again, it might be difficult to convince many Afghanis, Iraqis, Iranians and North Koreans that this is so).

Even if, however, Canada's postcolonial cultural condition was temporally limited mainly to the period 1867-1945, and spatially restricted to Anglophone Canada, this is still a significant chunk of the

country's history, albeit one that is fast fading from memory. Even recalling, once again, that the birth of the nation was oddly unhurried (beginning with the passage of the **British North America Act** in 1867 and not fully completed until the umbilical cord was cut by the **Constitution Act** of 1982), this remains an important part of the collective past. So, examining the relationship between denizens of the quasi-independent "Dominion of Canada" and the British Empire is an activity that can yield fascinating insights into what historian Frank Underhill called the "derivative" nature of Canadian thought and behaviour. In characteristically self-effacing terms, it can help illuminate the "collective mediocrity" of our citizens and the bland "democratic uniformity" of our political culture, an assessment that might well have embarrassed Tocqueville and brought J. S. Mill to tears (Underhill, 1961, p. 231).

The scholarly process of detailing the "colonial mentality" that enveloped English Canadian culture for much of the first century of Canada's postcolonial existence requires an ongoing mutual interrogation of historians and theorists. At issue is the essentially contested concept of "Canadian," understood in explicitly political terms. Those terms are the coinage not only of a colonial history but also of a history in which the Canadian colonies defiantly resisted association, much less union, with the revolutionary American states. The roots are in the colonial experience from Benedict Arnold's march on Québec, through the Battle of Queenston Heights to the repulsion of the Fenians in the first years of Confederation. Captured in whimsical prose by American essayist Gore Vidal (2001, p. 163), the peculiar relationship between US expansionism and Canadian conservatism is made clear:

In 1775, although Boston and New York were in British hands, George sent an army north to conquer Canada-Canada has always been very much on the minds of those Americans inclined to symmetry. When the White House and Capitol were put to the torch in 1814 and President Madison fled into the neighboring woods, where was the American army? Invading Canada yet again. The dream. The impossible dream.

Elements of this story have cropped up in the work of the widely respected US sociologist, Seymour Martin Lipset. He has written often about Canada and his empirical studies, while not methodologically sophisticated, nevertheless lead to interesting conclusions about the differences between Canadian and American political cultures. Canada, he affirms, is more élitist, collectivist and morally conservative than the USA (with Canadian "moral conservatism" being clearly distinguished from current examples of American "neoconservatism" involving religious fundamentalism, hyperpatriotism and an uncritical enthusiasm for market capitalism– none of which have much to do with authentic Canadian conservatism as contrasted with the replicated Republican agenda of that twenty-first century mélange known as the Reform/Alliance/Conservative Party of Canada). The genuine and original "Canadian identity," Lipset

says, is "the result of a victorious counterrevolution, and in a sense must justify its raison d'être by emphasizing the virtues of being separate from the United States (Lipset, 1970, p. 72)."

Put this way, Canada and its postcolonial heritage can appear to be a futile reaction to the dynamic liberal America. How much that heritage has failed in practice, but how much the it has nonetheless been insinuated into the ideologies and institutions of contemporary Canada is a matter of longstanding debate (see: MacRae, 1964; Horowitz 1966; Lipset, 1970; and Truman, 1971). Lipset sees Canada as "embracing élitist imperial Britain to escape revolutionary America," and as a political culture that "was never simply British [but] British North American (Lipset, p. 72)." As such, it had much in common with an aristocratic British organicism, a view of society as a pyramidal hierarchy held together with cheerful obedience at the bottom and a ruling class that oozed 'noblesse oblige' at the top. Horowitz added that the endurance of conservatism as a counter to the hegemonic liberalism was essential to the emergence of socialism and the maintenance of ideological diversity in Canada.

That conservatism was the inspiration for what George Grant called the "ridiculous task" of "trying to build a conservative nation in the age of progress, on a continent we share with the most dynamic nation on earth" (Grant, 1965, p. 68). That original toryism lasted longer than many imagine. It lasted long enough to provide the basis for the dialectic that Horowitz elucidated. It permitted the emergence of what came to be known as "red toryism," a political outlook that shared some of the old conservative reservations about human nature, democracy and republicanism, but also endorsed an activist state dedicated not just to the suppression of the dissent and discord prompted by "loose and disorderly" people, but also to the improvement of the material life and the betterment of the moral life of the community.

Americans may look with wonder at the record and at the anomalous title that graced Canada's national conservative party for three-quarters of a century. It was called the "Progressive Conservative" party and it was responsible for creating some of the most truly progressive institutions in this country including the Bank of Canada and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. In Ontario, its namesake created Ontario Hydro, the public electrical utility that, in 1906, celebrated the first power generated from the Niagara River with a bold sign that read "Power to the People." Traditional Canadian conservatism should not be confused with state socialism, of course, but neither must it be thought odd that apparent oxymorons such as "red tories" and "progressive conservatives" are phrases with which Canadians have long felt comfortable.

By contrast, American liberalism is almost pathologically bipolar. It is divided into two contrasting sub-ideologies that are, in reality, nothing more than right-wing and left-wing versions of the same point of view. True, serious debates take place but they are all comfortably

located within the parameters of classical liberal thought. The preposterous spectacle of Hillary Rodham Clinton attempting to create a sensible health care policy in a country in thrall to private enterprise would cause Canadians to laugh aloud were it not for our own discomfiture at seeming to be forever on the brink of allowing our own medicare system to disintegrate. With little effective opposition from the few remaining genuine conservatives and the few more democratic socialists who have yet to join the likes of former Ontario Premier Bob Rae in flaccidly declaring their apostasy (see Rae, 1998), it may be that Canada's postcolonial heritage has finally been transformed into a marginally kinder and minimally gentler version of US liberal politics with Liberals and Conservatives playing the "good cop/bad cop" roles familiar to observers of Democratic and Republican party stalwarts south of the border.

So it appears that liberalism is being effectively legitimized as authoritative in Canadian political thought as the old ideological diversity of Canadian postcolonialism simultaneously withers. So it is that the current political discourse seems hemmed in by the feeble assumption that the only pertinent question facing Canadians is not whether to endorse capitalism but merely what kind of capitalism to endorse. In this debilitated situation, is there any practical benefit in exploring the British postcolonial heritage? Is there a useful lesson to be learned or even an ennobling slogan to be retrieved from the ashes and bones of Canadian conservatism?

Some have thought so. Dalton Camp, who in later life became an exemplar of left conservatism's cultural, economic and political resistance to US "values" was certainly one of them. His open interrogation of contemporary political parties and their atrophied imaginations and dishonourable acquiescence in what passes for pragmatism is lent some support by cultural theorists like John Shepard, who insists that while "the bourgeoisie has always maintained an uncontested control in English Canada … it has not, in its openness towards the international capitalist order, succeeded in supplanting conservative beliefs as the actuality of an English Canadian identity." Thus, he continues, "it is largely inappropriate to conceive of [the] English Canadian form of privatism in hegemonic terms" (Shepard, 1993, p. 186).

The remaining shreds and shards of traditional English-speaking conservatism, then, may be essential elements in the struggle to restore, maintain and build upon a distinctive Canadian society. It remains only to rescue Canadian postcolonialism from the past and to remind ourselves that the path to a humane future has already been sketched out. As Nick Baxter-Moore shows elsewhere in this issue, committed artists such as Stan Rogers have done their best to ensure that Hegel's morbid assessment, repeated by Marx (1978, p. 9) at the outset of the **Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte**, can be avoided, and that the attempt to create a "peaceable kingdom" on the northern half of the North American continent will not have tragically failed in the first instance, only to become a farce in the second.

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